

Pushkin Hills

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ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS LTD
London House
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.almaclassics.com

Pushkin Hills first published in Russian as *Заповедник* in 1983
This translation first published by Alma Classics Ltd in September 2013
Reprinted October 2013

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Notes © Alex Billington, Alma Classics

Cover image © Reinhard Hunger

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84749-221-0

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Pushkin Hills

To my wife, who was right

AT NOON WE PULLED INTO LUGA. We stopped at the station square and the tour guide adjusted her tone from a lofty to an earthier one:

“There to the left are the facilities...”

My neighbour pricked up his ears:

“You mean the restroom?”

He had been nagging me the entire trip: “A bleaching agent, six letters? An endangered artiodactyl? An Austrian downhill skier?”

The tourists exited onto a sunlit square. The driver slammed the door shut and crouched by the radiator.

The station: a dingy yellow building with columns, a clock tower and flickering neon letters, faded by the sun...

I cut across the vestibule with its newspaper stand and massive cement urns and instinctively sought out a café.

“Through the waiter,” grumbled the woman at the counter. A bottle-opener dangled on her fallen bosom.

I sat by the door. A waiter with tremendous felted sideburns materialized a minute later.

“What’s your pleasure?”

“My pleasure,” I said, “is for everyone to be kind, humble and courteous.”

The waiter, having had his fill of life’s diversity, said nothing.

“My pleasure is half a glass of vodka, a beer and two sandwiches.”

“What kind?”

“Sausage, I guess.”

I got out a pack of cigarettes and lit up. My hands were shaking uncontrollably. “Better not drop the glass...” And just then two

refined old ladies sat down at the next table. They looked like they were from our bus.

The waiter brought a small carafe, a bottle of beer and two chocolates.

“The sandwiches are all gone,” he announced with a note of false tragedy.

I paid up. I lifted the glass and put it down right away. My hands shook like an epileptic’s. The old ladies looked me over with distaste. I attempted a smile:

“Look at me with love!”

The ladies shuddered and changed tables. I heard some muffled interjections of disapproval.

To hell with them, I thought. I steadied the glass with both hands and drained it. Then I wrestled out the sweet.

I began to feel better. That deceptive feeling of bliss was setting in. I stuffed the beer in my pocket and stood up, nearly knocking over the chair. A Duralumin armchair, to be precise. The old ladies continued to scrutinize me with apprehension.

I stepped onto the square. Its walls were covered with warped plywood billboards. The drawings promised mountains of meat, wool, eggs and various unmentionables in the not-too-distant future.

The men were smoking by the side of the bus. The women were noisily taking their seats. The tour guide was eating an ice cream in the shade. I approached her:

“Let’s get acquainted.”

“Aurora,” she said, extending a sticky hand.

“And I am,” I said, “Borealis.”

The girl didn’t take offence.

“Everyone makes fun of my name. I’m used to it... What’s wrong with you? You’re all red!”

“I assure you, it’s only on the outside. On the inside I’m a constitutional democrat.”

“No, really, are you unwell?”

“I drink too much... Would you like a beer?”

“Why do you drink?” she asked.

What could I say?

“It’s a secret,” I said, “a little mystery...”

“So you’ve decided to work at the museum?”

“Exactly.”

“I knew it right away.”

“Do I look like the literary type?”

“Mitrofanov was seeing you off. He’s an extremely learned Pushkin scholar. Are you good friends?”

“I’m good friends,” I said, “with his bad side...”

“How do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

“You should read Gordin, Shchegolev, Tsyavlovskaya... Kern’s memoirs...* and one of the popular brochures on the dangers of alcohol.”

“You know, I’ve read so much about the dangers of alcohol that I decided to give it up... reading, that is.”

“You’re impossible to talk to.”

The driver glanced in our direction. The tourists were in their seats. Aurora finished the ice cream and wiped her fingers.

“In the summer,” she said, “the museum pays very well. Mitrofanov makes close to two hundred roubles.”

“And that’s two hundred roubles more than he’s worth.”

“Why, you’re also bitter.”

“You’d be bitter too,” I said.

The driver honked twice.

“Let’s go,” said Aurora.

The Lvov bus was stuffy. The calico seats were burning hot. The yellow curtains intensified the feeling of suffocation.

I was leafing through the pages of Alexei Vulf’s *Diaries*.* They referred to Pushkin in a friendly and sometimes condescending manner.

There it was, the closeness that spoils vision. Everyone knows that geniuses must have friends. But who'll believe that his friend is a genius?!

I dozed off to the murmur of some unintelligible and irrelevant facts about Ryleyev's mother...*

Someone woke me when we were already in Pskov. The kremlin's freshly plastered walls brought on a feeling of gloom. The designers had secured a grotesque Baltic-style emblem made of wrought iron above the central archway. The kremlin resembled a gigantic model.

One of the outbuildings housed the local travel bureau. Aurora filed some paperwork and we were driven to Hera, the most fashionable local restaurant.

I wavered – to top up or not? If I drank more, tomorrow it'd be even worse. I didn't feel like eating...

I walked onto the boulevard. Low and heavy, the lindens rustled.

Long ago I realized that as soon as you give way to thinking, you remember something sad. For instance, my last conversation with my wife...

“Even your love of words – your crazy, unhealthy, pathological love – is fake. It's nothing more than an attempt to justify the life you lead. And you lead the life of a famous writer without fulfilling the slightest requirements. With your vices you should be a Hemingway at the very least...”

“Do you honestly think he's a good writer? Perhaps Jack London's a good writer, too?”

“Dear God! What does Jack London have to do with this?! My only pair of boots is in the pawnshop... I can forgive anything. Poverty doesn't scare me. Anything but betrayal!”

“What do you mean?”

“Your endless drinking. Your... I don't even want to say it... You can't be an artist at the expense of another human being... It's low! You speak of nobility, yet you are a cold, hard and crafty man...”

“Don’t forget that I’ve been writing stories for twenty years.”

“You want to write a great novel? Only one in a hundred million succeeds!”

“So what? In the spiritual sense a failed attempt like that is equal to the greatest of books. Morally it’s even higher, if you will, since it excludes a reward...”

“These are just words. Never-ending, beautiful words... I’ve had enough... I have a child for whom I’m responsible...”

“I have a child, too.”

“Whom you ignore for months on end. We are strangers to you...”

(In conversations with women there is one painful moment. You use facts, reasoning, arguments, you appeal to logic and common sense. And then suddenly you discover that she cannot stand the very sound of your voice...)

“Intentionally,” I said, “I never did any harm...”

I sat down on a sloping bench, pulled out a pen and a piece of paper, and a minute later scribbled down:

My darling, I’m in Pushkin Hills now,
Monotony and boredom without a switch,
I wander through the grounds like a bitch,
And fear is wracking my very soul!

And so on.

My verses had somewhat preceded reality. We still had about a hundred kilometres to Pushkin Hills.

I stopped by a convenience store and bought an envelope that had Magellan’s portrait on it. And asked, for some reason:

“Do you know what Magellan has to do with anything?”

The sales clerk replied pensively:

“Maybe he died... Or got decorated...”

I licked the stamp, sealed the envelope and dropped it in the mailbox...

At six we reached the tourist centre. Before that there were hills, a river, the sweeping horizon with a jagged trim of forest. All in all, a typical Russian landscape without excess. Just those ordinary features that evoke an inexplicably bittersweet feeling.

This feeling had always seemed suspect to me. In general, I find passion towards inanimate objects irritating. (Mentally I opened a notepad.) There is something amiss in coin collectors, philatelists, inveterate travellers and lovers of cactuses and aquarium fish. The sleepy forbearance of a fisherman, the futile, unmotivated bravery of a mountain climber and the haughty confidence of the owner of a royal poodle are all alien to me.

They say that the Jews are indifferent to nature. That's one of the grievances levelled against the Jewish nation. The Jews, supposedly, don't have their own nature, and they're indifferent to everyone else's. Perhaps that's true. It would seem that the bit of Jewish blood in me is beginning to show.

In short, I don't like exalted spectators. And I am mistrustful of their rapture. I believe that their love of birch trees triumphs at the expense of the love of mankind. And grows as a surrogate for patriotism.

I agree, you feel love and pity for your mother more acutely if she is sick or paralysed. However, to admire her suffering, to express it aesthetically, is low.

But enough...

We drove up to the tourist centre. Some idiot built it four kilometres away from the nearest water supply. Ponds, lakes, a famous river – but the centre is right under the blazing sun. Though there are rooms with showers and occasionally hot water...

We walked into the main office. There was a woman sitting there, a retired soldier's dream. Aurora handed her the register, signed some papers and picked up food vouchers for the group. Then she whispered

something to this curvy blonde who immediately shot me a glance. The look expressed a harsh, cursory interest, businesslike concern and mild alarm. She even sat up straighter. Her papers rustled with more of a snap.

“Have you met?” asked Aurora.

I stepped forward.

“I’d like to work at the Pushkin Preserve.”

“We need people...” replied the blonde.

The ellipsis at the end of this rejoinder was palpable. In other words, only good, qualified specialists are needed; random people need not apply..

“Are you familiar with the collection?” asked the blonde, and suddenly introduced herself. “Galina Alexandrovna.”

“I’ve been here two or three times.”

“That’s not enough.”

“I agree. So here I am again...”

“You need to prepare properly. Thoroughly study the guidebooks. So much in Pushkin’s life is waiting to be discovered. Certain things have changed since last year...”

“In Pushkin’s life?” I marvelled.

“Excuse me,” interrupted Aurora. “The tourists are waiting. Good luck.”

And she disappeared – young, wholesome, full of life. Tomorrow I will hear her pure girlish voice in one of the museum’s rooms:

“...Just think, comrades!... ‘I love you so truly, so tenderly..’ – Pushkin contrasted this inspired hymn to selflessness with the mores of the serf-owning world...”

“Not in Pushkin’s life,” the blonde said irritably, “but in the layout of the collection. For instance, they took down the portrait of Hannibal.”

“Why?”

“Some busybody insisted it wasn’t Hannibal. The medals, you see, don’t match. Supposedly, it’s General Zakomelsky.”*

“So who is it really?”

“Really it’s Zakomelsky.”

“Then why is he black?”

“He fought with the Asians in the south. It’s hot there, so he got a tan. Plus the paints get darker with age.”

“So they were right to take it down?”

“Oh, what’s the difference – Hannibal or Zakomelsky?... The tourists came to see Hannibal. They paid money. What in hell do they need Zakomelsky for?! And so our director hung up Hannibal. I mean Zakomelsky masquerading as Hannibal. And some character didn’t like it. Excuse me, are you married?”

Galina Alexandrovna uttered this phrase suddenly – and shyly, I’d add.

“Divorced,” I said. “Why?”

“Our girls are interested.”

“What girls?”

“They’re not here now. The accountant, the methodologist, the tour guides...”

“And why are they interested in me?”

“They’re not interested in you. They’re interested in everyone. There are a lot of single girls here. The guys left... Who do our girls get to see? The tourists? And what about the tourists? It’s good if they stay a week. The ones from Leningrad stop overnight. Or just for the weekend. How long will you be here?”

“Till autumn. If all goes well.”

“Where are you staying? Would you like me to call the hotel? We have two of them, a good one and a bad one. Which do you prefer?”

“That,” I told her, “requires some thought.”

“The good one’s expensive,” explained Galina.

“All right,” I said, “I’ve no money anyway.”

She immediately dialled somewhere and pleaded with someone for a long time. Finally the matter was settled. Somewhere someone wrote down my name.

“I’ll take you there.”

It had been a while since I’d been the object of such intense female concern. It would prove to be even more insistent in the future, escalating into pressure.

At first I attributed it to my tarnished individuality. Later I discovered just how acute the shortage of males in these parts was. A bow-legged local tractor driver with the tresses of a train-station floozie was always surrounded by pushy pink-cheeked admirers.

“I’m dying for a beer!” he’d whine.

And the girls ran for beer...

Galina locked the door of the main office. We proceeded through the woods towards the settlement.

“Do you love Pushkin?” she asked me unexpectedly.

Something in me winced, but I replied:

“I love... *The Bronze Horseman*,* his prose...”

“And what about the poems?”

“His later poems I love very much.”

“And what about the earlier ones?”

“The earlier ones too,” I surrendered.

“Everything here lives and breathes Pushkin,” continued Galina.

“Literally every twig, every blade of grass. You can’t help but expect him to come out from around the corner... The top hat, the cloak, that familiar profile...”

Meanwhile, it was Lenya Guryanov, a former college snitch, who appeared from around the corner.

“Boris, you giant dildo,” he bellowed, “is it really you?!”

I replied with surprising amiability. Yet another lowlife had caught me unawares. I’m always too slow to gather my thoughts...

“I knew you’d come,” Guryanov went on.

Later I was told this story. There was a big booze-up at the beginning of the season. Someone’s wedding or birthday. One of the guests was

a local KGB officer. My name came up in conversation. One of our mutual friends said:

“He’s in Tallinn.”

Someone countered:

“No, he’s been in Leningrad at least a year.”

“I heard he was in Riga, staying at Krasilnikov’s...”

More and more versions followed. The KGB agent stayed focused on the braised duck. Then he lifted his head and stated brusquely:

“There’s intel that he’s getting ready for Pushkin Hills...”

“I’m late,” said Guryanov, as if I was keeping him.

He turned to Galina:

“You’re looking good. Don’t tell me, did you get new teeth?”

His pockets bulged heavily.

“You little prick!” blurted Galina. And the next minute:

“It’s a good thing Pushkin isn’t here to see this.”

“Yes,” I said, “it’s not a bad thing.”

The first floor of the Friendship Hotel was home to three establishments: a general store, a hairdresser’s and the restaurant The Seashore. I should, I thought, invite Galina to dinner for all her help. But my funds were appallingly low. One grand gesture could end in catastrophe.

I kept quiet.

We walked up to the barrier, behind which sat the administrator. Galina introduced me. The woman extended a chunky key with the number 231.

“And tomorrow you can find a room,” said Galina. “Perhaps in the settlement... Or in Voronich, but it’s expensive... Or you can look in one of the nearby villages: Savkino, Gaiki...”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve been a great help.”

“So, I’ll be going then.”

The words ended with a barely audible question mark: “So, I’ll be going then?”