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The Beginning of Spring

Written by Penelope Fitzgerald

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The Beginning of Spring

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14

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1

In 1913 the journey from Moscow to Charing Cross, changing at Warsaw, cost fourteen pounds, six shillings and threepence and took two and a half days. In the March of 1913 Frank Reid's wife Nellie started out on this journey from 22 Lipka Street in the Khamovniki district, taking the three children with her – that is Dolly, Ben and Annushka. Annushka (or Annie) was two and three-quarters and likely to be an even greater nuisance than the others. However Dunyasha, the nurse who looked after the children at 22 Lipka Street, did not go with them.

Dunyasha must have been in the know, but Frank Reid was not. The first he heard about it, when he came back from the Press to his house, was from a letter. This letter, he was told by the servant Toma, had been brought by a messenger.

'Where is he now?' asked Frank, taking the letter in his hand. It was in Nellie's writing.

'He's gone about his business. He belongs to the Guild of Messengers, he's not allowed to take a rest anywhere.'

Frank walked straight through to the back right hand quarter of the house and into the kitchen, where he found the messenger with his red cap on the table in front of him, drinking tea with the cook and her assistant.

'Where did you get this letter?'

'I was called to this house,' said the messenger, getting to his feet, 'and given the letter.'

'Who gave it to you?'

'Your wife, Elena Karlovna Reid.'

'This is my house and I live here. Why did she need a messenger?'

The shoe-cleaning boy, known as the Little Cossack, the washerwoman, who was on her regular weekly call, the maid, and Toma had, by now, all come into the kitchen. 'He was told to deliver it to your office,' Toma said, 'but you have come home earlier than usual and anticipated him.' Frank had been born and brought up in Moscow, and though he was quiet by nature and undemonstrative, he knew that there were times when his life had to be acted out, as though on a stage. He sat down by the window, although at four o'clock it was already dark, and opened the letter in front of them all. In all his married life he couldn't remember having had more than two or three letters from Nellie. It hadn't been necessary – they were hardly ever apart, and in any case she talked a good deal. Not so much recently, perhaps.

He read as slowly as he could, but there were a few lines only, to tell him that she was off. Coming back to Moscow was not mentioned, and he concluded that she hadn't wanted to tell him what was really wrong, particularly as she had written at the bottom of the page that she wasn't saying this in any way bitterly, and she wanted him to take it in the same spirit. There was also something about keeping well.

They all stood watching him in silence. Not wishing to disappoint them, Frank folded up the page carefully and put it back in the envelope. He looked out into the shadowy courtyard, where the winter's stack of firewood was down by now, to its last quarter. The neighbours' oil lamps shone out here and there beyond the back fence. By arrangement with the Moscow Electrical company, Frank had installed his own twenty-five watt lighting.

'Elena Karlovna has gone away,' he said, 'and she has taken the three children with her, how long for I don't know. She hasn't told me when she will come back.'

The women began to cry. They must have helped Nellie to pack, and been the recipients of the winter clothes which wouldn't go into the trunks, but these were real tears, true grief.

The messenger was still standing with his red cap in his hand. 'Have you been paid?' Frank asked him. The man said he had not. The guild were paid on a fixed

scale, from twenty to forty kopeks, but the question was whether he had earned anything at all. The yardman now came into the kitchen, bringing with him a gust of oil and sawdust and the unmistakable smell of cold. Everything had to be explained to him all over again, although it must have been his business earlier on to help with Nellie's luggage.

'Bring some tea to the living room,' said Frank. He gave the messenger thirty kopeks. 'I'll have dinner at six, as usual.' The thought that the children weren't there, that Dolly and Ben would not return from school and that there was no Annushka in the house, suffocated him. This morning he had had three children, now he had none. How much he would miss Nellie, and how much he did miss her, he couldn't tell at the moment. He put that aside, to judge the effect later. They had been considering a visit to England, and with that in mind Frank had cleared the family's external passports with the local police station and the central police department. Possibly when Nellie signed her passport it had put ideas in her head. But when had Nellie ever allowed ideas to be put into her head?

Reids, when Frank's father had set up the firm in Moscow in the 1870s, had imported and assembled printing machinery. As a sideline he had acquired a smallish printing business. That business was pretty well all Frank had left. You couldn't do anything with the assembly

plant now, the German and direct import competition was too strong. But Reid's Press did well enough and he had a reasonably satisfactory sort of man to do the management accounting. Perhaps, though, 'reasonable' wasn't, in connection with Selwyn, quite the right word. He had no wife and appeared to have no grievances, was a follower of Tolstoy, still more so since Tolstoy died, and he wrote poetry in Russian. Frank expected Russian poetry to be about birch trees and snow, and in fact in the last verses Selwyn had read to him birch trees and snow were both mentioned pretty frequently.

Frank went now to the telephone, wound the handle twice and asked for the Reid's Press number, repeating it several times. Meanwhile Toma appeared with a samovar, the small one, presumably suitable for the master of the house now that he was left on his own. It was just coming to the boil and gave out a faint chatter of expectation.

'What are we to do with the children's rooms, sir?' Toma asked in a low tone.

'Shut the doors of their rooms and keep them as they are. Where's Dunyasha?'

Frank knew she must be about the house somewhere but was lying low, like a partridge in a furrow, to avoid blame.

'Dunyasha wants to speak to you. Now that the children are gone, what is to be her employment?'

'Tell her to set her mind at rest.' Frank felt he sounded like a capricious owner of serfs. Surely he'd never given them much reason to worry about their jobs?

The call came through, and Selwyn's light-toned, musing voice answered in Russian: 'I hear you.'

'Look, I didn't mean to interrupt you this afternoon, but something's happened which I didn't quite expect.'

'You don't sound altogether yourself, Frank. Tell me, which has come to you, joy or sorrow?'

'I should call it a bit of a shock. Sorrow, if it's got to be one of them.'

Toma came out into the hall for a moment, saying something about changes to be made, and then retired to the kitchen. Frank went on: 'Selwyn, it's about Nellie. She's gone back to England, I suppose, and taken the children with her.'

'All three?'

'Yes.'

'But mayn't it be she wants to see . . .' Selwyn hesitated, as though it was hard for him to find words for ordinary human relationships, '. . . might one not want to see one's mother?'

'She didn't say so much as a word. In any case her mother died before I met her.'

'Her father?'

'She's only got her brother left. He lives where he's always lived, in Norbury.'

'In Norbury, Frank and an orphan!'

'Well, I'm an orphan, for that matter, and so are you.'

'Ah, but I'm fifty-two.'

Selwyn had a reserve of good sense, which appeared when he was at work, and unexpectedly at other times when it might almost have been despaired of. He said, 'I shan't take much longer. I'm checking the wage-bill against what the pay clerks are actually handing out. You said you wanted that done more often.'

'I do want it done more often.'

'When we've finished, why don't you dine with me, Frank? I don't like to think of you sitting and staring, it may be, at an empty chair. At my place, and very simply, not in the heartless surroundings of a restaurant.'

'Thank you, but I won't do that. I'll be in tomorrow, though, at the usual time, about eight.'

He put the mouthpiece back on its solid brass hook and began to patrol the house, silent except for the distant rising and falling of voices from the kitchen which, in spite of what sounded like a burst of sobs, had the familiar sound of a successful party. Ramshackle, by Frank's standards, and roomy, the house consisted of a stone storey and on top of that a wooden one. The vast stove, glazed with white tiles from the Presnya, kept the whole ground floor warm. Outside, towards the bend in the Moscow river, a curious streak of bright lemon-yellow ran across the slate-coloured sky.

Someone was at the front door, and Toma brought in Selwyn Crane. Although Frank saw him almost every day at the Press, he often forgot, until he saw him in a different setting, how unusual, for an English business man, he looked. He was tall and thin – so, for that matter, was Frank, but Selwyn, ascetic, kindly smiling, earnestly questing, not quite sane-looking, seemed to have let himself waste away, from other-worldliness, almost to transparency. With a kind of black frock-coat he wore a pair of English tweed trousers, made up by a Moscow tailor who had cut them rather too short, and a high-necked Russian peasant's blouse, a tribute to the memory of Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy. In the warm room, with no ladies present, he threw off the frock-coat and let the coarse material of the blouse sink down in folds around his lean ribs.

'My dear fellow, here I am. After such news, I couldn't leave you by yourself.'

'That's what I would have preferred, though,' said Frank. 'You won't mind if I speak out. I'd rather have been by myself.'

'I came on the twenty-four tram,' said Selwyn. 'I was fortunate enough to catch one almost at once. Rest assured that I shan't stay long. I was at my desk when a thought came to me which I knew immediately might be of comfort. I got up immediately and went out to the tram stop. The telephone, Frank, isn't the right way to convey such things.'

Frank, sitting opposite, put his head in his hands. He felt he could bear anything rather than determined unselfishness. Selwyn, however, seemed to be encouraged.

'That's the attitude of a penitent, Frank. No need for that. We are all of us sinners. The thought that came to me didn't concern guilt, but loss, supposing we think of loss as a form of poverty. Now poverty, or what the world calls poverty, isn't a matter for regret, but for rejoicing.'

'No, Selwyn, it's not,' said Frank.

'Lev Nikolaevich tried to give away all his possessions.'

'That was to make the peasants richer, not to make himself poorer.' Tolstoy's Moscow estate was only a mile or so away from Lipka Street. In his will it had been bequeathed to the peasants, who, ever since, had been cutting down the trees to make ready money. They worked even at night, felling the trees by the light of paraffin flares.

Selwyn leant forward, his large hazel eyes intensely focused, alight with tender curiosity and goodwill.

'Frank, when summer comes, let us go on the tramp together. I know you well, but in the clear air, in the plains and forests, I should surely come to know you better. You have courage, Frank, but I think you have no imagination.'

'Selwyn, I don't want my soul read this evening. To be honest, I don't feel up to it.'

In the hall Toma appeared again to help Selwyn into his sleeveless overcoat of rank sheepskin. Frank repeated that he'd be at the Press at his usual time. As soon as the outer door was shut Toma began to lament that Selwyn Osipych hadn't taken any tea, or even a glass of seltzer water.

'He only called in for a moment.'

'He's a good man, sir, always on his way from one place to another, searching out want and despair.'

'Well he didn't find either of them here,' said Frank.

'Perhaps he brought you some news, sir, of your wife.'

'He might have done if he worked at the railway station, but he doesn't. She took the Berlin train and that's all there is to it.'

'God is not without mercy,' said Toma vaguely.

'Toma, when you first came here three years ago, the year Annushka was born, you told me you were an unbeliever.'

Toma's face relaxed into the creases of leathery goodwill which were a preparation for hours of aimless discussion.

'Not an unbeliever, sir, a free-thinker. Perhaps you've never thought about the difference. As a free-thinker I can believe what I like, when I like. I can commit you, in your sad situation, to the protection of God this evening, even though tomorrow morning I shan't believe he exists. As an unbeliever I should be obliged not to

believe, and that's an unwarrantable restriction on my thoughts.'

Presently it was discovered that Selwyn's brief case, really a music case, crammed with papers, and stiffened by the rain of many seasons at many tram-stops, had been left behind on the bench below the coat rack, where the felt boots stood in rows. This had happened a number of times before, and the familiarity of it was a kind of consolation.

'I'll take it in with me tomorrow morning,' said Frank. 'Don't let me forget.'