

The Ear: A Fable of Life and Social Change in St. Petersburg

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You probably won't believe me, because the papers didn't report it, which means it never really happened, but I swear to you that it's true.

I saw my ear rolling down Nevsky Prospect.

I saw it coming out of the theater, with a very elegantly dressed middle aged married woman (who later threw herself in front of an approaching train at the Ploshchad Muzhestva -- "Courage Square") where I heard the ear had great remorse for accidentally overhearing a very important high official. From there, I saw the ear start to roll after a ghost-like figure wearing a threadbare pair of pants of which one leg had been cut off to make the other longer. To top it off, there was a bed bug on his shoulder that had been frozen for thirty years in the frozen food section of a grocery with no food.

Upon a balcony, shouting at them, was a man who said he had been born three times. He was still in a bathrobe, shouting something about the King of Spades, and looked as though he had spent the whole century in bed. Passers-by said he was a lawyer dying a slow death, trapped in a world of written rules that had nothing to do with human beings or justice. Of course I wanted to believe them (the passers-by, that is, not the laws) but one looked suspiciously like a man who, in his youth, had killed an old woman in a boarding house just for the intellectual excitement, while another made a pretense to being a granddaughter of some unknown Euthanasia (or maybe it was Anesthesia), who said she was heir to all of the wealth of the Tsars, or at least the 10 kopecks that Russia is now worth, and if not that, then she was at least entitled to a pension for having been married to a veteran of a war she said was for her great Paternal-land. All this time, a third bystander stuttered and stumbled like an idiot; a madman possessed, who had just come up from the underground. A man thinking he was a dog, or a dog who had been reconstituted in the form of a man, no doubt.

Of course I was trying to convince an indifferent policeman of the gravity of the situation when a huge black cat bounded onto Nevsky and at them all.

Meeowww!

I was so disturbed by what I had witnessed that I went home and hid under the bed and had a fitful sleep in which I dreamt I had been taken to a place (completely unlike any place you know) that resembled a Garden of the Dead.

It was filled with people frozen in a time warp who worshipped their heroes of a war that had happened 50 years ago (a war in which they destroyed a system just like theirs to prove the invincibility of systems like theirs). They worshipped the heroes so much that they decided to keep the place in the same condition as it had been fifty years before.

Their old people had ghoulish and ghastly faces with empty eyes and they wore colorless suits. And they kept the buildings where they spent their lives unlit and barren and filled with cigarette smoke, while they kept their cemeteries like gardens, filled with plants and trees. They spent their time building weapons that they pointed everywhere, particularly at their own people, and kept building until they had the power to destroy all life on the planet itself.

Although time went forward, they tried to stop it in every way; one way was to try to sleep as many hours as they could on the first day of the year.

As a cruel joke, they named each year after animals that they displayed in little figurines, like horses, because none of the living animals could be found anymore. In fact, so few things were alive that they had nothing to eat. Certainly they would have eaten horses, had they been able to find them. Perhaps they already had.

To stop the future, they did everything to starve and deprive and discourage their young people so they would not grow and replace the old.

In response, the young turned into emissaries of death, all alike -- seeking pleasure without meaning and trying to turn all those they seduced into one of them, to tend over fallen trees and broken twigs and ash.

In this broken garden, they had a faith healer who spoke to them on an electronic box about how they could feel healthy just by not thinking about trying to grow and build anything new, but on faith alone, because it was easier. And they believed him, and believed they could make clocks in towers and time itself stop, just by wishing it. They believed, too, that they would be saved by aliens from another planet, and if not that, by adopting 200 year old obsolete political and economic systems from other countries, brought to them by "friends" from those countries.

When I woke up, I was in a cold sweat.

I came out from under the bed and thought about trying to grow trees in the Garden of the Dead. I knew that for every 100 trees I would grow, the People of the Dead would uproot 50 and would poison 40 more and that 9 would grow misshapen and with no fruit, but that perhaps one would grow and hold the soil and produce fruit, and give refuge to a lone squirrel or bird that might have survived. It would be enough. It would have to be enough.

When I got out from under the bed, I heard the distant purring of what must have been a Giant cat, and noticed that my ear was in its rightful place. What I had seen running down Nevsky must have been somebody else's ear.

Meeeeowwww!

The End