



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

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Highly Commended in the Open Division

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The Poetry of Cold Love

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The Poetry of Cold Love

I decided that the day my wife would die would be a Sunday.

It was to be simple. No poison or pillows. No bleeding or pain. She would simply be pushed out into the freezing night and the door locked behind her. I knew she may try to get back in, or to pound on the metal panel but, in this weather, it would only last for one minute and twenty seconds. I could withstand that. I had to.

This was the beginning of the end.

And the end always started with the loose threads being tied up, the debts paid and the past let go.

If I'm honest about it, I should have let her go eighty-six years ago. The day that the fire fell and the flower pot also crashed to Earth. But back then, in my youth, I hadn't been good with accepting my fate.

I knew she had died because Push came in from the dark, snow-filled yard.

He stood in silence and I assumed he was remembering the day we had met and all the years we had spent together since.

Push asked the only question he needed the answer to. "Did you love her every day?"

"I could not have loved a woman more than I loved my Nadia." My voice broke on her name and I shut my mouth with a snap, as though that could keep the emotion in. I swallowed hard. "Thank you, Push."

He waved a hand, a gesture he had copied from me. "It was nothing. To power your little wife was no effort at all."

"Were you bored all these years?" I asked.

"No, I have been reading her romance novels."

Siberia, 1908

From *The Siberian Gazeta*, 5 July 1908, p. 9

Bright Lights, Flattened Trees

Several eyewitness accounts have reported strange events of the early morning of 30th June, when just on dawn a rain of rocks and fire fell from the sky and landed in the forest near the Stony Tunguska River. Fur trapper, Evenk Bushkov, said he saw a fireball the size of a house plunge through the still dark sky into the upper branches of a copse of pine trees. His brother is still receiving medical attention for temporary blindness. Authorities from the Emergency Committee of Cheka are not allowing civilians into the area at this time.

It should have been summer.

But July in the east of the Siberian wastelands was content to simply throw some weak sunshine onto hard ice that refused to melt. I was not happy to be here.

My boss in Saint Petersburg had taken offence at an innocent comment and I had been assigned to Krasnoyarsk to head up the aluminium research department. Nadia, my wife, took it with good grace, but I was in a constant state of fume.

“Here,” she would say. “Chew on this sugared chocolate. It will make you work through your resentment.”

But all it did was make my anger sweeter.

Until the day I met Push.

News of the fire falling from the sky at Tunguska had travelled all over the area. The Cheka wanted to keep it quiet, which was the cue for every person moving through the area to tell every other person they saw. I had received a telegram informing me that I would be required to search the area for the possibility of any aluminium.

Nadia chewed at her bottom lip. “But what if something else falls?”

“Things come from out of the blue all the time.” I shrugged in a way that must have got Fate’s attention.

Nadia went out that afternoon to buy black bread and garlic. She had reached the doorstep when the neighbour who lived above us, who was dusting her windowsill, tipped a clay flowerpot over the edge.

I knew Nadia was gone as I carried her back to our apartment. Her eyes were already cold. So cold. I didn't think I could love something with that chilled a look. But I did. I did with all of me.

I sat on a dining chair and held her. I didn't think about what I would do next, as there was no next.

And that was when I met Push.

A small, round ball of a man – how I'd always pictured a gnome. He was the colour of charcoal, but transparent in a way. I could half-see the wallpaper through him. "Are you really here?"

Push grinned. "Yes, I'm here. We just live in a different dimension to you."

"The sixth?" I guessed.

"Seventh."

I creased up my brow and he commented on my confusion. "Don't try to think about it. It's easier to simply accept what is. That's what I do when I have to learn something new about holistic physics."

"Holistic physics?" I marvelled.

"I don't have all the words I need to speak to you in your language. Can you tell me some of your poems or stories?"

That seemed a simple request and with Nadia's cooling body tucked against my breast, I began to recite.

"Three fair maidens, late one night,

Sat and spun by candlelight ... "

I took him through some of my favourite passages from Aleksandr Pushkin's *Evgeny Onegin*, and I noticed the expansion in his vocabulary. Before I moved on to other greats of Russian literature, I named him "Push" as I decided it was Aleksandr who had taught him to speak.

When night had possessed the room and the furnishings were abstract shapes in grey, Push said. "I can help with this misfortune." He nodded to the still form of Nadia.

I stared at him. "How?"

"I can bring her back, but you must help me."

I continued to stare. I knew it wasn't possible, but a flame of hope was reaching out to him for oxygen.

"You need to do two things."

I could not help gasping for the possibility. "What?" I croaked.

"You must love her as if she is still really here."

I performed a strange bow from my seated position. "It would be an honour and no hardship at all."

Push stared directly at me. "And you must help my people get home."

My heart dropped. "Of course I will do what I can, but I'm a lowly government agent. I have no power or influence."

"I will arrange whatever you need to get you in the right place."

I choked back my humility. "Then I am at your service."

Push moved closer to where I sat. "Open her mouth."

I gently drew Nadia's lips apart and her slack jaw complied with my movements.

Push changed shape as he approached her, his transparent body lengthening into a serpent shape that hung in the air, then entered Nadia's throat.

The little grey gnome disappeared.

I sat in near silence with only the ticking of the mantle clock counting with me.

Then Nadia stirred and sat up in my lap. She blinked and looked around the room. "What's happened? Have I been asleep?"

"You were dizzy," I said. "You went to go shopping and came over a little faint. I think you've been doing too much."

She stood. "Tea. We must have tea."

"I just said you've been doing too much."

But she was already in the kitchen. "I can make my husband tea. It's nothing."

In minutes, she was back in the sitting room, setting out the teapot and cups on the table. Nadia sat down abruptly and turned to face me.

“This is the entity you promised to help,” she stated.

I held the sugar tongs in mid-air. “I see.”

“I will talk to you to tell you of our plight and then I will give full consciousness to Nadia. At any time, if I need to communicate with you, I will be brief, then leave you with your dear one.”

Again, my throat was thick. “Thank you for your kindness.”

“My people,” Push began, “come from another galaxy. There was a global accident on our planet and we had to leave it for a period of about three hundred thousand of your years.”

I could feel that my eyes were wide. “What happened?”

“A type of explosion.” He spoke, but Nadia poured a cup of tea. “We must remain in our ships until we can return.”

“Why did you come to Earth?” I passed the sugar tongs, although I wasn’t sure who to.

“The ships can overheat over time, so we need to submerge them in a deep body of water and allow them to rest.”

“You were aiming for the ocean?”

“No, it must be fresh water,” he said. “Lake Baikal was our target.”

Somehow I had drunk my tea. As I poured a fresh cup, I asked, “How did you crash?”

“There was a disturbance. A solar ... a type of vortex ...” Push paused for a moment as though sorting through everything I’d told him. “A tempestuous storm,” he announced, and a look of satisfaction crossed Nadia’s face.

“How many of you are there?”

“Fifty-seven thousand.”

I put my cup down hard on its saucer.

“They are in escape pods, what you would think of as lifeboats, at the bottom of the lake.”

“How will you all be able to leave?”

“A larger ship will need to collect us. Once we have found somewhere it can land.”

I nodded slowly, overwhelmed by Push's plight and feeling nowhere near able to help.

"Now, tell me," he said, "how does your world work?"

Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, 1974

It had taken forever, and they were many nights I'd paced the apartment unable to sleep, as I worried if Push and his people could ever be rescued. Nadia had tried to console me with tea, back rubs and eventually vodka. Push had explained that time was different for them, that they were sleeping through it, and that even he was lying dormant when Nadia was in control.

At least today might take us closer to a solution.

I bit at the edge of my thumb as I watched the screens. The new space station, Salyut 4, sat on the launch pad, looking proud and sturdy. But then so had its sibling, Dos 3, which had got out of control and then died a burning death.

It had to work.

If it could get into orbit, Push could view the readings coming back, could see if there was anywhere cold enough.

And then Salyut 4 was airborne and racing to leave the atmosphere.

"Congratulations," one of my staff said to me.

"Thank you, comrade."

The man nodded at me with respect, not knowing that he knew more about the science behind the launch than I could ever hope to. I was a senior commander on the Soviet Space Program because of whatever Push had arranged.

The space station reached orbit and started sending information back.

With each new team that went up, I hoped for signs of low enough temperatures, but the station couldn't cover the whole planet.

I was desolate, but Push was excited. "It's narrowed it down for us. We know the best place to look is under the ice, especially in the south."

Princess Elizabeth Land, Antarctica, 1974

No one commented on my transfer to the Soviet Antarctic Expedition that was run out of Vostok Station.

“This place makes Siberia seem balmy,” I commented to Nadia, who’d suddenly gained a qualification in glaciology.

“I think it’s lovely,” she said. “Especially at sunset.”

The fact that she was watching it from inside probably helped, but there was no need for me to spoil her enjoyment.

My mood had lifted since we’d arrived at the South Pole. I’d begun to share in Push’s belief that what we were searching for was here under the frozen surface. Now we needed to pinpoint exactly where and find a way to get to it.

One thought did bother me. It was my new worry to replace the old.

I was now ninety-two, although Push had ensured that I didn’t look it, and that there were no documents to show the truth. But I still felt it. My bones complained and ached, and I had trouble keeping all my memories straight. Regardless, I served as liaison for a survey the British wanted to do from our station, and felt my youth come back with a surge when they got readings that didn’t make sense.

Push and I said it together. “This is the place.”

But the technology wasn’t there to prove it. We had to wait.

From *Journal of Glaciology*, October 1993, p. 29

A scientist from the Mullard Space Station Laboratory in London has used a European satellite to study the Antarctic ice shelf. Work completed in 1974 suggested that fresh water may be under the surface and this has now

been confirmed. Initial radar results show the largest lake in the world at a depth of 4,000 metres.

I was so sleepy I had to read it twice to understand what I was looking at. Then I woke up Nadia from her afternoon doze so that I could wake up Push. He let me finish reading the whole article to him before he spoke.

“We have found it at last, old friend,” he said, grinning with Nadia’s face. “My people will be able to be rescued.”

“We have much to do,” I said, and stood up like I had an idea of where I was going. I paused for a moment, then walked to the sideboard and picked up the vodka bottle.

From *Izvestia*, 16 January 1994, p. 37

Our greatest Antarctic research station, Vostok, is to be closed from February to November this year. For the past ten years numerous core samples have been removed from sites around the camp and scientists say it is necessary to allow for refreezing and strengthening this southern winter. At the end of the year, work will continue on the search for evidence that will help to map the history of the South Pole.

I folded the broadsheet and let it fall onto the coffee table. I had been wondering how they were going to spin the closing of the station. The story was simple enough to make me smile. But it was only for a moment. The loss of Nadia still hung heavy on my lips and kept them in a straight line. I had let her go the night before, knowing that the time we’d borrowed had been an immense gift. Now it was my turn to give myself. I had to be the bridge between the ship and the lake, to let Push and his people flow through me as they rode on the emotion of my humility, and to give my life to let them escape.

I was happy to.

I was an old man with the scars of too many cares.

As we made our way down the newly carved tunnel to the underground lake, Push stopped and drew me to one side.

“Your gratitude for me.” A slight pause. “Push.” He said his name like he was tasting something delightful. “And your love for Nadia will power our ship.”

I nodded.

“We thank you for friendship and sacrifice,” he said.

I smiled. I knew my fate and now I was wise enough to accept it.