

# Matthew Francis

## Green Winter

IT IS DARK when the guards come to wake me. For a moment, I imagine that I am back home, and that some catastrophe has taken place, a fire, perhaps, or a burglary, but then I remember and swear at them. Yuri grins and says, “Come with us. The Chairman has visitors.”

Outside, the stars have already faded, and the only light comes from a few scraps of muddy snow. The white winter is over and the green winter is beginning; it has been thawing for a week now, and I tread carefully to avoid the deep, slushy puddles which are scattered everywhere, colder than snow itself. I must be still half-asleep, because a line of English poetry suddenly appears in my head:

*Woken in the pre-dawn by my guards. . . .*

Where does it come from? Have I read it somewhere?

The Chairman smiles, just like Yuri, and says, “Come in, come in, please take a seat. A cold morning for the time of year, isn’t it?”

“It isn’t morning”, I tell him sullenly.

It is warm in the office. There is a charcoal stove, a big one, and an electric light, though without a shade. To make it look more like an office and less like a caretaker’s hut, there is a desk with a typewriter on it, and one of those wire in-trays you see in Moscow offices. I am not deceived, however. Tigran Vartanovitch is not in favour. Zhelatsk is not one of those modern camps they have further west, with space for 5,000 prisoners, closed-circuit television, and central heating in the guards’ quarters. It is the true end of the world, *ultima Thule*. The Chairman must have said the wrong thing at a cocktail party, or perhaps he was at the wrong cocktail party altogether.

I am given a cup of coffee, which scalds my palate and tastes, enigmatically, of paraffin, but for which I am grateful. The Chairman introduces me to his visitors, a tall, athletic, bald man from Budapest (Dr Koshka) and a small, crumpled, bald man from Moscow (Dr Simagin). Koshka, the Hungarian, is an eminent parapsychologist, and Simagin a representative of the Supreme Committee for the Advancement of Soviet Science—in other words, I assume, some sort of policeman, even if an inductive rather than a deductive one. They ask me a number of questions about what they refer to as my “powers”.

“I have no powers”, I tell them impatiently.

I have no powers. When it comes to clairvoyance, I am just as likely to be spectacularly wrong as spectacularly right. If I had powers, after all, I would be making a fortune in black-market beef carcasses or selling secrets to the Americans instead of languishing in this desolate place, this Thule, the period of cosmography, the blank zone on the map. Unfortunately, I cannot control the visions that come to me when I lie in my hut at night, any more than I can control the cold or the darkness. Knowledge is only power if it is knowledge that somebody wants, and mine is not. Sometimes I wonder if even I want it.

Recently, my visions have been of a man of about forty, handsome in a craggy way, an Englishman, a poet. Sometimes I see him in bed with a blonde, frail woman, the wife of his publisher. (He addresses her as Ro, a curious syllable which might be the Greek letter or the English word for fish eggs.) They argue frequently about literary awards, about travel grants he might get to go to Iceland or America, about a man called Simpkins of whom the poet is jealous. At other times, I see him in village halls, or in cold, varnish-scented seminar rooms, reading impassioned descriptions of his childhood to sparse audiences of uncomfortable and adoring females. Sometimes again, he is doing something mundane, like going to the lavatory or buying razor blades, but I see him with such vividness that I *am* the poet, I smell the soap or see the sunlight fall across the foreign money in the till. I am not myself. It is my only distinction that I am not always myself.

IT IS TYPICAL OF my unevenness that, although the visitors are obviously interested in my spiritual, not my family life, my famous intuition at once leads me to believe that something has happened to Yelyena. Either she has received permission to go into exile—I mean the real kind, external exile—or she has been arrested, or she is dead. Dead—I am sure it is the latter. I do not know whether a political death or whether she has just died of something, but the voice has spoken.

On the contrary, Simagin tells me I am to be asked to take part in an experiment in the interests of the health and happiness of the Soviet people. For me, it will mean a transfer to Moscow, visits from Yelyena and

the children, an end to the hard labour which is ruining my health. Dr Koshka, who is the Professor of Parapsychology at Moscow State Technical College, has assembled more than a hundred gifted psychics for the experiment, which involves, Simagin implies, our national security. Of course, what I learn in this hut is to go no further.

Simagin now becomes rhetorical and refers to great leaps that are being made in the name of Soviet science by beings whom he does not further define. Then Koshka takes over, and asks for the light to be extinguished so that he can show a film. The Chairman, excitedly, dismisses the guards, and a white, flickering square, a Thule, is projected on to the wall as Koshka struggles with the film. Now he has it. A luminous countdown flashes past: 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1. The film begins.

Scene One. Koshka, three or four years younger, walks down a Moscow street with a large red question mark poised over his head.

VOICEOVER: Have you ever wished you could do something with the unused parts of the brain?

Close-up of puzzled frown behind Koshka's horn-rimmed spectacles. Cut to:

Scene Two. Very dingy studio set intended to represent a laboratory. Two Soviet scientists, identified as such by white coats and Order of Lenin round neck, are pouring frothing liquid into test-tubes.

VOICEOVER: Soviet scientists have been labouring night and day to liberate the full power of the brain for the sake of science, socialism, and the advancement of humanity.

Cut to:

Scene Three. Old black-and-white film of Egyptian desert, clearly from pirated travelogue.

VOICEOVER: This is a pyramid.

"What was that about pyramids?" I ask, as someone behind me scrabbles to find the light switch. The bulb explodes metaphorically above my head, and the Chairman, ignoring my question, says, "I hope you found that interesting."

"But it's only just started."

"What do you mean?" the Chairman demands, but Koshka squats in front of my chair and peers curiously into my eyes.

"What was the last scene you remember?" he asks. The question is so simple that I have a horrible feeling there must be a catch in it, but I reply anyway.

"The pyramids."

"You've been asleep!" the Chairman says indignantly.

"Is that so?" Koshka asks. "Have you been asleep?"

"No. Yes. No, not asleep."

"Not asleep? Absent, perhaps?"

"Yes", I reply, "absent."

# 400

\* THE NEXT issue of ENCOUNTER, out on 20 November, will be our 400th number. To celebrate the occasion we are publishing a special issue. On the cover is a new painting by Howard Hodgkin, and there will be contributions by George Steiner, Peter Jenkins, Milovan Djilas, Edward Shils, Leszek Kolakowski, Malcolm Bradbury, Thomas Sowell, John Weightman, Elizabeth Jennings, D. J. Enright, Marghanita Laski, Christopher Tugendhat, Daniel Bell, Gillian Tindall, Jack Curtis. . . . This will certainly be one of the most sought-after issues we have published—and in time, as with previous anniversary numbers, may well become a collector's item.

\* ALTHOUGH WE are printing more copies than ever before, the 400th number is quite likely to sell out (as several recent issues have) soon after publication. If you are not already receiving ENCOUNTER regularly, please place an order right away.

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# 400

AFTER ALL, it is not easy to live in a mosaic. If Koshka had not squatted in front of my chair and searched my eyes as he did, I would not know myself why I missed the film. It is like clambering out of a dream and then, when you finally emerge, being unable to remember whether you had the dream last night or the night before, or whether it was a dream at all. There are only the little coloured stones to be fitted in somewhere.

For most of the film, I now realise, I was in England with the poet, who was in bed with a woman—his own wife, this time, rather than someone else's. Her name is Tess, and she differs from his other monosyllabic lover in almost every respect. Where Ro is blonde, Tess is dark. Where Ro has bony shoulders, Tess, from what I have been able to see of her above the duvet, is rather buxom. But her post-coital temper is just as fierce as Ro's. (It is a disappointment to me that I always seem to arrive in my other existence just after the fun has stopped and end up doing the agonising instead of the ecstasising.) Tess was reproaching me for my infidelity, which she claimed was very immature. I defended myself on the grounds that Ro is better placed than almost anybody in England to advance my career. In bed, she is a *femme de lettres* in her own right. She has had sex with all sixteen members, male and female, of the Firm, the group of poets who run the literary scene from their country houses in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, and thus has the power to cause domestic disharmony on a Parnassian scale. Poets are nothing if not domestic animals.

My English self, of course, is no exception to this rule, but he is not afraid that Tess will leave him. She is proud of his status as the leading poet of his generation and the likely next member of the Firm. The blood of Shakespeare and Milton flows in his veins, as she sees it, and, indeed, she is probably right. In any case, the poet talked so convincingly about his power over Ro and Ro's power over the English literary world that she finally fell asleep with a glow of enthusiasm suffusing her as far down as the sternum. The poet, however—or was it me by this time?—was not so sure. But then poets never are.

THE PHOTOGRAPH which Koshka hands me is of a grey-haired man, smiling in an eminent way as if discreetly attempting to show off his gold fillings.

"Do you know this man?" Koshka asks. I shake my head.

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

"You would not like to guess his name? His nationality? Anything about him?"

"No."

Koshka seems disappointed. He runs his hand over his scalp and begins to pace up and down.

"I am sorry you missed my film", he says eventually. "I would show it again, but it will be dawn soon, and the curtains here would probably not be adequate to keep out the light. Never mind. Let me tell you something about myself."

He continues walking very rapidly, more like a man on a military training exercise than one struggling with a train of thought. He explains that the film showed how he, Koshka, had had a mysterious vision of the shooting of a certain President in a foreign country, how he reported it to his local Party and was ridiculed, and how the President was, in fact, assassinated several months later. How Koshka always remembered afterwards exactly where he was when he heard the news (in Dnyepopetrovsk Railway Station, returning from an International Conference on the Psychopathology of Dissidence). How he took the next train to Moscow instead of going home, and went straight to the offices of the Supreme Committee, where he explained what had happened, and how he was, after the necessary checks had been made, offered the Chair of Parapsychology, the first of its kind in the history of Soviet further education. How he conducted experiments in levitation, teleportation, telepathy and clairvoyance. Finally, the film showed his major finding, that a large number of gifted individuals concentrating their psychic forces on a single target could produce extraordinary effects, both physical and psychological.

Koshka stops his pacing and directs my attention to the photograph again.

"Suppose such a man were the target", he says.

"Who is he?"

"Suppose he were the Ambassador of a foreign power hostile to the Soviet Union."

"Yes?"

"Suppose, then, that more than a hundred of the most gifted psychics in the country were gathered together in one place—Moscow State Technical College, for the sake of argument—and that they knew a great deal about the man. They might have done some research, and found out that he had a mistress back home in Wisconsin (or wherever he came from) to whom he still wrote occasionally; that as a boy he was sickly and suffered from rheumatic fever; that he once dreamed of being a professional basketball player but was not tall enough; that his mother was dying of Parkinson's disease; that the food he missed most in his present posting was corned beef. You understand the kind of information I mean?"

"I think so."

"The kind it takes to know a man thoroughly. Suppose these gifted individuals knew such a man in this way, and that they used their knowledge against him. Suppose they concentrated on him for an hour a day, trying to influence him, to change his behaviour. What do you think would happen?"

"I don't know."

"Might he make a mistake? Perhaps send a letter to his President full of erroneous information?"

"I don't know."

"Alternatively, might he walk into the nearest police station and ask for political asylum?"

"I don't know."

"Finally, might he not fall unexpectedly ill? Have a stroke, or suffer from hallucinations?"

"I don't know. How do you expect me to know?"

"I don't expect it", Koshka replies, smiling. "We don't know, either."

**A** STUDY. I know it is a study although I have never been in one before. Through a small window opposite the door, I can see some typical English scenery of a green variety, downland or heath or moorland—I am not familiar with the technical vocabulary. There is a single bed, suitable for throwing oneself upon when worn out by the act of creation, and also a desk, brilliant and significant in the disc of light thrown by an anglepoise lamp (even though it is daylight beyond the window). The walls are heavy with books. A man of about forty, handsome in a craggy way, is sitting at the desk writing a poem:

*Woken in the pre-dawn by my guards. . . .*

It is to be a political poem, a protest against the injustice of the Soviet system. It will be thick with authentic detail, black bread, small green fish eaten whole, tattered cloths bound round the feet instead of shoes. It will be tense with a reticent British courage, and it will win a major poetry competition because of its realism and political awareness:

*. . . I ask nothing*

*But time to dream of my childhood,  
The odour of crushed blackberries,  
Sausage and soap and forgotten love affairs.  
But there is not very much time. Dawn is breaking.*

**D**AWN IS BREAKING as I explain to Dr Koshka and Dr Simagin that I am obliged to refuse their offer. The reason I give is not political or even moral. I explain that I am an individualist and do not think I could work well with other psychics, that the substance inside me doesn't appear to mix. Also that, as I remarked earlier, my faculties are passive ones and I have never influenced anybody to do anything in my life. It may be so, of course. The thought crosses my mind that I have perhaps influenced an English poet whose name I still do not know to write a poem about me that would never otherwise have been written. An alternative and more uncomfortable thought is that I may, in fact, have no objective existence outside his poem, and that this may explain my refusal to act in my own best interests—a common failing of fictional characters.

Koshka seems neither angry nor disappointed. He has, after all, more than a hundred psychics for his experiment. The guards are summoned again to take me to breakfast. As we leave the hut, a small, remote sun is shining, and the icy green of the surrounding fields looks suddenly foreign.

## Pumping The Organ

When our voices, caught between tides,  
Could find no safe haven,  
We were allowed to pump the organ.

Closeted in the vestry, snug as moths  
Among the spare cassocks and surplices,  
We watched the bellows' pointer rise  
As we wrestled with the heavy wooden bar.

Sometimes we dozed or forgot, the gauge  
Plummeted and the great gale above wheezed  
To a rude gasp. Then Mr Whaller, our  
Plumber-organist, would bang on the panels  
With his calloused hands and noisily,  
In panic, we restored the breath of God.

My voice never did find a sure harbour  
And though organs thunder they're inspired  
By the one silent, invisible usurper with  
No attendant clumsy hands that serve.

*R. N. Allan*