One day I returned to my apartment at Overstrand Mansions and found a case of vodka outside the door – a dozen bottles of Stolichnaya Green Label. A week later it was a basket filled with small jars of caviar. Neither of these gifts contained a note or any indication of the name of the sender. But there was no question of my keeping them. I brought them to the Embassy and put them in storage – in the same basement room in which we kept the originals of hate-letters and the left-behind umbrellas – and I had their existence entered in the duty officer's log. The next parcel was a box of chocolates, and the last one an imitation leather wallet. One thing was clear: whoever was leaving these things was running out of money.

'You have a secret admirer,' Everett Horton said. 'It's got to be a Russian. They're noted for their subtlety. Like German jokes, like Mexican food. A few years ago one of our guys on the third floor was approached by a Tass correspondent. They had lunch – our man was wired up. The Russian offered him money for information. Just like that – can you imagine? They still play the tape of the conversation upstairs for laughs.'

'What should I do, coach?'

Horton said, 'I'd put him on hold.'

The next week there was no gift at my door. There was a phone call.

'My name is Yuri Kirilov,' a man said. 'You know me.'

I did know him, in the same way that millions of people in the West know Soviet defectors. But Kirilov's defection – in the middle of a television program on the BBC – had been spectacular.

'Please to meet my wife,' Kirilov said, as I threw my lunch bag into the litter bin next to the bench. We were at the Piccadilly side of Green Park.

I was embarrassed for him, because this woman gave me a hot adoring look and took my hand. She said, 'You have beautiful eyes,' and kept staring.

Under the circumstances there was nothing I could say except 'Thank you' and 'Yuri didn't tell me he was married.'

'He is ashamed!'

I said, ‘If I were married to you I’d never stop boasting about you.’

It was exaggerated and insincere, but what else could I say? She had made a little melodrama out of being introduced to me in Green Park, and I was doing my best to turn it into a farce. Spouses who flirted in front of their partners seemed to me dangerous and stupid, and Helena – that was her name – had taken me by surprise. Kirilov had not mentioned his wife. He merely said that he urgently wanted to see me – somewhere quiet. I suggested my office at the Embassy. He said, ‘Not that quiet.’ I suggested the Serpentine, which I often walked around at lunchtime. ‘Green Park,’ he said. ‘Is better.’ Grin Park: he had not been out of the Soviet Union very long.

‘I must kiss him for these compliments,’ Helena was saying. ‘Take my photo, Yuri.’

Kirilov obediently snapped a picture as Helena sat me down beside her and threw her arms around my neck. We were, for a few seconds, the classic canoodling pair, kissing on a park bench.

‘I like the taste!’ Helena said. ‘One more time, please.’

I tried to restrain her, but it did little good. I was sure that the photograph of this embrace probably looked much more passionate. The kiss made it seem a private moment.

‘There is lipstick on your mouth,’ she said. ‘Your boss will be very shocked!’

I said, ‘It would take more than this to shock my boss.’

‘What if he knew it was Russian lipstick?’ Helena said.

‘He’d send me to Siberia,’ I said.

‘I would follow you,’ Helena said.

I expected Kirilov to hit her, but all he said was, ‘I was in Siberia. I write my novel in Siberia. With a little pencil. With tiny sheets of paper. More than eight hundred sheets, very tiny – very small writing, two hundred words to a sheet. I bring it here. It is Bread and Water. No one want to read it!’

‘Siberia?’ I said. ‘Were you in a labor camp?’

‘No,’ he said impatiently. ‘Writers’ Union! They send me to Siberia to make books.’

Helena said, ‘In Soviet Union, Yuri is famous. Have money. But here, not so famous!’

Kirilov looked rueful. ‘I am honorary Siberian for my work,’ he said. ‘I can sell two hundred thousand copies of novel.’ He made an ugly face. ‘This is nothing. Others can even sell half a million. Even if I go to a shop I hear people say, ‘Kirilov, Kirilov,’ and pulling my sleeve. Moscow shop.’

Helena said, ‘Pop star,’ and smiled foolishly at him.

‘In Soviet Union I have a car,’ Kirilov said. ‘Is better than that one.’

Now we were all sitting on the bench, and Kirilov turned and pointed to a maroon Jaguar. He then let his tongue droop and with big square thumbs snapped his camera into its leather case.

Helena said, ‘He have no car in London.’

‘I don’t have a car either,’ I said.

‘But you have a job,’ Kirilov said. ‘You have money. You can do what you like. I have nothing.’

‘You have freedom,’ I said.

‘Hah! I have freedom,’ Kirilov said. He twisted his mouth and made it liverish and ugly. ‘All I have is freedom, freedom. Too much, I can say.’

Friddom: he made it sound like persecution.

‘Is better more money,’ Helena said. Each time she mentioned money her face became sensual. She spoke the word hungrily, with an open mouth and staring eyes. It occurred to me that you could know a great deal about a person by asking him to say ‘money.’

Kirilov turned to her and said clearly in English, ‘Now we make our discussion. So you go, Leni. Be careful – people can do tricks to you.’

Before she left, Helena said to me, ‘You can come and visit me.’

‘Perhaps I’ll visit you both,’ I said.

‘Yes, that’s nice,’ she said, and made a soft sucking noise with her pursed lips.

When she was gone, Kirilov said, ‘She likes you.’

‘That’s nice,’ I said. But I wanted to say How do you stand this damned woman?

‘She never likes anyone before in London,’ he said. ‘But you – she like.’

‘She’s a very nice person,’ I said.

Kirilov laughed. He said, ‘No. She is very pretty. With big what-you-can-call. But she is not nice person. We say, she is like a doll – pretty face, grass inside.’ He winked at me. ‘Also, like an animal.’

‘I see.’

‘She love to buy clothes. English clothes. American clothes. Blue jeans. In Soviet Union, I buy clothes, clothes, clothes. I have money. I have respect. But here’ – he made his ugly face again – ‘nothing.’

‘It takes time,’ I said. ‘You’re luckier than some. There was a man here a few years ago who asked for political asylum like you, but before he was in the clear they drugged him – your Embassy people – and sent him back.’

‘He is not so unlucky,’ Kirilov said.

‘They might have killed him,’ I said.

‘You are like children – you believe anything,’ he said. ‘Maybe it was a trick. Just fooling the British. He is not unlucky. But I am very unlucky. These shoes – how much you think they cost?’

‘Thirty-two pounds,’ I said.

I must have guessed right, judging from his expression. He said, ‘In Soviet Union, not more than ten pounds. And my rent! I have a tiny small flat here. Is better for a dog. I pay sixty-seven pounds a week. In Soviet Union I pay twenty for the same square meters. Is ridiculous in London.’

‘Mr Kirilov,’ I said, ‘I thought you had something urgent to discuss with me.’

‘Yes,’ he said; then pettishly, ‘But why you refuse me to have lunch?’

Dinner had been his first suggestion, lunch his second – ‘I pay for you,’ he had said. And I knew then that he wanted a favor. I wasn’t interested in eating with him, and we had compromised on Green Park. If he had been any other Russian I would have refused to meet him, but he was enough of a celebrity to be harmless.

His defection, as I said, had been spectacular. He had been on a television program with his interpreter, who was also his security man. And then, in the middle of the program (something about writing and politics), Kirilov had simply stood up and walked off camera while the security man gaped. That was his defection. The clip of Kirilov hurrying away behind the wooden walls of the set, the security man squinting stupidly, was shown on the BBC many times, always with a hilarious effect, for it was known that minutes after making a run for it, Kirilov had gone into hiding, in the depths of Kent. A week later he was granted political asylum.

Kirilov was not a political dissident. He was a defector, a well-known Soviet poet, a party man, a womanizer. He had always claimed that he was free to criticize Soviet life. He had made numerous trips to foreign countries. He was thought to be safe. He was well connected. He went to writers' conferences, not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the West – in Stockholm, Paris, and Milan. He had been to Cuba five times. His poems had been translated by the American poet Walter Van Bellamy, and it was at Bellamy's house in Kent that he had hidden on the day of his defection. Anyone who read a newspaper knew these facts about Yuri Kirilov, and it was easy to tell from Kirilov's attitude on the telephone that he expected people to know him. He had the celebrity's easy presumption. He was on good terms with the world. I must have stammered or hesitated on the phone, because he had said, 'You know me.'

But he was annoyed that I had refused his invitation to lunch, and I think he objected to our sitting on this park bench in the middle of a gray winter afternoon. He had imagined something grander, and he sat tetchily on the bench, making fastidious plucks at his trouser creases, and fussing with his cuffs and his camera, and looking left and right.

I said, 'We can have lunch some other time.'

'You Americans,' he said. 'Always in a hurry. No time for relaxing. Even the British – so famous for their good manners. They behave like pigs, I can say.'

'That's nice, coming from you. I'm sure they'd love to hear you say it.'

'It is true. They are pigs.'

'When you ran away they gave you a place to hide. They let you stay. They could have sent you back. You'd be in Siberia, with your ass in a crack.'

'Siberia is lovely place! I am honorary citizen of Siberia!'

'You're an honorary citizen of Britain, too.'

He said, 'I am propaganda value. I am worth millions. You saw the newspaper –

‘Famous Soviet Writer Chooses Britain.’ All of that. It is good for the British government. They would never have sent me back.’

‘So you think you’re valuable?’

‘Millions,’ he said, curling his lower lip and fattening it boastfully. ‘I am not like some of these dissidents – troublemakers, cripples, Jews. Listen, I tell you they make trouble in any society – any. Solzhenitsyn! He is a trouble in Soviet Union. Yes, he is also a trouble in United States. You hear how he criticizes Americans – journalists, drugs, pop music. He is against!’

‘Can you blame him?’

Kirilov laughed, snapping his jaws at the air. ‘I can blame him! I like journalists, I like pop music, and some drugs I can say so what.’

‘Then you must be very happy in London.’

‘I am deeply unhappy, my friend. This is a terrible country, a corrupt country. So many people unemployed. No work. And how the people live! In small rooms, very cold rooms, eating bad food, taking the tube. Aargh! I hate.’ He batted the air with his hands, pushing these images aside.

‘Siberia must have been much better.’

He considered this; he nodded; he had not heard any sarcasm.

‘I can say, yes, better. In Siberia I am a VIP. Here I am nothing. No one to publish Russian books, no one to read. I go to the library, I drink with Walter Bellamy, I look for money. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Better VIP in Siberia than nothing in London. There are flowers in Siberia!’

‘It was your choice,’ I said.

‘Helena’s choice,’ he said. He winked at me. ‘She likes you very much. You know?’

‘She seems happy here.’

‘Happy, yes. Because I let her do whatever she like’ – he nudged me hard with a sharp elbow – ‘whatever make her happy. Anything.’

‘I see.’

‘Anything,’ he said. ‘I am not a jealous man. She is very beautiful. Like an animal, I can

say. Is cruel to make her unhappy. You think she is wild?'

'It's hard to tell,' I said, and now I was sure I wanted to walk away.

'In public park she is wild –'

'Yes, yes.'

'– but in bed, in bed she is a slave,' Kirilov said. 'A slave.' He watched my face closely, leering at me and waiting for me to react.

I was determined not to. I saw what he was offering me, but he stopped short of saying, Take her –

Perhaps he noticed my impatience, because his face hardened.

I said, 'What do you want?'

'Brodsky,' he sneered. 'Brodsky has been declared genius.'

'I haven't got the slightest idea what you're talking about.'

'Joseph Brodsky – Jew dissident – living in New York, good jobs teaching at three universities, nice place to live, plenty of money. He writes his poems in a tiny room in Soviet Union. Fine. Good. Everyone say, "Good work – maybe a little decadent." Then he hate Soviet. He go to New York. He get free money for write poems in New York! This scumdrill have plenty of money, but he want more to write more Brodsky poems! Then! American foundation say, "Brodsky is genius'" – he pronounced it jaynyoos – "'we will give him money! Forty thousand dollars, every year, for five years." Brodsky! Scumdrill!'

Kirilov was shouting. He had stood up, and his shrill voice penetrated through the roar of the traffic. The wind had risen, and it rattled the branches overhead, it pulled at Kirilov's coat, it yanked his trousers against his skinny legs and white ankles, making him look weak.

I said, 'I don't know anything about it.'

'Is in library. New York Times. Is your country. If you don't know about it I feel sorry for you. But I think it is an injustice.'

'This is the last time I ask you,' I said. 'What do you want?'

'You must give me visa for New York City.'

‘I’m not in the consular section.’

‘You know the poet Bellamy. Famous American poet. He will vouch for me. He will sponsor me.’

‘Bellamy’s in the hospital,’ I said. ‘Anyway, you’ve already been turned down for a visa.’

‘For what reason I want to know!’

‘We’re not obliged to give you a reason.’

He sat down beside me again – his shouting had tired him. He was a bit hoarse. He said, ‘You can help me. They will believe you. Bellamy says you are the only honest man in the Embassy – that’s why I phoned you up. You have a reputation for being a fair man. That’s why Helena is so attracted to you. She can’t help it – she admires your honesty.’

I said, ‘Do you know the word “bullshit”?’

‘You are trying to insult me,’ he said.

‘You’re wasting your time. If you had told me a half an hour ago that you wanted a visa I could have saved you a lot of trouble. It’s impossible.’

He said, ‘It is not I who am insulted – it is my wife. You simply toss her away like a worthless thing.’

‘Be careful,’ I said.

His face darkened. ‘Then you will be sorry.’

‘Don’t threaten me,’ I said. I was smiling.

He said, ‘You think you can mock me!’

‘No, I was just thinking that you offered me lunch. All this might have been taking place in a restaurant. I would have had indigestion! Excuse me,’ I said, and stood up. ‘I have to go back to my office.’

‘I have pictures of you with my wife!’ he said. He shook the camera at me. ‘I will send them to the newspaper. Hah!’

‘It will be very embarrassing for you,’ I said. ‘In this country, pimping is a criminal offense. I would imagine that if the authorities heard that you’d been pimping for your wife, they’d ship you both back to the Soviet Union.’

‘That is a disgraceful lie,’ he said. ‘And you have no proof.’

‘I’ve been recording our conversation,’ I said.

He laughed. ‘No, you haven’t. When Leni kissed you she examined your clothes for a recorder. She found no wires, or she would have told me!’

I moved to the end of the bench and dipped my hand into the litter bin. I retrieved the soiled lunch bag I had thrown in, and took a small tape recorder out of it. It was still whirring softly. I stopped it, rewound it, then pressed the Play button.

‘… ship you both back …’

‘You are disgusting,’ Kirilov said.

I said, ‘Get a job.’

I knew then that this honorary Siberian would spend the rest of his life as a refugee – unemployed, uttering threats, and pitying himself. He had actually believed that I would help him – perhaps sleep with his wife, or be tempted to collaborate with him in his flight to America. How old-fashioned the Soviets were in their quaint belief in blackmail! But Kirilov believed in nothing, really, which is why he was so ignorant. A more passionate man, a believer, would have been far more resourceful, like the other honorary Siberians who had already become American writers.