# Chess and Dragonflies

The next day, the dragonflies came. Millions of them, they rose up from the banks of the Neva. Each wall shimmered, each window and each lamppost, their wings rainbow like a slick of petrol across the city. They settled on flowerpots, bags of rubbish, horse pats and shop awnings, everything glittered and pulsed. The air was speckled with their bodies as they flew up and down the Nevsky Prospect, the boulevards and back lanes. The dragonflies flew straight at our faces. I couldn't walk down the street without looking like a saint, vibrant with animals. People wore scarves over their noses and mouths, bandits in the heat. Little babies choked on thoraxes. The horses twitched and snorted rainbows. For five days the city was ruled by dragonflies. For five days there was plague and we knew: the time had come.

That was before. Before our city was Leningrad, before it was Petrograd. When it was still St Petersburg. It was 1914, Peter's last summer.

They came to our little cinema. They ate the film. The film cannisters, so carefully closed, now burst with shiny monsters. They flew in front of the projector, enormous shadows against the screen, each one a leviathan, a premonition. They died in the projection room's heat, their legs scrabbling at the air, distorted in the light. For those five days, they were our only visitors.

Doors closed all down the Nevsky Prospect. Dragonflies hurled their bodies at the shops' windows with a gun-rattle sound. Every shopkeeper started, the dragonflies' suicidal passion a reminder of the strikes and the riots. A reminder of the slum workers in the back lanes who demanded more kopecks with a brick in their fist. I could see the workers' dim shapes as I walked. They huddled, wretched, in back alley courtyards and choked on dragonfly corpses.

My son came home early from the engineering school. He never did this, he knew that we had sacrificed too much for him to be there. The dragonflies ate the books, he said, they laid their eggs down the blackboard. He was choked and breathless. His head was full only of nature's numbers – the velocity of wings, the multiplication of hatching insects – as we sealed the windows and blocked the tiny gap under the door. The house filled with a rattle as the dragonflies threw themselves at the glass.

We hunted them through the apartment. My Misha's face was set, a dark frown, his head full of the velocity of tiny bodies. Was this the face he had when he rode west to the

front a few months later? When he obeyed his general's orders to face the Kaiser's grey-suited and jack-booted boys? They were all boys, I learnt; they were always boys, girls, children. The day before he left, he stood proudly at the kitchen table, his smart blue coat making him sweat in the August heat. In my dreams, I see him in that blue coat, its collar dragonfly-eaten, armed with only a flyswat. The German guns rattling to fill his head.

Each cupboard we opened the dragonflies flew out. Our coats in our wardrobes shimmered, iridescent. A buzz filled our heads as the insects ate their way through our lives. We thrashed at our coats, we made traps out of pots and bowls. The floor was littered with corpses.

We could see our best shirts, our new boots, being eaten by their ravenous insectoid mouths. My daughters came home late from the atelier, they had spent all day locking away each bolt of cloth and each fine gossamer frock. They were choked and breathless from the dragonfly-killer sprayed all through the atelier. The Madame sent them home, to mend the holes in their skirts and our linen.

Tanya mended, Sonya darned, they lengthened and patched. That summer, the next winter, with no orders from Poland or from Germany, with only a trickle from Moscow. Tanya kept working and Sonya kept house. The clothes the dragonflies ate never recovered. The red and blue of my daughters' modish Sunday best lost its lustre. The frocks became dull pink, grey-blue, almost white, indistinguishable from their pale hands, their veins. The good cloth the dragonflies ate was never replaced. It was only the three of us when the revolution came and came again. Our darns and patches disguised us as Reds.

All through that long summer afternoon, through the short summer night to the premature dawn, we swatted at dragonflies. They hissed and clacked. The kitchen table crackled with cracked wings, broken rainbows so beautiful in their abundance, shards of heaven among the teacups. Like film in their delicate translucency. Were they as flammable as celluloid? I wanted to string them together on a reel and project them in my cinema, a record of our rainbow plague.

The dawn hummed and shimmered and dragonflies rattled our windows like a revolution. Their eyes and legs clawed at the glass, a riotous mob, but the windows were sealed. Every crack was sealed and the door shut tight and bolted. By lunchtime, every dragonfly in the house was dead. We brushed their brittle bodies into piles, we swept all the casualties into one monstrous pile to rot. We couldn't burn them without suffocating in that airtight apartment. We couldn't leave.

The dragonflies drummed their gun-rattle on the windows. We ate silently, exhausted. We ate until all the food was gone. We lived like that for years, me and Sonya, after they took Tanya from the atelier one morning. We never heard from her again. We knew not to ask. Sonya and I sat at the kitchen table and made each rind of cheese, each crust of bread last as long as possible. Tanya's absence rotted in the corner. We couldn't move it. We couldn't leave.

We ate and slept. We put scarves over our mouths to breathe more shallowly. We didn't want to inhale the rotting corpses' miasma. Outside, they crawled on the windows. We slept in fits, our dreams a lethal rainbow. We couldn't even play chess to pass the time, despite our practice in the previous weeks. The rattle and tap of the dragonflies drummed out all thoughts of strategy, all thoughts but survival. We endured another long afternoon, on and on, the night barely touching the dark before dawn. The morning light so beautiful, pink and orange and blue as a dragonfly wing. So much colour, we would remember it with morbid longing in the grey days, when St Petersburg became Petrograd, when Petrograd became Leningrad. When Sonya was taken from her factory and sent to the Winter War. She was only tiny, my dark-eyed youngest, but she was unmarried and unmothered and ripe fodder for the front line. That November she marched off to Finland in the snow. In my mind's eye, I see her in her grey coat, rifle on her back, eyes dark like a forest seed, slowly becoming a log, a root, a hibernating bear in that war. In my dreams, she awakens at Easter, a miracle, her thick black fur bristling, her limbs strong, her teeth sharp and dripping with hunger.

Then it was the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis. I was an old man. I knew not to ask.

We tied up the dragonflies in a bedsheet. We couldn't bear the smell. We had to find a way to get rid of these tiny vermin bodies. I was the father, it was my duty. I wrapped a scarf over my face like a bandit from 'Bronco Billy' or 'Calamity Anne', those American films of 1913. I put on spectacles to protect my eyes, like a grand chess master. I heaved the sack of dead over my shoulder and headed out into the plague.

The dragonflies attached to me in such numbers I could hardly move. They ate their own dead. I could hear them, I could feel the extra weight of them. When I could no longer move, I turned around and a thousand dragonflies bristled and shimmered on the sack. They chewed through the material to the bodies beneath. I could only make it as far as the corner when the sack broke. It dropped and exploded with dragonflies. More came in droves to gorge on the dead. I watched, others watched, we all stopped at this spectacle. A dazzling ball of such high-pitched clicking and buzzing that I could almost feel, on my tongue, the sticky

movement of their mouths. Their thousand mouths, steadied by their thousands of wings. I had to turn away or I felt that I too would feed on the dead. It was too early to learn that lesson. We would have to wait until the Great Patriotic War, until the German siege of Leningrad, to learn that.

I walked on to the Parisiana, my cinema, to check. The doors were bolted shut and a hurried notice placed where the posters should hang: Closed Due to Dragonflies. The stained glass windows, enticing and glamourous and dark, were stained with dragonfly splatter.

We had had such hope. The day before the dragonflies, our cinema was visited by the chess masters. Those rulers of the inner world. We followed their exploits in the morning papers, where they breakfasted, how they prepared for the tournament – the American performed complicated calisthenics as he recited his tactics, the Englishman smoked three pipes and a pint of cider disappeared into his white beard. We followed their scores and the exquisite breakdown of their matches in the evening papers, our newspaper draughtsmen sketching their faces as a concerted flock of frowns.

They came to the Parisiana, an outing to show the cosmopolitan beauty of St Petersburg. I watched from the balcony, my cigarette almost forgotten. They clipped new shoes over the marble floors. The stained glass windows patterned their footsteps red and blue. These men more mind than body, they slid their hands over the gilt stair rail. The mirrors up the staircase made the hall full of kings.

We believed the papers. With men such as these, they declared, there must be a new world order. New values for the electric world, they wrote, and world peace! There can be no war with such minds as these in Europe.

In the staircase mirrors, their faces were posters, heroes for the new world. There was the Chess Machine from Cuba, black hair slicked back like Zorro, like the Sheikh. There was our own Alyekhin, proud and puffed like a cock, his gold pocket watch in his check waistcoat. The German touched the walls and rails like a praying mantis, his long fingers curled out to scuttle over the surface. The Pole wore his grey suit like a costume, amused, a cynical half-smile twitching in his cheek. There was a Frenchman, crinkled and brown from his games in Algiers, who sniffed with excitement. There was the master, the grand Shakhmatov, whose body drowned in his brown suit, whose brown eyes swam in his spectacles. A pure mind, a man purely mind.

They looked at each curlicued lamp and velvet sofa, at each film poster with the pretty actresses as they grasped their heroes, and nodded approval. Oh yes, we believed. There would be new electric values for this shiny, automated world.

I was satisfied. I went back to the projection room and loaded a new roll. Charlie Chaplin strode up and down in his too-short trousers and swung his cane, care free. A new world for my son and my two daughters.

And then they were gone. The dragonflies. The streets were littered with corpses.