

THE BUSINESS OF ANGUISH

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Excerpt from a novel in progress, tentatively entitled 888

Some cities are cities of light, such as Athens and Algiers and Las Vegas, with white walls and glaring sunshine, and some cities are vast darkness, such as London and Berlin, but Saint Petersburg was a city of neither light nor dark, but shadows, and yet not high resolution shadows, such as are cast in the cities of light and also in the cities of darkness: these were dusty, pastel, irresolute and vague shadows, and for that reason all the more threatening since you can't quite hide in them, as a slow prey, but you can, as a stealthily moving predator. And there was a feeling of predation, and depredation, in the city of stone upon marsh. This all seemed vague to David as he contemplated it, and yet, exactly in the spirit of the city of vagueness and evasion, of slippery apparitions, where hardly anything could be interpreted solidly, and thus it appeared that Rasputin — had he existed? — was killed in several places, the Yussupov Palace, the Moika River, and the Little Neva.

At every corner David wondered what terrible thing happened right there. The whole city was full of plaques. Here lived Alexander Glazunov, Lenin visited here, Dostoyevsky lived in this house, Anna Akhmatova, and so on. It was pleasant to walk in the streets named after poets and composers and painters. But it was easy to imagine a different sort of plaque, and he imagined these plaques where they weren't. Shostakovich, in talking to Volkov, said, Why isn't there a plaque which would say, Here lived Meyerhold, and was stabbed with knives sixteen times, and cried for help till dawn, until he died, and there was nobody to help him. Now that kind of tour would make much more sense, and it would be more convincing.

David dug the theme of Russian misery; after Kresty, he thought he should continue in the serious vein and see real Russia, and he toured the cemeteries. None was more impressive than the Lutheran Kladbische. This mostly German cemetery had been neglected out of revenge, despite the general love of the Germans in the city. Whoever had German heritage hid it, and didn't dare go to the cemetery to take care of ancestral graves. Consequently, the cemetery was a jungle, a forest with powerful roots penetrating the crypts. Some cement casings had cracked open,

and you could peer into the earth, and here and there see white bones. Orange dogs wandered, and it occurred to David that perhaps when all else failed as food supply these dogs crawled into the graves and jawed the bones. Now a pack of six of them cruised and sniffed around the graves and here and there took a leak, perhaps to reserve the bones for a moment of real need. The dogs were quieter than the pack at Mikhailovsky Garden, as though awed by the respect for the dead, or, more likely, since this section of the city didn't contain many clubs, they were not drunk from licking fresh vomit in the streets. Although David thought that this sightseeing of death wouldn't get to him psychologically (but would on the contrary uplift his creativity and give him ideas for stories), he grew anxious and began to think about where he would die, and where his bones would be buried, and how, and would they one day resurface, somewhere. Maybe he would be buried in Ljubljana, where his father was buried, or in Queens, where his grandmother was buried. He'd never thought in those terms, but suddenly, he felt insecure because he had no definite protected grave where his bones would end up, or rather, down.

The image of his father's grave, a cube of emptiness and green soil as the walls to that emptiness, disquieted his spirits. He remembered how the casket was brought down on thick ropes, thick enough to anchor a ship, and it sounded like the wood was being sawed.

He walked over to Dacha, and had several shots of vodka there, and among the young dancing bodies jostling one another in the steamy heat, he felt old and untouchable, and then he walked around the corner to Kofye Hauz past the gangrene man and had two double cappuccinos, but although awake, had images and flashes of skulls and bones, and whatever person he encountered, he saw as bones, and wondered how long the bones would be kept together by sinews, and where they would fall apart.

A quiet dread permeated David's blood. Maybe he would have a heart attack, and join the dead. His heart beat too fast; he measured it using the Nokia cellphone stopwatch, 120 beats a minute. To go to a Russian hospital was out of the question, indoctrinated as he was that American medicine was the best in

the world, and Russian among the worst, despite reading the studies that showed that American hospitals, while the most expensive in the world, were the least effective, excluding the Third World, in saving lives, particularly from heart attacks. Still, in a crisis, he would feel better with American disinfectants around. He waved down a cab, and a jolly Armenian in a brown leather jacket, who was drinking red wine from a bottle, drove him to the American Clinic near St. Isaac's Cathedral, for one hundred rubles. He offered David a swig of wine out of his green bottle.

No, thank you. I don't feel well enough for that.

You look pale. This will bring color back to your cheeks. It's a known cure for anemia.

So you must be very healthy.

Oh, no, I've already had heart failure.

But wine is good for you?

One bottle maybe, but I used to drink three a day.

And now?

Only two a day. Way too much. I'll die like a dog.

David rang the bell to the clinic, and presented his American driver's license to be admitted. Once he walked in, he lost his balance, and while passing out still managed to aim for a love seat upholstered in fake yellow leather. He woke up in a room, on a table, with glaring white lights above him. Where the hell am I? He looked at the walls and saw the diplomas of a couple of physicians. The diplomas displayed the MBA acronym, and David wondered whether it was Russian, MVA, and what did it mean? Certainly not MD, nor a Master of Veterinary Acupuncture, but Master of Business Administration. Yes, it was English.

What the . . . ? Businessmen are gonna treat me?

David jumped off the stretcher bed and rushed out of the windowless room. He bumped into a handsome blond man in white and green dressed as a doctor and shouldered him so vigorously that the doctor fell back against the wall, and only the wall kept him up.

Excuse me? said the business doctor.

David leaped to the door but the door was locked.

A secretary dressed in white came out and said, You can't leave unless you pay.

Pay for what?

ER visit.

I am not staying here, unless you show me an MD diploma. I've seen only MBA diplomas here. Can you show me one?

Of course.

Okay, I'll wait.

I can't go into the ER room, it's locked, the doc-

tors have an emergency, and there are the diplomas.

Open the door or I'll call the police. This is a rip-off.

We'll call the police for you.

Please do!

Fine, just please leave the premises, said the clerk.

That's what I am trying to do!

David walked into the streets, suddenly feeling perfectly fine and invigorated. The sunlight gleamed on the golden cupola of St. Paul's Cathedral, the sky was heavenly blue, and he was saved. No hangover, no nausea, nothing. He was glad he'd read the diplomas because who knows what kind of treatment he would have got from his fellow Americans? What kind of trustworthy American would go to Russia to practice medicine? So, just a serious financial threat — that may be the best cure for nascent heart attacks, better than defibrillation. He should present it as a study theme at the Mayo Clinic — one group about to have a heart attack for free, and another, to pay out of pocket, and see which group has more heart attacks. Not hard to guess.

He walked past St. Paul's Cathedral, checked out the plaque where Pushkin had died in the famous duel, protecting his wife's honor, while it was his hobby to sleep with other men's wives, having slept allegedly with more than a hundred of them. Wasn't that a bit hypocritical of him to resent his wife and even more her lover for doing what he was doing as a habitual fornicator and adulterer (as such, Pushkin, if alive and applying for American citizenship, would be denied — that is, if he truthfully answered the question). David looked onto the vast square, around which cars drove in tire-squealing arrogance and velocity. St. Paul's Cathedral didn't exist in the times of Gogol, and this is where Gogol fancied Akaky Akakyevich to be freezing in the open space. If you took St. Paul's Cathedral away, the square indeed would be huge, just like the Tsar Square in the back of the Winter Palace. Many people must have indeed frozen to death in the square, and in recent times, no doubt, many have been run over by cars shooting out from behind the curves. A modern-day Akaky Akakyevich would perhaps be terrified to be a pedestrian in Saint Petersburg, and would spend a decade saving for a car, and once he got it, thugs would steal it. His boss would laugh at him... and would be run over by a car, driven by the triumphant ghost of Akaky Akakyevich, right on the square near Bolshaya Morskaya. David enjoyed imagining possibilities for modern adaptations of old Russian works in his elation. Maybe he could write some metafiction

for the workshop? But isn't metafiction passé? What isn't passé, other than youth and arrogance? Well, he'd worry about that after he finished the story about Milosevic's being passé.

But the elation at avoiding a mugging in an American hospital didn't last; the American organized crime was so well organized that it was not a crime; it was actually a virtue to give thousands of dollars to American doctors, not only in America but everywhere. He felt his heart pound against his ribs, which seemed natural enough, but it was beating against his left shoulder blade as well. How long could it go on like that? How could it push back there through the left lung? Has my lung collapsed, making it possible for the heart to thud against my back? Or is my aorta pulsing so strongly and hitting the bones? He inhaled, and it appeared to him that his breathing was wet, as though he had pneumonia, and even worse, like his father's upon collapsing at the zoo. I should get a tranquilizer. Do I know any? I've been sleepy most of my life, I only thought of stimulants, not of depressants and tranquilizers. He went home, had a couple of somewhat appeasing shots of vodka and attempted to sleep. Alcohol gave him heartburn, and his head veins throbbed above his zygomatic bones. He knew that extra alcohol contributed to blood pressure. Alcohol was only a brief reprieve and long-term aggravation; he needed something that would work to depress his physiology and keep it down.

He would not be an American if he didn't indulge in pharmacology and self-medicating; his citizenship would probably be revoked. So, since he failed to fall asleep, and his heart seemed to skip beats, and then to accelerate, and some hours it worked very slowly, he walked out to a pharmacy on Canal Griboyedova and Gorohovaya (close to where Rasputin used to live) and bought himself something his insurance couldn't afford him (he wasn't sure he still had insurance), a variety of prescription pain-killers, powerful antibiotics, and statins. First, he'd make sure not to die of a heart attack and then he'd calm down. He stared at the exhibit of drugs in the pharmacy. There was Viagra, the champion of spam discount emails. Things were not going so well that he'd need a pill, he reckoned, but Lipitor or Zocor, for sure. Zocor went by the generic name simvastatin, and he asked to be shown all the simvastatins.

Do you have a prescription by a vrach?

No, but could I buy it?

You really need a prescription.

Well, I don't have one. I could get one, I am sure.

Next time, come with a prescription.

Do svidanya. He turned around to walk away.

This time, we'll make an exception. This one is the best, it's made in Germany.

And this one?

Nearly as good, made in the Czech Republic.

This one?

Not so good, made in Cyprus.

And this one?

I wouldn't recommend it.

But why not?

It's made in India. You never know how they work.

But it's the cheapest, so could I have two packs, please.

What? You want these? Did I hear right?

Yes, actually, three packages.

But I am warning you.

What is this? You admire the Germans who nearly exterminated you, and you mind the Indians, who are the best engineers in the world. In fact, even in Germany now the best engineers come from India, and that's perhaps the only reason I would buy a German pill. By the way, do you have a statin made in Russia?

No, believe me, you wouldn't want a Russian statin.

But you have very fine engineers, you went into space first.

We used to have them. Most of them moved to Germany and America.

The pharmacist called her assistant. Listen to what this man just said, that Indians were the best engineers; could you repeat it?

He did.

They sold him the three packs in a rush, hoping the lunatic would leave the premises ASAP.

David read about the potential side-effects of the drug. One, pretty rare, but sometimes deadly, muscle degeneration, atrophy, mostly in the legs, possibly leading to paralysis, and sometimes affecting other organs, such as the heart, and resulting in sudden death.

He took the simvastatin anyway, and to enhance it, some niacin.

A few hours after reading the side-effects litany, David experienced a dizzy spell and spasms in his calf muscles. When he walked on Nevsky, the weakness in his legs and dizziness made him gasp in fright. Oh, here I am, thinking of all the dangers outside, but the greatest enemy is within, my own physiology and CNS. Now his anxiety was mounting so much so that he was both aware that he must be having a

hypochondriac episode and that he was in ill health. You can have an illusion and be totally right at the same time. You may have an illusion but actually see what is there, not so apparent to others, and the illusion may amount to vision. Illusion is not necessarily a delusion and there's no point in rushing to judgment. Terming something delusion is a value judgment. Yes, my cholesterol is high, my blood pressure is up, I have insomnia, arrhythmia, and it may all be a perfectly normal response to Russia in the post-White Nights decline, and in fact, may be a sign of splendid health and hormonal response to the provocations on Nevsky. He remembered how the decline of the sperm count was general in the United States, except in NYC, where it was going up. The puzzle was why. Well, dah. A propos of dah, is that some kind of insult to the Slavs? Like, when even a Slav could get it, Da? May be a consequence of someone hanging out with the Poles too much and innovating the English language thusly. But although it sounded reasonable that all his alarm signals were actually very healthy responses, a sort of revival of an American who had been deadened by the repression of the Bush homeland security, David was not quite so optimistic in his interpretation of his body. It was unhealthy that he concentrated on his body, he realized, and he would have certainly preferred if he'd been allowed to concentrate on one lithe body trained by the Kirov ballet, but so far no such body surfaced. That sounded a little morbid, just to talk about the body and not the whole person, some form of necrophilia. Anyway, yes, no doubt, it would be healthier if he had other bodies to pay attention to and not only his. But for now, he had to placate his, and he went out to buy beta blockers at another pharmacy, also on Griboyedova and Gorohovaya (it turned out that Russia was like America in that respect, every city corner featuring a pharmacy and a bar) and sometimes, actually, the doubles on diagonally opposite corners, or to make it sound chummier, kitty cat corners.

Could I have some beta blockers?

Only if you have a note from a vrach.

I happen not to have a prescription, but I think my heart is beating too loudly, and I'd like it to shut up. Well, not really shut up. (He wasn't sure he was saying exactly this in his Russian but imagined he was.)

What do you want?

A calming drug.

We have tranquilizers for that. You know which one you want?

Tranquilizers are mostly for the mind. My mind is fine, he said, although he wasn't convinced. But it's my body that bothers me.

Your body? Asked the chubby pharmacist. She looked exactly like the pharmacist in the previous pharmacy, and maybe was. Maybe she was getting to know him. Maybe he'd never been to the other pharmacy but just imagined that he was while he was in this one. Did this woman also hate Sikhs? Anti-Sikh? Well, dah, anti-sick.

I recommend this one, a beta blocker, said the woman. Minimal side effects, very good for lowering blood pressure and establishing a steady heart beat.

How much is it?

Three hundred rubles, fifty pills, fifty milligrams each.

All right, I'll take it.

Where is your prescription?

I already said I don't have one.

You must have one, she said, and collected his money and handed him over the pills.

I agree, I should have it. D'accord.

Konyeshna.

He walked out and admired this concept of prescriptions. A prescription is something you don't need in Russia, but you talk about, when you get the under-the-counter drugs. It is a reminder that you are a swine, and that they are swine, and that everybody is corrupt, and that at the same time, it is a waste of time to visit doctors. And that it's much healthier to talk about them than to visit them. In fact, there's something accurate about this world view, David thought. The difference between this and the American system is this: in the States you are denied the drug in the pharmacy unless you visit the doctor, who will refuse to see you next time, unless you buy the most expensive drug on the market, whose poster he has in illusory 3D on the wall, always somehow resembling the DNA model. Yes, you must take Lipitor, his American doctor would say. The net result in either country is that you get whatever drug you want, but you pay more for it in the States in time and money, and in Russia, you pay only in self-respect, which, if you are a true Russian, you have lost so long ago, that it is not a loss anymore but a reminder of what you would lose if you had it. In fact, it's a nice game, which, if you play it well, only boosts your self-respect and confidence.

The hell with anxiety. Anguish is a fine word, better than anxiety, and better than the German angst, which everybody in the States pronounces as engst. It sounded like some kind of shortened superlative of

eng, narrow, engest. And strangely, that somehow fit the mode — the narrowing of arteries in anxiety. He was free-associating but not freely, as his thoughts came back to his heart and arteries, narrowing and pressing, creating anguish. Anyway, he would get rid of his anguish.

After he took the beta blockers and quit taking Zocor and niacin, he did feel much better. (He'd read that statins and beta blockers can interact adversely, paralyzing your muscles, potentially, even the heart in higher doses.) He walked on Nevsky thinking of Kundera, only because of the title, the lightness of being, which Kundera must have lifted from somewhere, and since it was Kundera, it was already unbearably pretentious, so saying unbearable was kind of redundant. But he felt good, and especially so as he approached the Fontanka. In fact, he never felt good around Griboyedova, as though the canal was poisoned, but as soon as he approached Fontanka the world was improved, the sky was bigger, there was more light, and somehow, right before the bridge, he'd always notice a very fine looking woman, and this day, blocking his beta impulses, he suddenly felt alpha dog waves. He walked behind a woman who seemed interestingly narrow yet curvaceous. She walked in a particularly springy way, despite her high heels, and her posture was magnificent. He passed her and was delighted to see ample cleavage and then full lips and shining eyes, a woman alert on all fronts. She was clearly aware that he was looking at her, with a slight curl to her lips but she would not make eye contact. So many other body contacts were already in the air, the eye was superfluous. Bears perceive the world almost entirely through their nostrils, and the polar bear can smell a woman (of his bear kind) ninety miles up wind-stream. Well, it was still vision, only vision for him. He could think of bears, Russian bears, and the phantasmagoric ladies of Nevsky on Anchikov bridge; he could think of tactile invasions and olfactory effusions but all he was doing was ogling and goggling. The world was sort of at fingertips but it definitely was in the eyeballs. He was eyeballing her, and she was feeling his beta blocked, nearly alpha, waves. If you suppress the suppressor, you get the aggressor, or something like that. The power of negative dialectics on the soil of negative dialectics, socialism. To put it simply, he felt delightfully thoughtless and extroverted. There was nothing inside to worry about and there was this wonderful world outside filled with architectural and feminine graces. The beta blockers seemed to diminish his sense of existential uncertainty and threat. Strange to

imagine that a whole philosophical movement perhaps wouldn't have taken place if people had serotonin reuptake inhibitors and beta blockers, or perhaps there would have been no philosophical movements at all but more performers, actors, dancers. Anguish after all has its uses and perhaps too few people are afflicted with it, and therefore too forward. Well, having temporarily suspended his sense of mistrust and threat, he walked down Nevsky as though it were his comfy home — no threats, only prettiness. The gulf between strangers and him seemed to have diminished, the interpersonal space no longer needed to be that vast.



art by: Maryanna Hardy

FROM *1001 XANADUS*

MALCOLM SUTTON

1. Of late I'd been romanticizing the idea of becoming an old man. What are the chances? I asked my wife. Natalie, ten years younger, was so much closer to her body, her skin and bones, than I would ever be with mine — it made sense, she with her smooth long limbs leading from her frilled underwear. July, clothes draped over chair backs for the heat. Why should my description of her stop here? You're not even thirty-five, she exclaimed, though one can feel older, I thought. As if reality was generous to good couples, generous in years — she believed we'd be