

Some Kind of Need

When Captain Shtanz arrived in Tula, there was much rejoicing, for we had grown hungry for brutal flogging. Down our main road he came riding with his Cossack aide, sitting atop his two-person carriage, the look of the two like the holy image of Saint Nikolai's menacing and most terrible aspect. We gathered there, cheered the two to their shared cottage with our low-headed plea, "When, Fathers, might the beatings begin?"

Then came the time when all retired to the Couch of Vexation.

At the factory, Vasily Likavni bit the softened metal at his station, scummed it with his hand, and reported triumphantly this most mischievous and dumb mistake, only to be placed in a quiet corner to think upon his crime. Vasily sat in the quiet corner. He thought upon his crime. Vasily decided this was not so good as a beating.

Lo, we continued, dumbfounded. Antonina, with the withered hand from last year's maiming, placed a cube of ill origins on the desk of Captain Shtanz, only to be given over to the Cossack aide who calmly instructed her on its proper uses. He touched her hand and asked if she knew the innocent arts. If Tula had learned of the revolution to make all equal, everything right. Antonina said to us, "I spat." She said to us, "I kicked. But nothing was to come upon my head."

After hearing this, in the Hall of Meeting, we met. We hissed our consternation in plenty, gurgled drink in plenty. Above all, the nihilists shouted, "God damn the day we were born," and gulped mighty bumpers of Kyzyl vodka. Drunken so, we voted on the employment of crafty mental shifts. We would refuse our lightly salted cracknel. We would rub ourselves vigorously and approach Shtanz and Cossack with our pests, give them over to the flea. Then, with the help of their manic variations in all directions, a hate would be found. Beatings would be assured. "What now, Fathers?" we would call. "We the good people believe in our right."

Lo, in this place of nothing, we had no knowledge of their melkoscopes and mechanisms. We did not foresee their ability with the tiny things that danced their three-figured quadrille, feelers skipping. Out of the cottage into the dust-heap came Shtanz and Cossack clothing. Out of the cottage came each squashed

flea. And so when we gathered to wait on our desserts, asked in a voice of one for our feet to be made glass as if we had wandered the twice ninety good versts to Kieff, lo, we received the soft hand.

They emerged, Shtanz and Cossack, powdered and flung limb to limb with white cotton smock. "Our children," they said, smelling sweet of oil, "we are to give you a raise of five kopeks each. We are to give you better beds." At this, confused and despairing, we scoffed, "Beds for what? Our bodies?" We demanded our woe. Each raised his stumps and mutilants.

"I have already forgotten," a nihilist shrieked. "I have already forgotten my line."

Looking on our robed leaders, we informed them thusly: "The good people of Tula are renowned, for we know how the holy picture of *The Evening Chime* should be painted. We are the keepers of many stone-carved images that have floated hither in the most remote times upon a great cross on the river Yug, all clad in vestiges of Him. We are," we said, "here to face the brunt."

Yet still they refused us our beatings. And so we set them aflame, their cottage too, and all was lit and steaming like the image of our world.