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The Russian House

By Charlotte Webb

It might begin like this. With the tentative opening of a single eyelid affording a bleary view of puke-smearred linoleum. With the mind-splitting clank of last night's beer bottles rolled towards the sunken center of the room. With profound disorientation and the vague, disembodied desire to die rather than be here in this dank hole with my head in a vice. Rooming with a sadistic bastard bent on experimenting with the parameters of human suffering; lazily kicking anything not nailed down towards the nauseating dip in the linoleum, to which my damp cheek is currently adhered. Curious as to how much clanking it will take before my head explodes, leaving trails of grey matter and half-baked ideas splattered on the walls like some obscene Rorschach test.

Or, it might begin with her. With a purpling birthmark on a translucent white thigh. With a stolen glance at her near-naked form as she sleeps, splayed out in an impossible position—one arm jammed under her spine, one knee bent straight up toward the ceiling—on the Portuguese guy's double mattress in the room across the hall, his paisley sheet peeling back from the corners, revealing a medley of coffee-and-god-knows-what-other stains beneath. With her hair—not mirror-black, sleek and glossy like in shampoo commercials—but coal black. Torn and frayed at the ends as though hacked at with kindergarten scissors. A black that absorbed the light, sucked it right out of the lone bulb dangling haphazardly from a tangled web of cords criss-crossing the ceiling. With her smell. Her laugh, like a jack-hammer, startling innocent passers-by with its violent, unpredictable syncopations as we walked hip-to-hip down the cobbled streets of Södergatan.

But I can't really get into that until I tell you about the house.

No one knew why it was called the Russian House. Or Casa Rusia, as it was dubbed by the generation of inmates before mine. In truth, it didn't require much explanation. Until I moved in I'd only ever seen the place from the outside. The custodian didn't offer me a showing and didn't seem interested in meeting me beforehand. Just telephoned in broken Swenglish to say the room was available immediately, that the guy who currently lived there hadn't finalised the lease on his new apartment but that this was bound to happen any day now and did I mind sharing till then.

I was sleeping on my ex-girlfriend's couch at the time. Abject poverty and an acute shortage in student housing hadn't given me much of an option. I'd considered going back to the States but didn't really have the cash for the trip. For the past two months I'd

feigned sleep as she came crashing through the front door in the middle of the night, giggling, slurring.

"Don' worry about him, heesh nobody."

I'd counted cracks in the ceiling as she mercilessly revenge-fucked Friday night's drunken suitor in the adjoining room, woken up to her eyeing me with brazen dislike over a bowl of sodden cornflakes.

No, I told him, I did not mind sharing. Three boxes of books, a backpack, and a battered guitar case were stacked on the street outside the building before he'd hung up the phone.

From outside, the Russian House looked like any modest, four-storey, turn-of-the-century red brick affair. Vaguely neo-classical. Indistinguishable from any other residential structure on that street. It wasn't until you bypassed the heavy wooden doors leading to the inner courtyard that you noticed something was amiss. It was like the Eastern Bloc in there. Various corners of the garden had been dug up for no apparent reason. Rusty drainpipes jutted out at menacing angles from the roof. Patio furniture, bike parts, and electrical equipment were strewn across the pathway and piled up against the walls. A tiny, slightly askew cottage-cum-shed was nestled snugly in one corner, the house's retarded love child, curtains drawn. I never saw anyone go in or out, but someone told me later that it housed seven illegal Serbian immigrants.

Things didn't improve much inside the building. The walls blossomed with black mould and garish floral wallpaper. Brown. Vinyl. Peeling back at the edges. I was given the grand tour by Adnan, the Palestinian janitor-slash-super. His brown eyes twinkled under heavy eyebrows as he broadly encapsulated all seven out-of-function washing machines with a rough hand. Pausing to indicate a florid bar of cracked neon bulbs above the doorway.

"Used to be whorehouse," he said, grinning proudly. "It's laundry now."

Adnan was the stoic backbone that held the Russian House and its volatile population of inmates together. I'm not sure that he ever actually fixed anything—mostly because there were never the necessary tools, funds or parts—but he collected rent, made conversation, and listened patiently as we bitched about the mould, the dank, the perpetual absence of hot water, and the long suffering refrigerator that had finally given up the ghost. He banged the deceased radiator in my room into continued existence with the edge of a crowbar, smiling heartily as if to say his work here was done. Some time later, when the elusive owner skipped the country to avoid paying back-taxes, it would be Adnan who would keep the place running on the power of prayer and idle threats.

My room, such as it was, was a six-by-six stretch of linoleum plastered haphazardly over the floorboards in a vain attempt to cover up a pendulous dip in the center. Adnan had failed to comment on the phenomenon when I moved in, instead remarking on my good fortune at having secured a view of the courtyard. Over the ensuing weeks, I managed to piece together an explanation derived mostly from the hyperbolic fragments of house legend handed down by other inmates: three years ago an overly enthusiastic party downstairs had taken out a load-bearing wall. I can't vouch for the truth of any of the more specific details.

The room contained two narrow beds, one of which was supernaturally hard and badly singed. This was mine. Apparently a psychotic Russian woman had set fire to it one night after a spat with another resident. Oladipo, the Nigerian guy next door, had

lived here during her time. He said that she was always eating everyone else's food. One night he had caught her in the act. Before he could say anything, she let out a blood-curdling scream, pitched the half-eaten falafel in his face, and ran off. He avoided her after that.

I settled in pretty quickly, absorbed into the off-beat rhythms of the house. Time seemed to pass more slowly, meted out by the hands of a yellowed kitchen clock. I began to accept all manner of strange events as part of the fabric of daily life. Like the sporadic appearance of the Polish booze bus delivering cigarettes and homemade moonshine and human cargo in the middle of the night. Or the fact that, for some reason, the only channel available on the house's one black-and-white television set was hardcore Danish porn. Or the blockades. At least once every couple of months the fire department blockaded the building, yelling through megaphones about the building's impending collapse and the need for immediate evacuation. After awhile we all got used to it. It was like poker night, another festive occurrence in the life of the house. We took bets on when they would stop by next. One month I won 500 crowns.

I read a lot of Bukowski. Partly because it seemed to emphasize the house's atmosphere of deadbeat decadence. Mostly, however, because of the women. I hadn't been with anyone since Cecilia. Three months had passed and things were starting to crawl under my skin. I laid there, picturing my horizontally-challenged digs beset by floods of cheap women in laddered polyester stockings. Their hair. Their legs. Their long acrylic talons painted garish shades of puce, carving runnels down my back. So many women that I had to endow them all with monosyllabic nicknames in order to keep track. I labeled them for the color of their hair, for their resemblance to fifties film starlets: Red, Kate. Knowing all the while that I was more likely to be the guy holding back Red's luscious mane as she puked into Bukowski's bathtub.

Then I met Ari. The first time I saw her, she didn't know I was there. Actually, that happened a lot. She'd wander idly through the labyrinthine hallways all but oblivious to the fistfights, oil fires, pot smoke, multi-lingual domestic rows and blaring raga seeping out from behind partly closed doors. On this particular occasion she was gazing into a cracked mirror someone had left in the corridor. Turning her head this way and that. Not vainly. Slowly, deliberately, as though trying to fuse together the two antithetical sides of a coin. It took a while before she registered my reflection next to hers. I hadn't seen myself in weeks. Mirrors had been removed from the bathrooms after a tenant used a broken shard to threaten the landlord during a prolonged hot water shortage two years back. I looked awful. There were bags under my eyes and four days of unruly growth on my chin. My hair looked as though something was nesting in it. Garlic sauce dribbled down my hand from a disintegrating kebab clenched in my fist. For a long time she said nothing, eying my reflection quizzically as though examining a species of rare bird.

“Are you going to eat that?” she asked finally.

I was not. I had awoken to a cacophony of beer bottles hurtling toward the dip in the floor, and to the appearance of my roommate, Ali. He mercifully passed most of his time shacked up in the more comfortable abode of one his many girlfriends but was making a rare appearance in order to grin maniacally and augment the qualities of my hangover. Afterwards, he had offered up a conciliatory kebab, told me his contract had finally come through and he was moving out. Sickening as the thing was, I was grateful for the gesture. I was even happier that he was gone.

I shook my head mutely.

She nodded, "I know a place."

The café was crowded and warm and located in the basement underneath a hat store. It was plastered with Palestinian flags, Lautrec prints, and posters for the Young Left. They served every imaginable incarnation of soy. We took a seat on a threadbare orange sofa. People were smoking, despite the complete absence of windows. The air was thick and heavy, and I felt a wave of nausea rise up, peak, and crash against the sides of my esophagus.

Ari toyed with the edges of a red velvet lampshade, ordered coffee, some form of tea I'd never heard of, sandwiches, and cake. She was partly obscured by an oversized black sweater emblazoned with a befuddled-looking white owl, her skinny legs clad in red woolen stockings. She sat with her legs tucked underneath her like a Geisha during tea ceremony, two black ballerina slippers criss-crossed behind her. She lit a cigarette and smoke curled upwards, joining a pink haze spreading across the ceiling, tinged by the lampshades. After a wordless minute or two she seemed to remember I was there.

"I like this place," she said, knotting a mass of unruly dark hair on top of her head (I never figured out how she managed to fix all that hair in place with a single pin). "It's cheap and you can smoke indoors. I've been coming here since my first year. Hardly anyone knew about it then. Used to be owned by these really nice lesbians, but they had a baby and moved to the country."

I nodded, fighting back another wave. The food arrived and she poured honey in one of the mugs, stirred it slowly, revealing chipped pink fingernails, and handed it to me.

"Here, drink that, it's got ginger in it." My dad used to make tea with ginger when I was sick. Then I went to boarding school and we weren't allowed tea or coffee, because of the caffeine. I had—what do you call it—gastritis, so I'd get sick for days and nothing helped. The nurses gave me those fizzing heartburn things but they just made me feel worse.

I sipped. The drink was hot and sickly and had a strange after-burn, but it was good. Perking up slightly, I asked Ari how long she'd been in the house. She made a dismissive gesture with her cigarette,

"Oh I don't live there. I just sleep there sometimes. There's usually an extra bed and I'm between places right now. I made a deal with Carlito, showed him my breasts once and now I can sleep in his room whenever I want. He snores, so it's better when he's not home."

"No kidding." I couldn't think of anything else to say.

She nodded, "Yep. His family's Catholic. I don't think he'd ever seen a naked woman before. He's hardly ever home now, has loads of girlfriends. But he still lets me stay on principle. A man of his word. Do you have a girlfriend?"

I felt a remote stab, noting tangentially that it was still there.

"Not really. We broke up three months ago." I tried and failed to conjure up the right words for what had happened with Cecilia. Instead I found myself offering Ari the spare bed in my room.

She didn't move her stuff in right away, just spent the night now and then, curled up on the other mattress (I kept the burnt one), reading by the light of my feeble standing lamp, or chatting away, pausing only occasionally for air or a superfluous response on my

part. For someone who kept herself to herself, Ari could really talk. She told me about the little white house where she grew up, in Keflavik, about her name (it was a boy's name, meaning 'eagle', her parent's had kept it even after the scans told them they were having a girl), about her ex-boyfriend who was the drummer in a band we both liked. She was studying art history and Russian, and her English was almost perfect. She read voraciously. Anything and everything. Dostoevsky and Emily Brontë and Proust and Kerouac and Ginsberg and the backs of cereal boxes. She left hairpins on my bedside cabinet and red tulips in a vase on the window ledge. She brought boxes of baklava from the Persian bakery down the street and touched my arm with syrupy fingers while she talked. During the blockades, Ari would wander out in her bathrobe and beanie to offer the firemen biscuits and thermoses of tea while the rest of us toasted their health from the upstairs windows. That's just how she was.

She also encouraged me to get to know some of the other residents. Like the meat man. None of us knew his actual name. He'd been living there so long it would have been awkward to ask. He was a nice guy. Tuppence short of a shilling, if you know what I mean. But Ari liked him. Every night he would get back from the gym (he was pretty hardcore about that sort of thing) and flop his latest purchase down on the kitchen bench. Blade chops, back ribs, porterhouse, rib-eye, tender slice. I quickly became an expert in obscure cuts of meat. He'd fry it up and lay it out carefully in the center of the plate, pop open a bag of potato chips, carefully arrange them around the edges, and head off to watch some Danish porn. One day Ari and I were in the supermarket, trying to calculate what kind of meal we could scrub up for the twenty-eight crowns we had between us, when she spotted a cardboard display in one corner of the store. It was a large, sprightly-looking heifer, with big brown and white patches and a lively red bell around its neck. She stood, transfixed.

“We have to steal it.”

I regarded the cow. It wasn't the sort of thing one could slip under one's shirt and stroll casually out the front door with. And while I shared the usual 'fight the power' mentality of your average undergraduate, I hadn't stolen anything since the sixth grade, when I had pocketed a pack of Reese's Pieces from the local convenience store and proceeded to suffer sickening pangs of guilt for the next four days. But there was no dissuading Ari. Her jaw was set, her eyes alight.

“You grab the back end, I'll grab the front.”

We were off. Of course, it was ten o'clock at night and the two teenage cashiers just wanted to go home. One of them yelled words of encouragement and gave the two-fingered satanic hand signal as we fled through the glass doors. The fat security guard chased us impassively for a half a block and then gave up. The cow was proudly displayed in our kitchen. Meat man seemed genuinely touched.

The weeks went by and Ari still didn't seem to regard my room as hers. She crashed in Carlito's room when he wasn't there so I would have 'my space'. I wished she wouldn't but didn't know how to tell her. Frequently, I wondered who she loved. Though unabashed about her naked form (on nights when the heat was working she slept in her underwear, her spine a splendid white curve against the florid brown wallpaper), she didn't sleep around. She certainly wasn't sleeping with Carlito. Or anyone else in the house. I felt I would know. Actually, the cramped living quarters and paper-thin walls

meant that it would have been hard not to. I was intimately and involuntarily familiar with the sexual practices of most of the residents. Like Boris, the Ukranian, with a thing for middle-aged Polish prostitutes. Or Ulrika, the prim Swedish teaching assistant who batted for both teams (often simultaneously). Or Dirk, the Australian porn-aficionado with a penchant for candle wax. On Sunday mornings he'd emerge in satin boxer shorts emblazoned with the Southern Cross, with the stuff still tangled in his chest hairs.

At times she disappeared for a day or two. The sheets smelled like her. Sun-warmed skin and cloves (from the baklava that she ate continuously, even in bed). When she returned it was as though she'd never left. We continued not sleeping together. At night I would try not to watch her, try to ignore the translucent inner thigh and livid purple birthmark burning its imprint into my peripheral vision. During the day we'd push our bikes along Södergatan, sit in the parks with mugs of hot chocolate and cigarettes, attend the occasional lecture. She had a thing for Godard and took me to a marathon at the local cinemateket. After seeing *À Bout de Souffle* for the umpteenth time she came home with her hair cropped close like Jean Seberg. It suited her. She looked petite and tough and utterly breakable all at the same time.

One night in early spring I couldn't sleep. Ari had been away for three weeks, her longest absence yet. She was in Reykjavik, visiting her brother, a cellist with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. His wife had just had a miscarriage and she had gone to try and help out around the house. I didn't know exactly when she was coming back. In her absence the house had taken on a hallucinogenic quality, outgrown its own warped dimensions somehow, like a robust woman in a cocktail dress two sizes too small.

It had been an odd fortnight.

On Monday rumors had begun to circulate of Tom's return to the premises. Tempers had reached boiling point over a three-day power outage following yet another unpaid electricity bill. The new girl – a diminutive Czechoslovakian med student by the name of Anezka – had spotted a disgruntled old man with a long white beard slinking from room to room on the first floor, raking through people's belongings and casting paranoid glances at the electric meters. Panicked, she ran to the custodian's office to report the incident. Adnan had been unperturbed.

“Not to worry. That's Tom Kronsjö. He owns Russian House!”

When Anezka returned to her floor, the man had disappeared.

On Tuesday the residents came together to pow-wow over exactly which of the twenty-odd urgent concerns should be brought before our prodigal landlord. I had never seen them so organized. Lists were compiled and reviewed and itemized. Toxic mould took precedence over the unfinished fire escape still dangling haphazardly from one side of the house. A surprisingly civilized intellectual debate broke out over the relative import of washing machines versus refrigerators. A recent rat infestation was bumped in favor of concerns over asbestos in the walls. Heating trumped everything else. Dirk stood in the hallway in boxer shorts, terry robe and flip-flops, taking notes, two ruddy eyebrows knit together like mating caterpillars, a cigarette burning dangerously close to the corner of his bottom lip. After three hours of hearty debate and two bottles of German vodka, the list looked something like this:

1. HEAT!!!
2. Rats Asbestos
3. Mould in bathroom/bedrooms/kitchen/floors/walls (mention Oladipo's allergies)
4. Washing machines Fridge (C.f. last month's salmonella outbreak)
5. Rats
6. Fire department barricades/ unfinished fire escape – tear the motherf***er down??
7. Washing machines
8. Those three Polish dudes in the basement.

A diplomatic delegation was formed. It consisted of Dirk (who turned out to have a useful pragmatic streak), a Chinese student studying international conflict management, and me. I didn't know how I'd become involved. I'd never met Tom and didn't know anything about conflict resolution. But I played along out of sheer morbid curiosity. By now Tom had become the cornerstone of house legend. The guy had three doctorates (no-one knew in what) and had founded something called the "Earth Radiation and Para-Psychology Center" in Stockholm. He had theories. He'd purchased the Russian House in 1969 due to convictions (his own) that it was built on an energy field connected to the catacombs of the Lund cathedral. He was said to be a loon. And a genius. Adnan regarded him as a great philosopher. I just wanted to scope out the inside of his office.

All communications with Tom went through Adnan. On Wednesday the three of us stormed into his cubicle, demanding to see Tom, swollen with the anger of the righteous and the remnants of last night's vodka. We fed off one another's indignation, reeled off our list of demands. Adnan listened, sipped black coffee from a cracked mug, regarded us soberly over the rim. He would speak to Tom. He would let us know. It was sort of an anti-climax.

Two days later, he stuck his head around my door and announced that Tom would see only one of us. By a show of hands, that someone turned out to be me.

Tom's office was on the top floor of the house, adjacent to the attic. It had one of those signs on the door with the person's name and a slot saying "in" or "out." Someone had replaced this with a strip of cardboard reading, "has left the building." Tom didn't seem to have noticed. I knocked hesitantly on the door. No answer. I waited a polite minute or two, knocked again and tried the handle. The door opened onto another dimension. It was like a museum presided over by an Alzheimer's patient. There were old wireless radios and walkie-talkies and bike parts and rusted wire coat hangers twisted into angular contortions. The walls were lined with shelves sagging under the weight of miscellaneous piles of books in miscellaneous languages and disciplines, all under three inches of dust. Pages had come loose from some of them and stuck out at odd angles, their margins covered with chicken-scratch scrawl. On the desk, a number of stones were collected in separate, sealed glass jars. Despite evidence of recent habitation (a half-empty coffee mug, an open window), the room was deserted.

I returned a couple more times throughout the afternoon, to no avail. When Dirk approached the following day, he found the door had been locked. Tom had gone AWOL again, disappearing back into the fog from whence he came.

After that, things started to slide into chaos. People stopped paying rent and about twenty new faces appeared in the halls and never left. On Monday a party broke out on the fourth floor and continued for four days straight. Faces materialised out of nowhere

and packed us to capacity. You could almost hear the floors heaving under the added strain. Dancehall competed with Basement Jaxx and Syd Barrett and psychedelic post-rock. Some guys erected an elaborate electronic setup in the hallway, complete with an immense, hand-painted sign proclaiming their ambition to “explore the boundaries between the guitar and the long, wavering field of reverberation.” Four hours of amplifier-screach later and Dirk threw them out on their collective ass, a knotted mass of cables trailing in their wake.

The Polish booze bus turned up with startling regularity, offering vodka, moonshine and PCP. And four women in black vinyl fuck-me heels who didn't speak a word of English. On Tuesday I walked in on one of them giving Boris a blowjob in the bathroom while The Prodigy blared “Smack My Bitch Up” in the background.

On Wednesday people began to lose it. I drank a lot of moonshine and then dropped acid with some guy I'd never met. We spent four hours absorbed in an intense discussion about what was inside a spider. I spent the next two curled over the toilet bowl. A raucous cheer rumbled through the house as I heaved. I emerged to find a gaping hole where the unfinished fire escape had been, a lone pick-axe still lodged in the moldings.

On Thursday, my dad died. At least that's what I was told by the hollow voice echoing down the telephone wire. It wasn't entirely unexpected. He had been sick for a while. I had meant to go home.

That was a lie. I had meant to stay here and drown out the retching, the slipped feet padding out anxious rhythms on the carpet, my mother's desperate voice on the phone to the oncologist at four in the morning. It was not my mother on the telephone now. She and I hadn't spoken since I'd left, a year-and-a-half ago. It was my sister Bev, sobbing quietly. Making funeral arrangements and booking airline tickets and urging me to come home. I told her I'd call her back.

The party had begun to disperse. I didn't say anything. I think Dirk somehow got wind of it though, because he suddenly switched from Bob Marley to Cat Stevens and patted me on the back in an abrupt, manly way. I left a drunken message on Ari's brother's answering machine and then slept for three days.

When I woke up I was staring into a pair of saucer-like pupils, some guy still high on last night's dust leaning over me with a razor blade.

“Hey man, turn over, I'm gonna cut you open. I want to see if you have wings.”

Without thinking, I shot straight up in bed and punched him in the face. Blood spurted from his nose, showering the floral wallpaper. Curled up on the linoleum concavity, he screamed at the top of his lungs then erupted in laughter. A horrible, depraved, high-pitched wheezing. I felt like I was coming unstuck. The room was suddenly skewed and disproportionate. Like one of those boxes set up to fuck with human perception, ruled with angular black lines leading off to a vanishing point on the horizon. I needed to disappear. I needed to shut him up.

Then, out of nowhere, the meat man. I knocked the guy out cold with a clean left hook, grabbed him by the collar, dragged him from the room, then closed the door neatly behind him.

Since I was fourteen I have suffered from insomnia. Spent nights behind red-raw eyeballs with multiple, incoherent trains of thought screeching through my skull. On that night, in early spring, it was particularly acute. I would have to leave. I saw that now.

There was something wrong with this place. It wasn't a haven, a beatnik paradise. It was a sucking black hole, absorbing legions of no-hopers into the dank depths of its twisted vortex. The house was reading me, projecting my own inner chaos out into the cracks behind the wallpaper. Infecting me with my own disease.

I had booked a flight home, leaving the following evening. I wasn't going back to stay; that wasn't right either. But I was going back.

I thought about Cecilia. About hiding in her for a year without really caring who she was. I thought about home and the Russian House and my house a world away. About my mom, sitting alone in dad's worn leather recliner, her face a silent, white mask. About Bev, bustling away in the blue kitchen with pots of tea and a hands-free earpiece, making arrangements for the funeral. About Ari, wherever she was. Distant, intangible. I thought about all of these things as I lay in the dark, a cigarette burning its way toward my fingertips, listening to the strains of someone's stereo playing Leonard Cohen. So long, Marianne.

Then, she came back.

Stealing in so quietly I thought I was dreaming. The muffled sounds of undressing. Her hot breath next to my ear, her birthmark on my thigh in the dark. After a time, I turned to her.

"We have to leave, Ari. You have to leave. This place is going to eat us alive." I was sobbing. She put her hands to my face, her mouth to my cheek. Her lips were chapped.

Quietly, softly, she swallowed me whole.

Some time in the early hours of the morning, her hands in my hair, Ari told me I had to go home. I told her I was. That I didn't know when I was coming back. When she kissed me, I tasted tears. When I awoke, she was gone.

Some time later, long after Tom Kronsjö skipped the country, never to return, the environmental agency shut down the Russian House. When they stormed the building, they found two refugees from Cameroon roasting sausages over a garbage bin fire in the kitchen.

Adnan was in his office.