

the other shore

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a script for four voices

john fraser



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main characters

Feodor – lives in an industrial city not far from Moscow; active in the Komsomol (Communist League of Youth); writer and journalist.

Leo – lives in Canada, is a Czech who lived in Moscow several years ago and who has worked in Canada as an industrial worker; writer and propagandist.

Aleya – agricultural economist; now lives on a *sovkhoz* in Central Asia

Aleya's diary – was written in Moscow some time before moving to Central Asia.

note

Felix Dzerzhinski (pseudonymously 'astronomer'), 1877–1926, was the historic head and founder of the GPU, the police arm of the Russian Revolution. In Moscow the square which bore his name is today renowned for its big toyshop, Children's World.

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feodor

Yuri and Ilich are playing volleyball behind the repair shed, and I can hear them shouting. They are playing for drinks, and when they are finished we will all go and get drunk. On the table before me there are two bowls – one with sweet cherries, one with sour. I have enjoyed the whole day – there is a smell of ozone and sweet heavy oil from the bus repair shop. This morning I had the memory of a taste – the taste of a Georgian wine I have not drunk for months. Sophie came back to town today.

‘I cried when I saw the birch trees,’ she said.

All day I have been sitting at the window, watching the traffic run by like water, thinking of the South and the sun. Thinking of writing a novel about the sun and the South to keep me warm. The ice is already pushing out shelves beyond the reeds to the boyars’ island. All day the yard outside has been full of workers, and I must think of something to say about them.

I was thinking too about my America. They will be playing college football, and the police will be trying to stop them drinking in the stands. The militia will be trying to stop us drinking too, but I have no sympathy for the Americans.

Well, yes, I have. But our priorities are different. I want to get drunk as a Soviet citizen, to be punished – if they catch me – as a responsible Party member. Where is the America I know? They could kill me as I sit here at the window. They could kill Yuri and Ilich, they could kill Sophie and the wolf Sophie tells us she saw in the forest. But they will freeze their ignorance in the little snowpile of our remnants ... Could they understand these four things that I do – the work for the Komsomol, the thinking of the southland (the dog split open by a truck in Samarkand, sweet and stinking), my America, my life with the welders and the intensity of the slice of the vodka to my heart ...?

And my Sophie, who likes me to think because it makes me quiet. ‘My girl, my girl, don’t lie to me ...’ If only she could ... Her new fur is honey and black, a wolfdog: and she is sweet as these cherries to my sour breath ... she is the blasting wind off the desert which sweetens those long pale grapes – what do they call them? Sophie believes that innocence drives out dialectics – but she believes this because she is not innocent. I say too, ‘I submit to discipline because I agree I must submit to discipline’ – and this annoys people. ‘But you know I’m a good communist,’ I say.

‘Just be a communist.’

But I am a good communist.

*

There are days when the intensity of isolation nearly rattles the rivets out of my head. 'Transcending the necessity of necessity,' a friend of mine puts it ... Today there is the scent of snow and apricots on the wind – last night the militia shot a cougar in Great October park. I wrote a letter to Sophie: 'Can you reconcile your modes with mine? Do you think we can all hug together and stand close – there not being very many of us, and it needing all the heat and warm breath we can muster to keep out the frost and the cougars ...' But I did not send it.

This had been the longest week in my world. Sophie had gone to Yaroslavl'. Here I am with what I call my honesty. With my lecture for the Komsomol on intra-bloc relations. With that slow slow clock in my head, audibly counting off the minutes. I can survive the loss of Sophie, if it comes to that: I can survive a winter without honey and a soft warm song from the south. In the street two of the girl construction workers, come to tease us all the way from Georgia, are dancing. One of them likes me, and I like both of them.

I know the limits of necessity this week. This produces a certain austerity, and a certain arrogance. Sophie understands this, and is proud of me. But as I move from austerity to austerity, I think, 'Perhaps Sophie will not come back, despite being proud. Perhaps she has plans so big I just cannot show up on their scale. Perhaps the plan of her life has no category available for me. I can understand that.' But when I think this, the austerity shows through as bitterness, and I see myself for a fool.

And yet I will survive. As a communist, that is what I have been taught, that is what I can practise. If you survive as a stone, survive: as a talking stone. And in my case, survive with a vestigial nose turned to the stinking tripe of the shattered dog in Samarkand, survive with a bare crack of an eye to catch the thin wolves running flick-flick through the birch trees.

Always the sticky-sweetness of things past. Why do I think of the horsemen of Montenegro, riding into the sky, riding alongside the little Zastava, its engine boiling as it climbed the mountains? Of the girl – my girl – who cried when she came back from the south and saw her birch trees again, who showed me the ants which ran like water under the poplars?

So, I wait in my room, the sad piles of newspapers and periodicals building up like bones on a cave floor. Will Sophie take the time to explain why she is leaving me, as I speculate on my America – hockey players, cops, the sad tropics of the 'south of Louisiana' ... small towns linked by chains of motels, two strangers in every room sharing the bottle of rye in every suitcase ...

But I am in the Soviets, and the only life of any significance I have is my life in the Komsomol, not my life looking out of this window at the

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workers in the yard.

Yuri and Ilich are nearly finished: there are only three sweet cherries left in the bowl. Now I will go and drink.. But it is in the Komsomol that I must work. I remember the old man who told me, 'When your quest is for truth, you don't have to bustle about like everyone else.'

The voices of the Georgian girls are harsh and challenging. Perhaps they will come to drink with us.

I remember someone singing a song in French – 'I have never seen China – but I can imagine it ... in my street there lives a Chinese who carries his country inside himself ...' I would be like that.

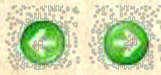
So, is it true then, that honesty costs more than truth? What a mistake Sophie was (already I sense that the vodka will lift the images of Sophie off my memory like stamps soaked off an envelope) – to have mistaken spontaneity for sensibility – how pitiful! And yet again – all as meaningless as patterns of smoke. Regrets without an object are onanism, as old Marx said. How fortunate the stores here are never out of vodka.

Am I even so good a communist? If I were, why ask the question? Am I a moralist without a conscience – for whom both doubt and certainty are equally self-indulgent and paralysing? Do I have the courage to explore, and the courage to conceal my discoveries? Does that concealment really require judgement and courage – especially when self-doubt twists like old ivy round judicious loyalty – or judicious humbug and priggery ...

So my mind is a squirrel's cage. Sophie once had a squirrel and had it killed when she was tired of it. How many excuses I made for her when I loved her ... 'Why not set it back among the birch trees you like so much?' 'It was a black squirrel, honey: they get tame frightfully quickly. It would have missed me.'

What nonsense it has all been so far. Each of us must reject the old ways. And I shall do so tomorrow – or the day after, when my head is better.

The thaw is dead and buried in the summer heat we are now beginning to forget. The birches stood knock-kneed together like fawns' legs, a little yellow-green fuzz on the branches, so pale it looked disembodied. The ice unlocked the bodies of dogs and pigeons for their season of corruption – the morgue on clearance day. In those days I could go home and make love with Sophie, crouching and gnawing like a fox with its trophies of the forest. But all that is past.



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