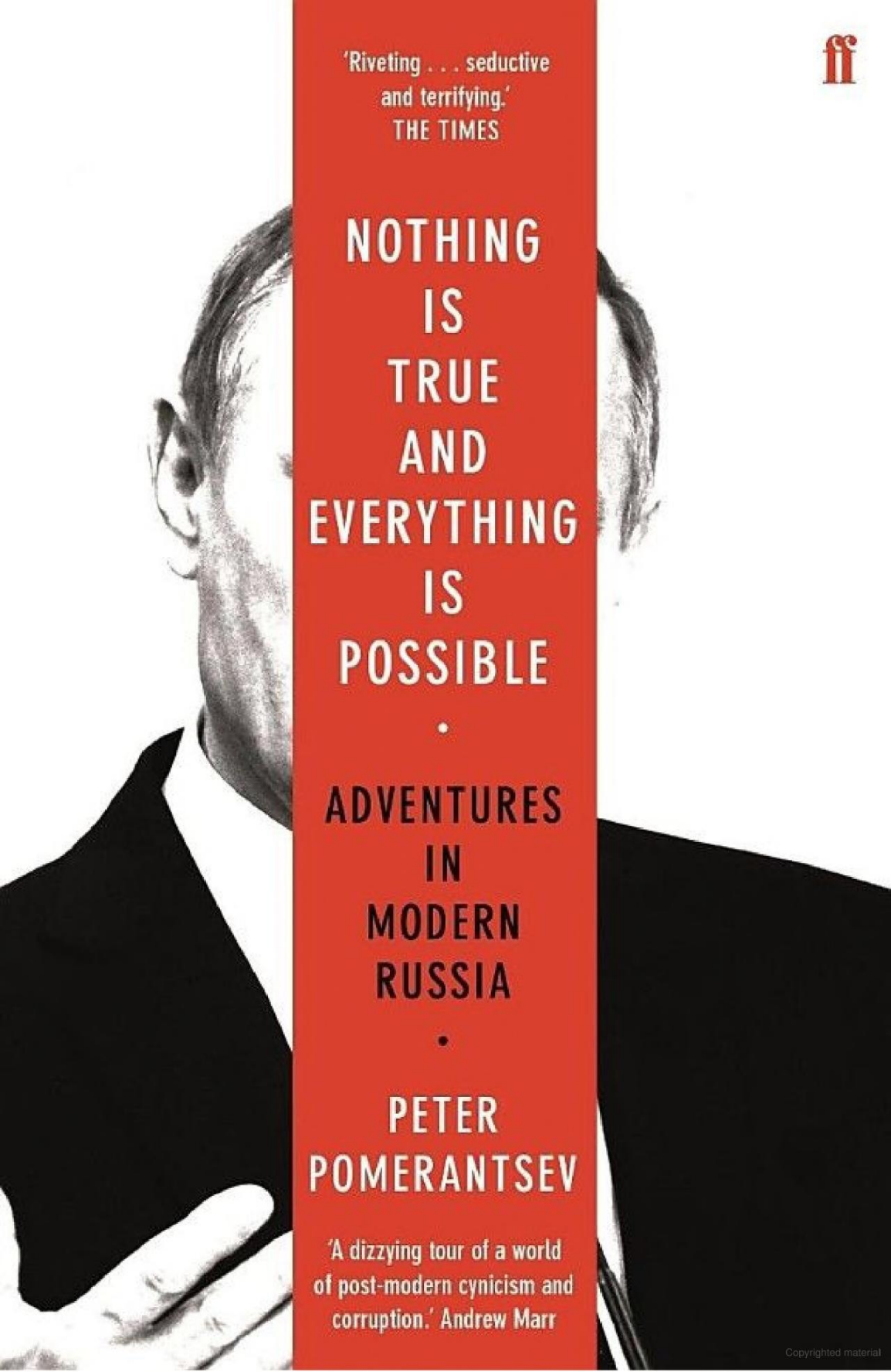

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Foreword to the new edition

At the end of this book I return from Russia to London in the second decade of the twenty-first century to find signs of something similar to what I had seen in Putin's Moscow playing out in the thing we used to know as 'the West'. This is not to draw equivalency between the systems of government; when it comes to rights and rule of law and press freedoms they are obviously different, but something in the permafrost beneath the political culture was melting in a familiar way. This was just an instinct at the time of writing – but it appears to be true today.

Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible was my diagnoses of the political and social psychology of Putin's Russia. A triumphant cynicism permeated every strata of society, from gangsters through to the President, PR men and cult leaders. 'Post-truth' is the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s word for 2016, denoting a discourse where politicians don't merely lie – they've always done that – but where they seem to revel in throwing off the glum constraints of coherence.

Why has this 'post-truth' wave engulfed both sides of the old Cold War? Could it be embedded in the nature of Russia and the West's relationship?

As long as the two sides were competing over who had the better idea of the future, Communism or Democratic Capitalism, each side had to use evidence – or falsifications posing as evidence – to prove their side was doing better. After the Cold War ended only one version of the future remained – some sort of default globalisation, which Russia imitated without ever believing in it, and the West went along with as long as it made money – and stopped when the financial bubble burst. With no idea of the future left, facts become unnecessary. They are, after all, unpleasant things, reminders of one's mortality and limitations. How much more fun to throw rational thinking to the wind.

This process occurred in Russia harder and faster because cynicism and disillusionment set in earlier – for reasons and in spectacular ways I relate in the book – and everything turned into a dark carnival more rapidly. The Russian president turned politics into a reality show, remaking authoritarianism with the logic of twenty-first-century entertainment. In America a reality-show star has captured the presidency, substituting politics with the logic of entertainment. Writing in early 2017 one can only wonder where that will end up. What I saw in Russia serves as a screen to view it through.

ACT I

REALITY SHOW RUSSIA

A City Living in Fast-Forward

Flying in at night over Moscow you can see how the shape of the city is a series of concentric ring roads with the small ring of the Kremlin at the centre. At the end of the twentieth century the light from the rings glowed a dim, dirty yellow. Moscow was a sad satellite at the edge of Europe, emitting the dying embers of the Soviet empire. Then, in the twenty-first century, something happened: money. Never had so much money flowed into so small a place in so short a time. The orbital system shifted. Up above the city the concentric rings began to shine with the lights of new skyscrapers, neon, and speeding Maybachs on the roads, swirling faster and faster in high-pitched, hypnotic fairground brilliance. The Russians were the new jet set: the richest, the most energetic, the most dangerous. They had the most oil, the most beautiful women, the best parties. From being ready to sell anything, they became ready to buy anything: football clubs in London and basketball clubs in New York; art collections, British newspapers and European energy companies. No one could understand them. They were both lewd and refined, cunning and naive. Only in Moscow did they make sense, a city living in fast-forward, changing so fast it breaks all sense of reality, where boys become billionaires in the blink of an eye.

'Performance' was the city's buzzword, a world where gangsters become artists, gold-diggers quote Pushkin, Hell's Angels hallucinate themselves as saints. Russia had seen so many worlds flick through in such blistering progression – from communism to *perestroika* to shock therapy to penury to oligarchy to mafia state to mega-rich – that its new heroes were left with the sense that life is just one glittering masquerade, where every role and any position or belief is mutable. 'I want to try on every persona the world has ever known,' Vladik Mamyshev-Monroe would tell me. He was a performance artist and the city's mascot, the inevitable guest at parties attended by the inevitable tycoons and supermodels, arriving dressed as Gorbachev, a fakir, Tutankhamen, the Russian President. When I first landed in Moscow I thought these infinite transformations the expression of a country liberated, pulling on different costumes in a frenzy of freedom, pushing the limits of personality as far as it could possibly go to what the President's vizier would call 'the heights of creation'. It was only years later that I came to see these endless mutations not as freedom but as forms of delirium, in which scare puppets and nightmare mystics become convinced they're almost real and march towards what the President's vizier would go on to call 'the fifth world war, the first non-linear war of all against all'.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

I work in television. Factual television. Factual entertainment, to be

exact. I was flying into Moscow in 2006 because the television industry, like everything else, was booming. I knew the country already: since 2001, the year after I graduated from university, I had been living there most of my time, jumping jobs between think tanks and as a very minor consultant on European Union projects meant to be aiding Russian 'development', then at film school, and lately as an assistant on documentaries for Western networks. My parents had emigrated from the Soviet Union to England in the 1970s as political exiles, and I grew up speaking some sort of demotic émigré Russian. But I had always been an observer looking in at Russia. I wanted to get closer: London seemed so measured, so predictable; the America the rest of my émigré family lived in seemed so content; while the real Russians seemed truly alive, had the sense that anything was possible. What I really wanted to do was film. To press 'record' and just point and shoot. I took my camera, a battered metal Sony Z1 small enough to drop in my bag everywhere. A lot of the time I just filmed so as not to let this world escape; I shot blindly, knowing I would never have a cast like this again. And I was in demand in the new Moscow for the simple reason that I could say the magic words 'I am from London.' They worked like 'Open sesame.' Russians are convinced Londoners know the alchemical secret of successful television, can distil the next hit reality or talent show. No matter that I had never been more than a third-rate assistant on other people's projects; just whispering 'I come from London' could get me any meeting I wanted. I was a stowaway on the great armada of Western civilisation, the bankers, lawyers, international development consultants, accountants, and architects who have sailed out to seek their fortune in the adventures of globalisation.

But, in Russia, working in television is about more than being a camera, an observer. In a country covering nine time zones, one-ninth of the world's land mass, stretching from the Pacific to the Baltic, from the Arctic to the Central Asian deserts, from near-medieval villages where people still draw water from wooden wells by hand, through single-factory towns and back to the blue-glass and steel skyscrapers of the new Moscow – TV is the only force that can unify and rule and bind this country. And as a TV producer I would be directed right into the centre of its workings.

My first meeting took me to the top floor of Ostankino, the television centre the size of five football fields that is the battering ram of Kremlin propaganda. On the top floor, down a series of matt-black corridors, is a long conference room. Here Moscow's flashiest minds met for the weekly brainstorming session to decide what Ostankino would broadcast. I was taken along by a friendly Russian publisher. Due to my Russian surname no one had yet noticed I was British; I kept my mouth shut. There were more than twenty of us in the room: tanned broadcasters in white silk shirts and politics professors with sweaty beards and heavy breath and ad execs in trainers. There were no women. Everyone was

smoking. There was so much smoke it made my skin itch.

At the end of the table sat one of the country's most famous political TV presenters. He is small and speaks fast, with a smoky voice:

> We all know there will be no real politics. But we still have to give our viewers the sense something is happening. They need to be kept entertained. So what should we play with? Shall we attack oligarchs? Who's the enemy this week? Politics has got to feel like … like a movie!

The first thing the President had done when he came to power in 2000 was to seize control of television. It was television through which the Kremlin decided which politicians it would 'allow' as its puppet opposition, what the country's history and fears and consciousness should be. And the new Kremlin won't make the same mistake the old Soviet Union did: it will never let TV become dull. The task is to synthesise Soviet control with Western entertainment. Twenty-first-century Ostankino mixes show business and propaganda, ratings with authoritarianism. And at the centre of the great show is the President himself, created from a no one, a grey fuzz via the power of television, so that he morphs as rapidly as a performance artist among his roles of soldier, lover, bare-chested hunter, businessman, spy, tsar, superman. 'The news is the incense by which we bless Putin's actions, make him the President,' TV producers and political technologists liked to say. Sitting in that smoky room, I had the sense that reality was somehow malleable, that I was with Prosperos who could project any existence they wanted onto post-Soviet Russia. But with every year I worked in Russia, and as the Kremlin became ever more paranoid, Ostankino's strategies became ever more twisted, the need to incite panic and fear ever more urgent; rationality was tuned out, and Kremlin-friendly cults and hate-mongers were put on prime time to keep the nation entranced, distracted, as ever more foreign hirelings would arrive to help the Kremlin and spread its vision to the world.

But though my road would eventually lead back to Ostankino, my initial role in the vast scripted reality show of the new Russia was to help make it look and sound and feel Western. The network I initially worked with was TNT (no relation to the US channel of the same name), which is housed in a new office centre called Byzantium. On the ground floor is a spa done up in faux-Roman style with Doric plaster columns and ruins, frequented by languid, leggy girls here to deepen already deep tans and have endless manicures and pedicures. The manicures are elaborate: rainbow-coloured, multilayered, glitter-dusted designs of little hearts and flowers, so much brighter than the girls' bored eyes, as if they pour all their utopias into the tiny spaces of their nails.

The network occupies several floors higher up in the building. When

the lift door opens you're greeted by TNT's logo, designed in blindingly bright, squealingly happy pinks, bright blues, and gold. Over the logo is written the network's catchphrase, 'Feel our Love!' This is the new, desperately happy Russia, and this is the image of Russia TNT projects: a youthful, bouncy, glossy country. The network sends a beam of hyperactive yellows and pinks into people's darkling flats.

The offices are open-plan, full of shiny, happy young things hurrying about, sprinkling their Russian with Anglicisms, whistling the tunes of Britpop hits. TNT makes hooligan television, and the young staff buzz with the excitement of cultural revolution. For them TNT is a piece of subversive pop art, a way to climb into the nation's psyche and rewire it from inside. The network introduced the reality show to Russia: one raunchy show is – joy of TV-producer joys – censured as immoral by ageing communists. TNT pioneered the Russian sitcom and the Russian trashy talk show à la Jerry Springer. The network gobbles up Western concepts one after the other, going through more formats in a year than the West can come up with in a decade. Many of the city's brightest are defecting to entertainment channels and glossy magazines; here they won't be forced to make propaganda, are encouraged to be subversive. They just can't do real politics here; it's a news-free zone. Most are happy with the trade-off: complete freedom for complete silence.

'We want to find out what the new generation are really thinking. Piiitrrr.'

'What excites them, Piiitrrr.'

'We want to see real people on screen. The real heroes, Piiitrrr.'

'Piiitrrr.' That's what the producers at TNT call me. Three women, all in their twenties. One raven-haired, one curly-haired and one straight-haired, each picking up the ends of the others' sentences. They could call me by the Russian version of my name, 'Piotr'. But they prefer 'Piiitrrr', which makes me sound more English. I am their window-dressing Westerner, helping them create a pretend Western society. And I, in turn, pretend to be a much greater producer than I am. We start by launching TNT's first documentary strand. It takes me just thirty minutes to get my first commission: *How to Marry a Millionaire (A Gold-digger's Guide).* I reckon I could have got three films if I had made the effort. In London or New York you would spend months trying to get a project off the ground. But TNT is sponsored by Gazprom, the Russian state energy monopoly, which is at this time the world's largest gas company. Actually, scratch that; it's the world's largest company, full stop.

No Complexes

‘Business theory teaches us one important lesson,’ says the instructress. ‘Always thoroughly research the desires of the consumer. Apply this principle when you search for a rich man. On a first date there’s one key rule: never talk about yourself. Listen to him. Find him fascinating. Find out his desires. Study his hobbies; then change yourself accordingly.’

Gold-digger Academy. A pool of serious blonde girls taking careful notes. Finding a sugar daddy is a craft, a profession. The academy has faux-marble halls, long mirrors, and gold-colour-painted details. Next door is a spa and beauty salon. You go for your gold-digger lessons, then you go get waxed and tanned. The teacher is a forty-something redhead with a psychology degree, an MBA, and a shrill smile, her voice high and prim, a Miss Jean Brodie in short skirts: ‘Never wear jewellery on a first date, the man should think you’re poor. Make him want to buy you jewellery. Arrive in a broken-down car: make him want to buy you a smarter one.’

The students take notes in neat writing. They have paid about £600 for each week of the course. There are dozens of such ‘academies’ in Moscow and St Petersburg, with names such as ‘Geisha School’ or ‘How to be a Real Woman’.

‘Go to an expensive area of town,’ continues the instructress. ‘Stand with a map and pretend you are lost. A wealthy man might approach to help.’

‘I want a man who can stand strong on [his] own two feet. Who will make me feel as safe as behind a wall of stone,’ says Oliona, a recent graduate, employing the parallel language of the gold-digger (what she means is she wants a man with money). Usually Oliona wouldn’t even think of talking to me, one of those impossible-to-access girls who would bat me away with a flick of her eyelashes. But I’m going to put her on television, and that changes everything. The show is going to be called *How to Marry a Millionaire*. I had thought it would be tough to get Oliona to talk, that she would be shy about her life. Quite the opposite: she can’t wait to tell the world; the way of the gold-digger has become one of the country’s favourite myths. Bookshops are stocked with self-help books telling girls how to bag a millionaire. A roly-poly pimp, Peter Listerman, is a TV celebrity. He doesn’t call himself a pimp (that would be illegal), but a ‘matchmaker’. Girls pay him to introduce them to rich men. Rich men pay him to introduce them to girls. His agents, gay teenage boys, search at the railway stations, looking for long-legged, lithe young things who have come to Moscow for some sort of life. Listerman calls the girls his ‘chickens’; he poses for photos with kebab sticks of grilled poussins: ‘Come to me if you’re after chicken,’ his

advertisements say.

Oliona lives in a small, sparkly new flat with her nervous little dog. The flat is on one of the main roads that lead to billionaire's row, Rublevka. Rich men put their mistresses there so they can nip in and visit them on the way home. She first came to Moscow from Donbas, a Ukrainian mining region taken over by mafia bosses in the 1990s. Her mother was a hairdresser. Oliona studied the same profession, but her mother's little boutique went bust. Oliona came to Moscow with next to nothing when she was twenty and started as a stripper at one of the casinos, Golden Girls. She danced well, which is how she met her sugar daddy. Now she earns the basic Moscow mistress rate: the flat, £2,500 a month, a car, and a week-long holiday in Turkey or Egypt twice a year. In return the sugar daddy gets her supple and tanned body any time he wants, day or night, always rainbow happy, always ready to perform.

'You should see the eyes of the girls back home. They're deadly jealous,' says Oliona. '"Oh, so your accent's changed, you speak like a Muscovite now," they say. Well, fuck them: that just makes me proud.'

'Could you ever go back there?'

'Never. That would mean I'd failed. Gone back to mummy.'

But her sugar daddy promised her a new car three months ago, and he still hasn't delivered; she's worried he's going off her.

'Everything you see in this flat is his; I don't own anything,' says Oliona, peering at her own flat as if it's just a stage set, as if it's someone else who lives there.

And the minute the sugar daddy gets bored with her, she's out. Back on the street with her nervous little dog and a dozen sequined dresses. So Oliona's looking for a new sugar daddy (they're not called 'sugar daddies' here but 'sponsors'). Thus the Gold-digger Academy, a sort of adult education.

'But how can you meet with other guys?' I ask. 'Doesn't your present sponsor keep tabs on you?'

'Oh yeah, I have to be careful; he has one of his bodyguards check up on me. But he does it in a nice way; the bodyguard turns up with shopping. But I know he's checking there've been no guys here. He tries to be subtle. I think that's sweet. Other girls have it much worse. Cameras. Private eyes.'

Oliona's playing fields are a constellation of clubs and restaurants designed almost exclusively for the purpose of sponsors looking for girls and girls looking for sponsors. The guys are known as 'Forbeses' (as in *Forbes* rich list); the girls as '*tiolki*', cattle. It's a buyer's market: there are dozens, no, hundreds, of 'cattle' for every 'Forbes'.

We start the evening at Galeria. Opposite is a red-brick monastery leaning like an ocean liner in the snow. Outside the restaurant black cars are quadruple-parked up the narrow pavement and onto the boulevard; scowling, smoking bodyguards wait for their masters, who sit inside. Galeria was created by Arkady Novikov: his restaurants are *the* place to

go in Moscow (he also does the Kremlin's catering). Each restaurant has a new theme: the Middle East, Asia. Not so much imitative pastiche as knowing hints at someone else's style. Galeria is a collage of quotations: columns, chrome black tables, panels with British paisley fabric. The tables are lit up with cinema spotlights. The seating plan is such that you can see people in other corners. And the main subjects on display are women. They sit by the bar, careful to order just Voss water and thus provoke a Forbes to invite them for a drink.

'Ha, they're so naive,' says Oliona. 'Everyone knows that trick by now.'

She orders a cocktail and sushi: 'I always pretend I don't need anything from a man. That gets them in.'

At midnight Oliona heads for the latest club. Worming cavalcades of black (always black), bullet-proof Bentleys and Mercedes move slowly towards the entrance. Near the door thousands of stilettos slide and shuffle on black ice, somehow always keeping their immaculate balance. (Oh, nation of ballet dancers!) Thousands of platinum-blond manes brush against bare, perma-tanned backs moist with snow. The winter air is rent with cries from thousands of puffed-up lips, begging to be let in. This is not about fashion, about cool; this is about work. Tonight is the one chance for the girls to dance and glance their way over the usually impossible barriers of money, private armies, security fences. For one evening a week the most divided city in the northern hemisphere, where the mega-rich live fenced off in a separate, silky civilisation, opens a little, narrow sluice into paradise. And the girls pile and push and crawl into that little sluice, knowing full well that it will be open for one night only before it shuts them back out in a mean Moscow.

Oliona walks lightly to the front of the queue. She's on the VIP list. At the beginning of every year she pays the bouncer several thousand dollars to make sure she can always be let in, a necessary tax for her profession.

Inside, the club is built like a baroque theatre, with a dance floor in the centre and rows of loggias up the walls. The Forbeses sit in the darkened loggias (they pay tens of thousands of dollars for the pleasure), while Oliona and hundreds of other girls dance below, throwing practised glances up at the loggias, hoping to be invited up. The loggias are in darkness. The girls have no idea who exactly is sitting there; they're flirting with shadows.

'So many eighteen-year-old girls,' says Oliona, 'breathing down my neck.' She's only twenty-two, but that's already near the end of a Moscow mistress's career. 'I know I'll have to start lowering my standards soon,' she tells me, amused rather than appalled. Now that Oliona has taken me into her confidence, I find that she's nothing like I thought she would be. Not hard, but soft-drink bubbly. Everything's just play with her. This must be the secret to her success: the room feels fizzier when she's there. 'Of course I'm still hoping for a real Forbes,'

she says, ‘but if the worst comes to the worst I’ll settle for some millionaire dunce who’s come up from the provinces, or one of those dull ex-pats. Or some vile old man.’ But no one knows what a gold-digger’s future really holds; this is the first generation to have treated this sort of life as a career. Oliona has a mafia mining town behind her and god-knows-what in front of her; she’s giggling and dancing over an abyss.

Back at the academy the lessons continue.

‘Today we will learn the algorithm for receiving presents,’ the instructor tells her students. ‘When you desire a present from a man, place yourself at his left, irrational, emotional side. His right is his rational side: you stand to his right if you’re discussing business projects. But if you desire a present, position yourself by his left. If he is sitting in a chair crouch down, so he feels taller, like you’re a child. Squeeze your vaginal muscles. Yes, your vaginal muscles. This will make your pupils dilate, making you more attractive. When he says something, nod; this nodding will induce him to agree with you. And finally, when you ask for your car, your dress, whatever it is you want, stroke his hand. Gently. Now repeat: Look! Nod! Stroke!’

The girls chant back in unison: ‘Look. Nod. Stroke … Look, Nod, Stroke.’

(‘They think they’ve won something when they get a dress out of us,’ one millionaire acquaintance tells me when I tell him about the lessons at the academy. ‘I let them win sometimes. But come on: what could they ever, ever take from us we didn’t actually let them?’ ‘You know what my word for them is?’ says another. ‘I call them gulls, like seagulls, circling over garbage dumps. And they sound like gulls, you know, when they sit and gossip in a bar together. “Kar-Kar! Kar-Kar!” Gulls! Funny: isn’t it?’)

As I research the show I get to know more graduates from the academies. Natasha speaks decent German. She works as a translator for visiting businessmen. The translation agency advertises only for girls with ‘no complexes’: code for being prepared to bed the client. Everywhere you see advertisements for secretaries or PAs with ‘no complexes’ added in small print at the bottom. The phrase somehow transforms humiliation into an act of personal liberation. Natasha is working for a German energy boss. She hopes he’ll take her back to Munich.

‘Russian men are completely spoilt for choice; Western men are much easier,’ she says earnestly, like one carrying out market research. ‘But the problem with Westerners is they don’t buy you presents, never pay for dinner. My German guy will need some work.’

Lena wants to be a pop star. In Moscow they’re known as ‘singing knickers’: girls with no talent but rich sponsors. Lena knows perfectly well she can’t sing, but she also knows that doesn’t matter.

‘I don’t understand the whole thing of working 24/7 in some office.

It's humiliating having to work like that. A man is a lift to the top, and I intend to take it.'

The red-haired instructress with the MBA agrees: 'Feminism is wrong. Why should a woman kill herself at a job? That's a man's role. It's up to us to perfect ourselves as women.'

'But what about you?' I ask her when the students are out of the room. 'You work; the academy makes you money.'

The instructress gives a little smile and changes the subject: 'Next I'm opening up a clinic that will help stop ageing: would you like to come and film that, too?'

The class continues. The instructress draws a pie chart on a white board. She divides it into three.

'There are three types of men,' she tells her students. 'The creatives. The analysts. We're not interested in those. The ones we want are "the possessors",' and she repeats the tell-all, prison-intimating phrase, 'a man behind whom you feel like behind a wall of stone. We all know how to spot them. The strong, silent men. They wear dark suits. They have deep voices. They mean what they say. These men are interested in control. They don't want a forceful woman. They have enough of that already. They want a girl who'll be a pretty flower.'

Do I even need to mention that Oliona grew up fatherless? As did Lena, Natasha, and all the gold-diggers I met. All fatherless. A generation of orphaned, high-heeled girls, looking for a daddy as much as a sugar daddy. And that's the funny thing about Oliona and the other students: her cunning comes with fairy-tale fantasies about the tsar who, today or tomorrow or the day after, will jet her off to his majestic Maybach kingdom. And of course it's the President who encapsulates that image. All the shirtless photos hunting tigers and harpooning whales are love letters to the endless queues of fatherless girls. The President as the ultimate sugar daddy, the ultimate protector with whom you can be as 'behind a stone wall'.

When I see Oliona back at her flat she brings out a tome of Pushkin. She met a Forbes at the club the other night who is fond of literature. She's learning whole stanzas of *Eugene Onegin* off by heart:

> Whom to love, whom to believe in,
> On whom alone shall we depend?
> Who will fit their speech and on,
> To our measure, in the end?
> … Never pursue a phantom,
> Or waste your efforts on the air
> Love yourself, your only care …

'I'll slip them in, just when he's least expecting it.' She winks, keen to show off her cunning.

The Forbes has already taken her on a ride in his private jet. 'Can you

come so fast, like glitter shaken in a snow globe, that it feels totally unreal, not something to hoard and save but to twirl and dance in like feathers in a pillow fight and cut like papier mâché into different, quickly changing masks. At 5 a.m. the music goes faster and faster, and in the throbbing, snowing night the cattle become Forbeses and the Forbeses cattle, moving so fast now they can see the traces of themselves caught in the strobe across the dance floor. The guys and girls look at themselves and think: ‘Did that really happen to me? Is that *me* there? With all the Maybachs and rapes and gangsters and mass graves and penthouses and sparkly dresses?’

A Hero for Our Times

I am in a meeting at TNT when my phone goes off. The display says ‘undisclosed’, which could mean it’s something important from home. I apologise and move to the corridor, under the neon sign ‘Feel our Love!’ When I answer at first there’s a long silence. Breathing. Then a hoarse, whistling laugh.

‘Piiitrrr. You recognise me? It’s Vitaly Djomochka. I need you to do me a favour. Will you do me a favour? Just a small favour?’

Vitaly has a way of asking that makes it uncomfortable to say ‘no’.

‘Sure.’

‘Come to D station. Bring a camera. And not a little one. A real one. Deal?’

‘Sure …’

In the evening I make my way down to D. The journey will take an hour on one of the slow, suburban trains. These trains are among the most miserable rides in Russia: full of the angry poor of satellite towns, the shop assistants and cops and cleaners, who come every day to the big city to be within breathing distance of all the platinum watches and Porsches, only to be blown back again each evening to their dark peripheries, carrying their shift clothes crumpled in plastic bags, drinking lukewarm beer in a cold train. The benches are wooden and impossible to sit on comfortably. I fidget and wonder what Vitaly could possibly be doing in D; it doesn’t strike me as his sort of place. But it has been a while since I last heard from him.

Once upon a time Vitaly Djomochka had been a gangster. In the 1990s the words ‘Russian’ and ‘gangster’ became almost synonymous, but when the President ascended to the Kremlin the era of the gangster ended. The secret services took over organised crime themselves; there was no way hoodlums could compete. Some became Duma deputies to make their money safe, while others retired to become regular businessmen. But in Siberia Vitaly Djomochka had other plans: he wanted to direct movies. He gathered his crew. No more grand theft auto and extorting businessmen, he told them; they were going to make films about themselves, starring themselves.

None of them knew anything about filmmaking. They had never heard of montage, storyboards, or camera movements. There was no film school they could go to, no famous director to guide them. Vitaly worked out how to make movies himself. He watched and rewatched the classics, breaking down every shot, every cut, every twist and turn in the plot. There was no script on paper; scripts were for saps. Everyone knew the scenes from memory. They didn’t use make-up or stuntmen; they jumped from tall buildings themselves and crashed their own cars. All the blood

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