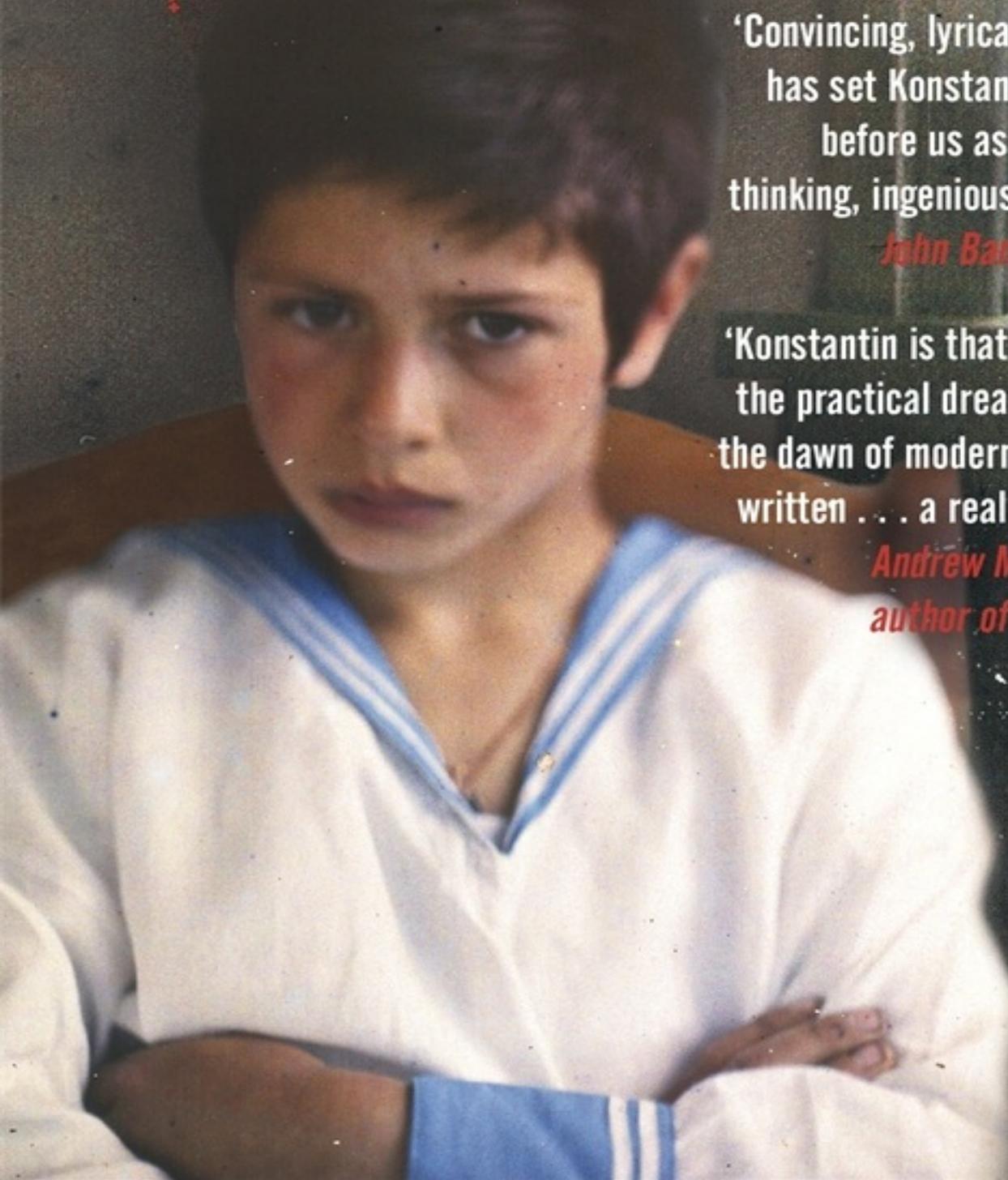


KONSTANTIN

TOM BULLOUGH



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'Konstantin is that rare creature, the practical dreamer, a hero at the dawn of modernity. Beautifully written . . . a real achievement'

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TOM BULLOUGH

Konstantin

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Acknowledgements

For Edwyn

The greater man's progress, the more he replaces the natural by what is artificial

Konstantin Tsiolkovsky,
Dreams of Earth and Sky (1895)





December 1867

Kostya hurried down the bank towards the frozen Oka, fine and light in his heavy sheepskin coat as a sparrow in its winter plumage. On the river, the tracks of the woodsmen cut north through the even snow, steering a line towards the pine logs strewn along the shore beneath the forest. Kostya ran and slid on the exposed ice. From the darkness of the birch trees he emerged in the December sunlight, one arm extended for balance, the soup can blazing between his shirt and his coat, and nowhere beneath the ice-blue sky could he see any movement beside his own long, wavering shadow.

The snow on the north bank had formed a crust since it was last trampled by horses and men in bast shoes, and the boy moved quickly and easily up the slope. He climbed among white-capped logs in their hundreds, which would, in the spring, be carried east with the broken ice, seething and roaring the 350 versts to the sawmills at Nizhny Novgorod, but for now were as frozen as the forest behind them. Their tracks in the deep snow were broad, hard and sparkling, cutting between the bare, scrubby lilacs and the gangling ash trees – converging on a door in the wall of the pines.

That winter, as everyone in Ryazan knew, felling had been prohibited within five versts of the river. Even for a grown-up it was an hour's walk to the woodcutters' clearing, and Kostya arrived in the forest almost at a trot, following the plumes of his breath. In the gloom of the great, snow-laden trees, the cold was sharper than ever against his pink, rounded cheeks, his determined, down-turning mouth, the black Tatar eyes that had come to him from his mother. He held the soup can firmly to his skinny stomach, and he looked up only once, when the Sun cut a line through the tangled branches and turned their snow into a torrent of light.

It was perhaps a verst, perhaps two, before Kostya came to a bright red streak in the track in front of him. He stopped, touched it with his old felt boot and found that it was sticky. The streak was startling against the uniform whiteness. It stretched and wove away from him, complicated by clods of fur, arching in the prints of the horses, and as Kostya lifted his head he found himself facing a tall, scruffy dog – its thick coat

glinting with icicles, its colour such that it need only to have retreated a few paces to have vanished among the white-grey trunks.

On the narrow track beneath the shadow-hung trees, Kostya heard the tremor of his heart, the gasp of his breathing, the hush as a cascade of snow slipped from the treetops, but beneath these fragile noises he heard nothing: the great, indifferent silence of the forest. Distantly, he wondered why this dog had strayed so far from Korostovo, the village where it surely lived. Through the smell of cabbage soup, he smelt its hard, animal stink. He saw the half-eaten hare beneath its wide, webbed claws. He saw its pyramid ears, its muscular shoulders, the knife-like teeth between its thin black lips.

He saw the silence in its fire-coloured eyes.

The swathe cut by the men from Korostovo lay parallel with the Oka: a great, gaping space of broken trees and open sky where women in headscarves and children in well-patched rags were gathering branches beneath the few deformed or unwanted pines, the limes and rowans that stood exposed in the winter sunlight. The smoke rose straight from the woodsmen's fires, like the ghosts of the trees they had felled. In the mouth of the track, Kostya stood small and shivering, the peak of his blue woollen cap low above his eyes. To the south, the men were working steadily, the cold air loud with their axes. He watched them cut a notch above the root of each tree, and a higher notch on the opposite side. He watched them hammer in the wedge as the treetop started to waver, and as the branches met the ground in a screaming, splintering crash he saw them fall upon the trunk – working with brisk, practised movements, slicing the bark along its length, skinning it like an animal.

Several minutes passed and several women paused in their work to point and call to Kostya before the foreman came striding from the shallow shadow to the south. Eduard Ignatyevich was a broad, dark figure with a black-grey beard, a long black coat and a black felt cap that covered his cropped black hair. Even with a bracking hammer swinging from his big, gloved hand he looked as much like a priest as a forester.

‘Konstantin?’ He took his spectacles from his pocket and hooked the arms over his ears. ‘What are you doing here?’

Kostya produced the soup can from his coat. He held it up to him with trembling hands, the steam coiling faintly from the lid.

‘Konstantin,’ his father repeated. His eyelids flickered, but his voice remained low, methodically Polish. ‘Let me explain to you something very important, which I have explained to you in the past but you have clearly failed to understand. In the town, a man is a mind. That is to say, in the town he is an intellectual being. With a house, a fire and a reliable source of food, he is able to rise above his surroundings, to forget his physical self and devote himself to mental pursuits. Without the town, we would have no books, no telegraph, no railway. Because in the forest, a man is simply an animal with neither fur nor claws. Alone in the forest in the winter, he may consider himself to be in terrible danger. Do I make myself clear?’

Eduard Ignatyevich opened his tin cigarette case, lit a match and released a cloud of smoke, which shone in the light of the low Sun prowling through the southerly treetops. Kostya blinked to stop himself crying. He gave a little nod and his father put a hand to his back and propelled him towards a nearby bonfire where a pine tree stood like a visiting mourner – a rotten lip near the top of its trunk where it had once been struck by lightning.

‘As you know,’ he continued, ‘the zemstvo has decided that there will be no more felling in Ryazan after the end of this week. As a result, I have a great deal of work to do. So, I would like you please to make a bed of embers and warm up your soup can, and then when it is hot I would like you to drink it.’

‘But –’ said Kostya.

‘No buts.’

‘But, Father, I brought it for you!’

‘Konstantin,’ said Eduard Ignatyevich, and his voice acquired the faintest edge. ‘Do you take me for an idiot? Do you think that I come to the forest every day with inadequate food?’

‘But ... But, Mama said she was worried that you would have to work until after dark again. She said it’s the most coldest winter she can remember, and she said you would get hungry!’

His father turned at a shout from one of the woodsmen.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘whatever your mother might have told you, I am quite sure that she had no intention that you should come all the way out here. Indeed, if she knows about it, I imagine she is losing her mind with worry. The situation is quite simple. You are shivering, which indicates that you are trying to remain warm. It is important that you do not catch a chill, therefore you are to drink the soup, stay by the fire and wait for me to return.’

Even with the heat from the bonfire, a skin of ice had already covered the small oval lenses of his spectacles.

It snowed again that night, and in the cold grey morning Voznesenskaya Street was clean and white beneath the low clouds, the shock-headed willows and the reds, blues and greens of the little houses. Once again the shutters were open. Women in shawls and aprons were clearing the paths to their doors, breathing visibly, remarking to one another on the twenty-five-degree frost, the ring that someone had seen around the Moon, the mouse that someone else had found in her shoe. Everyone, it seemed, had some portent of doom to report – although to Kostya, standing at the foot of the steps with his toboggan, the city looked very much the same as it had every other winter he could remember.

Kostya lived in a wooden house with vivid blue walls, three rectangular windows framed by a lacework of carving, and eaves that emerged from beneath the iron roof like the petticoats of some expensive lady. In the snow beside the door, there lay the remains of a thresher once invented by Eduard Ignatyevich, which had never

successfully worked. From the squat brick chimney, a line of bluish smoke trailed west towards the embankment of the railway, which had come to Ryazan two and a half years earlier and would, said Kostya's mother, one day reach such places of the imagination as Voronezh and Rostov-on-Don: the very shores of the Black Sea!

'Ignat!' Kostya shouted.

The front door opened and his brother came skidding out of the small dark kitchen where the ten members of the Tsiolkovsky family spent every night from October to April.

'You two mind that you don't catch cold!' their mother called after him.

'Yes, Mama!'

Ignat was a couple of *vershoks* shorter than Kostya, a skinny specimen, nine years old, with large blue eyes and a shadow in his mouth where he had recently lost his front teeth. With barely a year between them, the two boys had long been inseparable, and they turned without a word along the tracks of a *troika*, which happened to have passed that morning. They raised their woollen hats to a neighbour who was loading hay through his barn's stable door, a couple of chickens pecking imaginary morsels at his feet, and as they passed the brightly painted houses they summoned their friends with deafening whistles:

'Andrei!'

'Viktor!'

'Nikolai!'

'Come tobogganing!'

Myasnitskaya Street led north towards the centre of the city, and it wasn't long before the two boys reached the limits of the Fire of 1837, where the houses became tall, brick and stone, muted shades of yellow and pink. One was the merchants' club, where a group of men in bearskin coats were huddled in discussion. Another was the hospital, where, faintly, Kostya could make out the screams of some unfortunate patient. Beyond the creaking sledge and steaming horse of an *izvozhik*, they passed a team of peasants sweeping the wooden pavements in the snow-smothered gardens of Novobazarnaya Square and they steered as close as they could to a man selling meat pies – the smell so sumptuous that it was almost worth the visit in itself.

'Just imagine ...' Kostya began.

'Kostya!'

'I know, I know. But I haven't got a kopeck.'

'You've got a twenty-kopeck coin! I know you have!'

'Well, you're not having that!'

'Then I'm not listening.'

'Oh, come on, Ignat!'

'You said you'd give me a kopeck every time I had to listen to one of your stories.'

For a moment they walked in silence.

'I'll tow you as far as Sobornaya Square,' said Kostya. 'How about that?'

Ignat sat down on the toboggan and pulled his knees up to his chest.

‘Giddy up, horse!’ he said.

‘Right.’ Kostya hauled on the string. ‘Imagine if everything in Ryazan was the same size as us. If everything was really small, that would make us really big, wouldn’t it? Then all the other people wouldn’t even be able to see over our boots, but we could see right out over the rooftops. We’d be able to look straight into the fire-towers, and wouldn’t the lookouts get a shock when they saw us!’ He laughed delightedly. ‘And they would have to be nice to us too, because we would be very, very strong and we could just pick up the whole tower if we wanted and plonk it in the river!’

‘Faster!’ Ignat tossed a snowball against his brother’s back, and Kostya began to run – the big, stucco houses sliding steadily past them. From the north, the fifteen-minute whistle of the morning train cut through the freezing air.

‘In my world, anyway, there wouldn’t be any gravity, so it would be easy to pick up anything we liked. In my world, I would be able to jump versts through the air. I would be able to jump through the clouds and right out into the ether. If I wanted to go to Moscow, I would just have to run and jump and I could fly there, easy. The people in the train would see me zooming past like a cannonball! I would bring back a new dress for Mama, and a smart new fountain pen for Father, and a whole cow for us all to eat –’

‘What would you bring me?’ asked Ignat.

‘I would bring you a toboggan as big as a kibitka, with red velvet seats and a bell on the front so that everyone would know you were coming!’

At Sobornaya Square, where an official in cloak and brass buttons was hurrying between the government offices, Kostya stopped beneath a lamp post. All morning he had felt as though something was caught in his throat, and as he coughed and tried to clear the obstacle he felt a sudden wash of giddiness and had to sit down on a bench – facing the avenue that converged on the golden campanile of the kremlin.

The best tobogganing slope in the whole of Ryazan was the bank of the Trubezh River, near Uspensky Cathedral, whose five deep blue, star-spotted cupolas were like the night sky seen from the outside. The river itself was derisory, a trickle compared to the great winding Oka, but to its south there rose a virtual cliff where, on any winter’s day, you could find a mob of boys flying downhill on shovels and old doors, shrieking and spinning across the ice.

‘Kostya!’ called one. ‘Is it true you went to the Korostovo fellings yesterday?’

‘He did!’ said Ignat.

‘What, on his own?’

‘Did you get a beating?’

‘Their father never beats them, lucky buggers ...’

‘Oh! I would have caught it!’

‘Poles!’

It was a matter of pride to Kostya that he possessed an actual toboggan. He had made it himself, and although it amounted to little more than two planks trimmed into curves and a third plank for a seat, he had nailed four wedges to the inside corners for

strength, waxed the runners and decorated the sides with bits of coloured glass that he had found in the icon-makers' yard. As he strode through the crowd, he greeted his friends and took pleasure in their complimentary comments. Arriving at the slope, he considered the scars and footprints in the fresh snow. He sat down, dug his heels into the ground, waited for Ignat to squeeze between his legs, then walked them to the edge, leant forwards and lifted his feet.

Although both boys had come sledging here numberless times, still the first run of the day was enough to stop the breath in your throat. The ground dropped away so sharply that you might have been falling. Kostya clung to the string, his brother and the sides of the toboggan. He screwed up his eyes against the bitter wind and the flying snow, and as they hit the lip between the bank and the river he felt them lift clean into the air.

They landed, by chance, on both runners and sped away across the ice – past the quay where the steamboats docked in the summer, past the fishermen crouched over their holes with saw, line and bottle, past the shying horse of a cursing peasant and the final tracks of the other boys – and they hit the far bank with just enough speed to climb half an arshin up the slope.

Shaking with laughter, Kostya lay with his feet in the air and his head on the ice, his face burning, his cap, his linen trousers and his sheepskin coat all caked evenly in snow. Beyond the cross-topped domes of the kremlin and the skeletal beech trees that reached like roots into the clouds, a scrawl of black smoke stretched above the city. After a moment, the train's five-minute whistle sounded long and mournful, and just as other boys could tell a bird by its song so Kostya could tell that its engine was an 0-6-0: a wood-burning freight locomotive with six drive wheels and no guiding axle – unstable at speed, but useful in these wintry conditions. The ice was forming on his collar, but still he gazed at the smoke in the sky, that signature of power. He thought of the roaring pistons and the steam that fled down the flanks of the carriages. He imagined himself travelling north, fast as a galloping horse – following the telegraph wires through Kolomna, Voskresensk and Lyubertsy, all the way to Moscow itself.

That afternoon, Kostya sat at the table in the kitchen and stared into the icon corner, where the logs of the walls met like fingers. As a rule, he enjoyed mathematics. He loved its music, the way that the answers would pop unbidden into his head. It was only today that the numbers seemed dark and evasive, shadowy through the ache in his throat and the pain in his head, and when his two younger sisters arrived from the yard with arms full of icicles he shivered so violently in the cold air from the open door that his chalk went skidding across the slate.

‘“The stepmother knew very well ...”’ read Ignat, who was sitting beside him, running a finger across Afanasyev's *Tales*.

‘Yes?’ their mother prompted.

Ignat sucked air through the space in his teeth. ‘“The stepmother knew very well that ... deep in the forest there was a ... wr ... a ...”’

‘Spell it out now.’

‘W, R, E, T, C, H, E, D.’

‘And what does that spell?’

‘Wre ... ? Wretched!’

‘Very good!’

‘“A wretched little hut with the legs of a hen. And ... in that little hut, there lived a horrible old witch called Baba Yaga!”’

Even in the ice-softened daylight, Maria Ivanovna looked exhausted. There were lines between her arching eyebrows, around her tapering eyes, her high Tatar cheekbones. Her grey woollen dress was clean and pressed, but it hung unfilled beneath her milk-heavy breasts, and as she packed into an iron-bound trunk the work of philosophy that her husband wrote for an hour every evening, the strands of silver shone in her thick black hair.

‘Mama?’ said Kostya, eventually. ‘Mama, I’m thirsty.’

His mother straightened up, one arm supporting her chest. ‘Have you done your sums yet, Kostya?’

‘Not ... Not yet, Mama.’

‘Then you can have a drink when you finish your sums.’

‘But, Mama ...’

Out by the frozen well, Masha and Fekla were singing a song that their mother had taught them on one of their countless long winter’s evenings – the story of a prince and a beautiful changeling peasant girl. There was always more noise about the house when Eduard Ignatyevich was at work. Often Maria Ivanovna would sing herself, and when Kostya wasn’t faced with such problems as $136 \div 8$ and 157×5 he would join in too, rattling between his various projects: the puppets and the model trains that he would make out of glue and cardboard, the cockroaches he would catch with Ignat and race along a floorboard framed by particularly wide cracks.

Today, however, the song was simply fuel to the pain in his head.

‘Konstantin!’ Maria Ivanovna was standing behind him, staring down at her own neat, rounded numbers and the line that had spat from his chalk. ‘What on Earth have you done?’

‘Mama,’ he said, in a pitiful voice. ‘I don’t feel well.’

‘You’ve crossed out my sums!’

‘No, Mama! I didn’t mean to!’

‘By all that’s holy, Konstantin!’

On the ledge above the stove, the baby started to cry.

Maria Ivanovna put her hands to her face, breathing heavily. ‘Yesterday ... You’ve no idea ... Konstantin, I’ve told you endlessly not to go into the forest, haven’t I? I’ve told you all about the dangers, and the risk of getting lost, and the robbers, and the Baba Yaga, and what do you do? You go off into the forest, on your own, right in the middle of winter!’

‘But, Mama –’

‘And now I ask you to do ten sums easily within your ability, and not only do you not even try to do them, for some reason you actually cross them out!’

‘Mama, I don’t feel well –’

‘And what did I tell you when you left the house this morning? What did I specifically tell you?!’

‘Not to catch cold, Mama,’ said Kostya, miserably.

‘Not to catch cold,’ said his mother. ‘And so, of course, you catch cold!’

Beside him, Ignat sat in silence, his finger on the page, his eyes turned furtively towards them. In the summer room, the girls came marching back among the barrels of pickled cabbage and cucumber, the model trains and houses that Eduard Ignatyevich had made himself when the older boys were small and he still had time for such diversions – their boots loud on the hollow floor, their voices shrill and penetrating.

‘Honestly, Kostya, what on Earth am I supposed to do with you? Do you not realize what a difficult time this is for us? Your father no longer has work here! Do you understand what that means? In five days he will be leaving for Vyatka. We are going to have to pack everything up and say goodbye to all of our friends, and travel all the way across the country, and ...’ She hesitated, her cracked red hands in fists against her belly. ‘Well, your father may not approve of beating, but I was raised on it and, I swear, if you continue with this behaviour I will take your trousers down, bend you over and beat the life out of you!’

‘I saw a wolf!’ Kostya whispered.

Beside him, Ignat stirred in the broad straw bed. His eyelids quivered, his eyes fiery in the wind-raised light from the big stove.

‘What ... ?’ he said, sleepily.

‘I saw a wolf, in the forest!’

Kostya felt light, alert, as if he were dreaming. The pain in his head and his throat was gone. There was a distant discomfort in the bones of his limbs, but they seemed somehow to be the limbs of somebody else. He himself was perfectly composed. He was warm and safe in this strong little house with its fire and its food – apart from the blizzard that howled and clawed at the shutters, trying to force its way inside.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I was scared.’

‘If you’re telling me one of your stories ...’

‘I’m not! It’s true!’ Kostya’s whisper broke into speech.

‘Ssh!’

Behind Ignat’s anxious, flame-painted face, Maria Ivanovna sighed with every breath – her head turned right, towards her guardian angel, and Anna, Fekla and Masha, and the fire-lit canopy that divided the kitchen every night. Faint through the thin linen, Eduard Ignatyevich lay between Alexei and Dmitri, muttering in Polish. Beneath the kerosene lamp, St Nikolai the Miracle Worker, St Ioann the Divine, the

Weeping Virgin and Christ Pantocrator appeared to be suspended in the air – their faces lined equally with wisdom and suffering.

‘What happened?’ asked Ignat. ‘How come it didn’t eat you?’

But a weakness and a weariness had come over Kostya, quick as a cloud’s shadow, and even as he opened his mouth to reply he felt himself sliding back into sleep.

Ivan Ivanovich Lesovsky was a kind old man, a Pole, a friend of Eduard Ignatyevich, but as he approached Kostya in the fluttering candlelight on that second evening he looked terrible, diabolic. Tall and stout, he had snow on his shoulders, shadow-filled craters beneath his eyes and a fine moustache that emerged from his beardless cheeks like little horns. He stood above the bed, his face carved from darkness, while Kostya shrank beneath the blanket until he could barely see over its edge.

‘Hello, old chap.’ He had a deep voice, almost subterranean. ‘Can you tell me what’s wrong? Have you got a sore throat?’

‘Kostya, you know Dr Lesovsky.’ Maria Ivanovna sat beside him, stroking the wet hair back from his forehead. She set a candle on a chair beside the bed and the shadows shrank in the doctor’s face. The light glittered on the ice in his moustache. Suddenly his expression was one of concern, so Kostya allowed his mother to pull the blanket back beneath his chin.

‘Have you got a sore throat, Little Bird?’

Kostya nodded, and coughed up a thick, glue-like substance.

The doctor smiled. He placed a hand on Kostya’s forehead, then produced a gold watch from his waistcoat pocket and set two long hairy fingers on the inside of his wrist. He hummed a tune and watched the second hand make its circle of the face.

‘One forty,’ he pronounced. ‘And I’d put the temperature at forty, forty and a half. You’re not at all well, are you, poor old chap?’ He turned to Maria Ivanovna. ‘How long has he been like this?’

‘He started complaining ... yesterday, Ivan Ivanovich.’

‘You didn’t think to call me then?’

‘Well ...’ She stroked Kostya’s hair more urgently. ‘You see, Ivan Ivanovich, he’d been playing in the snow. I thought he’d just caught a chill ...’

The doctor took the candle and inspected Kostya’s mouth and cheeks. The shadows moved through the pouches of his face and the tiny holes that pitted his large red nose.

‘Well, old boy,’ he said. ‘I’m going to have to have a look down your throat, so we’re going to have to get you out of bed. It won’t hurt, don’t worry. Do you think you can manage that?’

Thin and feeble in his long white shirt, Kostya pushed his legs over the edge of the mattress. He got to his feet with the help of his mother, while the doctor wrapped him in the blanket and lifted him on to her lap.

‘Well done, Kostya,’ she murmured. ‘Well done, Little Bird ...’

When Ivan Ivanovich put his fingers to the sides of Kostya’s neck, the boy howled and thrashed against the blanket, but his arms were pinioned and his mother, even his

mother, was holding his head so that he couldn't pull away. The doctor bent over him, the candle in one hand, and when he pushed a cold metal spoon between his lips it was as if his tongue were being sliced with razors. Mucus boiled in his throat, fetid and clinging. In the gale of his breath, the candlelight panicked. The doctor's face seemed to convulse, whipped up like the Oka in the fierce autumn winds, a flame in each eye and each dribbling icicle that hung from his moustache, and, realizing that he had been deceived, Kostya shook and fought and wailed in terror.

Later, when he was free to move again, Kostya lay limply across the big bed. His head lolled to the right, as his mother had left it. His eyes were closed, shivering faintly beneath their lids. He was tiny, translucent, a daub of violent colour on each cheek like a peasant girl at Easter.

'Maria Ivanovna,' said the doctor, patiently. 'You must understand that in your condition you cannot risk staying with him. You can't stay with him, he can't stay with the other children and none of you can stay in this house until it has been cleaned. The floors must be scrubbed, the walls whitewashed and your clothes and sheets washed and baked. I will send the watchman from the hospital with potassium permanganate, which should be dissolved in four buckets of water and left in the corners of the house for a week at least ...'

'Would you like some more tea, Ivan?' asked Eduard Ignatyevich in a low, tight voice.

Behind his eyelids, Kostya dozed, woke, dozed, skimmed the surface of sleep. His fingers twitched beneath the blanket. His breath croaked from his open mouth, while saliva trickled down his cheek and formed a dark circle on the white linen.

'*Pan doktor*, I've lost six children! Six! I cannot bear to lose another!'

Kostya did not feel his father dress him in trousers, boots, woollen hat and sheepskin jacket, and wrap him in the blanket. He woke only with the fearsome cold outside in the street, where great white flakes fell from the vastness of space, shining from a light cut to the shape of his mother, from the lantern that hung from a sledge whose driver had snow in piles on his hat and coat, whose horse stood shivering in the arch between the shafts. Eduard Ignatyevich's breath was hot and odourless. His beard was coarse against the tender skin of Kostya's face. His arms were knots of strength beneath his son's back and legs. As the whip flew out above the horse's back, Kostya heard himself groan and saw the snowflakes weaving from the blackness, like the stars falling from their homes.

*Full well the Virgin trod the road
That led her to Ryazan!*

Beside the tavern were figures with huge distorted faces, dancing in the snow with accordions and wheeling arms.

The church bells made a pulsing, shimmering roar.

'Nearly there, Kostya,' said his father, in a soft, unfamiliar voice. 'Nearly there now.'

The big stone houses formed a ravine, a cleft in the Earth where the snowflakes swarmed around the gas lamps. It was at its deepest point that Ivan Ivanovich's sledge passed between the lanterns on the gateposts of the hospital and stopped beside three steps, a pair of doors and a wall of light-leaking shutters. From inside, there came the familiar screams, and Kostya began to struggle feebly in his father's arms.

As they passed through the door, they met a torrent of noise and heat. Ivan Ivanovich shouted and gesticulated. The waiting room seethed and pressed towards him, peasants bowing and crossing themselves, long hair swinging across their raw, bearded faces. On the floor, one man lay in a puddle of blood, his legs impressed with the runners of a sledge, held together only by his trousers. On a bench a heavily pregnant woman was groaning, ignored. On another, a drunkard snored insensibly.

'I do appreciate your assistance, Eduard,' said Ivan Ivanovich, distantly. 'The feldshers are overwhelmed ... We have a case of scarlatina, therefore the first thing to do is to reduce the swelling in the lymphatic glands. I will begin by decongesting the nostrils, and then relieve the throat by means of the principle of opposition.'

In a bare white room, Kostya lay naked on an oilcloth. Above him, a pressure lamp gave out such light and heat that his father and the doctor seemed unreal, angelic. His father's spectacles were lamps in themselves. Someone was sponging his body with warm water, moving across his legs and his abdomen, which were red and prickly like goose flesh. The doctor held some kind of pump – a glass cylinder with notches on the side – and when he set its mouth to Kostya's nose the boy felt an explosion of pain. Mucus and soapy water burst from the other nostril and splattered over his chin. He coughed and retched. He flapped like a fish on the slippery bed. In a moment, he saw his father's eyes, small and blue behind their lenses. Through the roar of the flame, he heard him speaking incomprehensibly, as if asking continual questions. He could smell again now – soap, kerosene and, to his surprise, potato – and when the doctor next appeared he was holding a bulging handkerchief. In the depths of his mind, Kostya remembered a trick that his sister Anna had once shown him, when she placed a ball inside a bottle, sealed the bottle, and then revealed it to be empty. In the flickering light, the doctor squeezed the handkerchief so that hot potato oozed between his fingers, and he pressed it to the agonized side of Kostya's neck, while ladling snow into his mouth.



January 1868

Kostya's room was tall but narrow. It contained a small black stove, a pile of logs, an icon of Vasily the Blessed, naked and supplicating, a bed with a golden dome at each corner and a chair where Ivan Ivanovich would appear periodically to frown, feed him water or push a wood-framed instrument into his armpit, which he would later return to consult. The room had a window with shutters that were sometimes closed and sometimes open. Once, Kostya managed to pull himself upright. With the heat from the stove the inside window was clear of ice, but even in the sunlight that made the 'T' out of 'KOSTYA' on the wall beside the door still the outside window remained opaque – the horses and patients who arrived in the yard the spectral inhabitants of a separate world.

There were worms in Kostya's head, which made him scream and attack the iron bed-end like he was fighting the bars of a cage. Some of them were curled like maggots in his throat, so that he struggled for every long, gargling breath and would wake from dreams in which he was being strangled. Others burrowed upwards into the bone and the matter of his brain until they came to his ears, where, pale, eyeless, sharp with spines, they gnawed at his flesh with little teeth. One night, when the shutters were closed and only the faint glow of the fire lit the room, Kostya pushed his fingers deep into his ears. He reached for the worms, and in the darkness felt a slick, slimy fluid dribbling from his earholes, down his neck, into the collar of his hospital shirt.

At one point that night, Kostya dozed and woke to find a faint slice of yellow light hanging in the air above him. He was calm, cool, for once without pain. His head lay on the pillow, but where formerly he had had shoulders and a ribcage now he had a tiny pair of arms thrown backwards and a pair of legs that curled above his belly to end in miniature feet. Kostya could feel every hair, every pore of his new skin in perfect detail. He knew that he was a baby, that he could neither stand nor speak. He lay helplessly, his fat hands open to the slice of yellow light, and so he remained for some unfathomable period of time, until the slice brightened into daylight and a memory of his previous body came back to him from a distant corner of the bed.