

The Street of Heroes



by

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At the bottom of the Street of Heroes, opposite the last tram stop before it wends its way across wasteland to the concrete towers of the modern suburbs, there is an old apartment block. Out of its blackened stonework, dusty windows look through their curlicued ironwork balconies on to the tree-lined street below and, at the back, the remains of an orchard, walled round so that only tenants can take its sour apples and cherries. Unaccountably left standing when its neighbours were demolished, it stands alone, sentinel-like, guardian, or so it seems to some of the tenants, of an older, stabler set of values. To them it sometimes seems that the history of this building is a microcosm of the history of this little corner of Eastern Europe.

Built at the turn of the century, its builders were a people newly freed from foreign rule, fired by a vision of a new and strong society, a vision they expressed in the nicely balanced proportions of its exterior, the spacious high-ceilinged rooms and finely decorated plasterwork. A vision that was squandered in four wars and many minor skirmishes some of which left their mark in the form of bullet holes and the odd corner lopped off by an inaccurate or over-enthusiastic gunner, so that the building came to seem like the nation, still standing but with its fine decoration chipped and battered. Then, communism came and with it, uniformity, industrialisation and, as a side-effect, housing shortage. Each apartment became home to two or sometimes three families, while the worn stone stairs echoed to incessant chatter and the smell of cheap cigarette smoke was everywhere.

Now, communism has gone and in the aftermath, known to all only as the 'Changes' as if to underline the uncertainty of where such upheavals lead, ten families and some single people live here.

Flat 8 on the third floor is perhaps more modern than the rest in the block, the furniture is newer, more expensive, the carpets more luxurious and in it lives Evgeny Stratev and his wife. In the history of communism, people like Evgeny will never figure largely, perhaps unjustly so because were it not for him and thousands like him the Party machine would not have functioned half as effectively as it did. For Evgeny was an apparatchik, a Party man who had risen, almost as though on a pre-determined path, through the ranks of the Youth League, the Komsomol, to attain, for him, the quite dizzy heights of Secretary of City District Number 2. This well-paid and comfortable post gave him considerable powers over the life and livelihood of his fellow tenants and the other inhabitants of the district. Should anyone want a new job, a reference from him was required, the move to a new flat could only be done with his approval and so on, so that to many people Evgeny had more power than the Leader himself. He had not got this position by brilliance of intellect or character, but by diligence, an intimate knowledge of the Party system and the luck to have a father who had been a comrade of the Leader in the early days of the revolution.

He was not a prepossessing man, small, in his late thirties with untidy black hair and a permanent five o'clock shadow, habitually dressed in a rumpled grey suit. So it was that at his trial just after the Changes, Evgeny had not cut an impressive figure. An over-zealous prosecutor had seized upon Evgeny as a flagship case with which to obscure his own communist past and mounted an enthusiastic court case on charges of embezzlement and fraud. Conviction seemed to Evgeny inevitable. He was enough of a politician to realise that the credibility of both the new government and the prosecutor lay in the successful outcome of such trials, and when he was sentenced to three months imprisonment, he was only surprised at the brevity of the sentence. He had not considered himself guilty. True, monies had been paid, but the Party had given and as the Party's loyal servant he had accepted.

Evgeny was not given to introspection or bitterness. As an apparatchik he had prided himself on being a man of action and looked with contempt upon those colleagues who took days to make the simplest decision and then worried endlessly about its correctness. Thus, during the lonely hours in his cell, he had started to plan his rehabilitation, if not complete then at least partial. He was under no illusions that the halcyon days of power and

position in the Party were gone, but calculated that enough of the old party machinery still remained for there to be a place, however minor, for a loyal member.

After release, though, it quickly became apparent that the Changes had gone further and faster than he could have envisaged. Friends and ex-colleagues, waiting for the prosecutor's call themselves, suddenly became 'unavailable' and his carefully laid plans crumbled into a stream of unanswered letters, fruitless phone calls and the embarrassed faces of former friends met casually on the streets.

Now in the aridity of the endless days in the flat on the Street of Heroes, Evgeny considers his position carefully, seeking diligently for the one opening that can start the process of restoration. He has not the taste, nor enough money, though he has enough put by to live on, to work or invest in any of the little businesses that are springing up all over the city. No, Evgeny tells himself, he is a politician of the old school, forged in the fire of revolution and hardened by adversity, and politicians of that ilk never give up or fade away.

By luck, one morning, one of his phone calls strikes fertile ground. Luca Todorov had been Evgeny's senior, the city committee chairman, whose position Evgeny, in the normal way of things, might have expected to inherit. He had had the good fortune to retire just before the Leader was forced to step down and, thus far at least, has escaped the attentions of the prosecutor. Which makes it all the more surprising that that one call is so full of friendliness and warm greetings that Evgeny, for a moment, wonders if the Changes have taken place at all.

So it is, two months after release from prison, that one fine spring morning, just as the lime trees that line the Street of Heroes are putting on their leaves for the summer, Evgeny steps out of the apartment block. He is dressed in one of his better suits, an Italian one bought on a 'trade' visit some years ago, and makes his way by tram across the city to the suburb still called, in Communist fashion, 'Youth', a journey he has made many times in happier days. Where you would expect a man of Luca's former position to have lived in a villa, perhaps, or a small dacha on the slopes of the mountain next to the city, he chose to live quietly and unostentatiously with his wife in a three-roomed apartment in this rather run-down area of the city. Which is perhaps why, Evgeny reflects on the way up in the lift, no prosecutor has yet come banging at his door.

Luca is a big man, both physically and in character, with a fondness for telling long, convoluted stories, and today he is in irrepressibly good form. As his wife brings coffee and

the table in front of him is laid to groaning point with sandwiches, fruit and torte of many kinds, he tells the tale of a shouting match with his neighbour over a dog that barks all hours of the day and night. Such encounters always improve his mood, in the old days he would actively look for an argument just so he could go home happy.

'Now you know and I know, Evgencho, that such animals shouldn't be here,' Evgeny is momentarily unsure whether he means the dog or its owner, 'and previously he wouldn't be here, but now, in my position...' and Luca shrugs his shoulders and turns the edges of his mouth down.

'Anyway, enough, it's good to see you here, Evgeny, reminds me of the old days, and retired old man that I am, I need reminding sometimes. But, from what I hear of your position,' and Luca looks shrewdly at him through his incongruously small glasses, 'I can't imagine that this is a purely social visit.'

'What have you heard, Luca?' asks Evgeny.

'Oh, things and things, just gossip. Some of the old comrades still speak to me. Prison can't have been pleasant.'

'No, not pleasant but more unpleasant though was coming out.' Evgeny feels uncharacteristically diffident. 'Luca,' he says hesitantly, 'I need some advice.'

'Advice, my friend?' shouts Luca 'What advice can I possibly give you? You were my most respected district secretary for all those years.'

'Yes, I know, but times change, and I've changed, from respected chairman to' and Evgeny has to spit the words out 'petty criminal.'

'Well,' Luca sobers for a moment 'times change, certainly, Evgeny, it's the nature of politics, but times will change again.'

'I don't want to see too many more changes' says Evgeny 'For thirty years I was part of a system that was considered right, you were, everyone was, and now, in the blink of an eyelid, I'm wrong, and, have been for thirty years, according to this government.'

'Hah, this government, what a sham. Were there ever such price rises and shortages in our time?'

'The people. apparently, have chosen, Luca.' Evgeny is cosily sarcastic.

'Chosen? Chosen what, democracy?' Luca articulates the word carefully, like a man spitting out cherry pips, 'An unfulfillable dream, more than that, a dangerous dream. In the west all the institutions of government, all the paraphernalia of history is moulded to create the illusion that they have the best, most accountable system. They have their senates, mother of parliaments, constitutions, Magna Cartas and free speech. But what is free speech for your average man, Evgeny, but the right to loose his mouth off in a political vacuum. Rulers rule, leaders lead and all else is illusion. Each age has its guiding light to recreate that illusion, ours was Marx, Lenin and a belief in our own national identity, Europe's appears to be Mrs. Thatcher. Let them joke in cafes about dragging her over here to lead us to the promised land, but they'll see that things don't change as fundamentally as they think.'

Luca pauses and in the sudden silence a dog barks next door. Both men laugh as the tension of the moment drains away.

'See, the voice of the people. Forgive me, I've spoken at too many Party Congresses,' Luca smiles ruefully' and I like to keep in practice in case I get to speak at another one.'

'Oh,' Evgeny dismisses this with a wave of his hand' but you're right The art of government is a form of magic to hide the conjuror's true identity. The next congress might be a vain hope, though.'

'Not so vain, perhaps, if this government persists in trying to emulate Western ways quite so slavishly. Western economists and politicians come here peddling their lunatic theories, and what do our glorious leaders do but roll over and ask for more, whores for their ecus and dollars. Tamper with our nationalism at your peril, is what I say. Why do you think, Evgeny, your street is named as it is? Whoever named it is far cleverer than you or I or our current crop of so-called leaders. He knew, where we forgot, that happiness or the greater good alone doesn't keep a country together, but the nobility of heroic struggle unites a people as nothing else will. That's where this government will fail, they haven't the experience of the people we had, and that's why I dream of the next congress.'

At the bottom of the Street of Heroes, opposite the last tram stop before it wends its way across wasteland to the concrete towers of the modern suburbs, there is an old apartment block. On this sunny afternoon, a portly well-dressed man stands on the street looking up at its dusty windows. Evgeny, for it is he, is seeing for the first time, in the principles that constructed such a solid, lasting building, his past and his future.