

# Russian Dreams

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Alexander Gotsen was not a man of wild and dangerous passions which needed to be brought under control. He was, on the contrary, a philosopher, a professor of classical philosophy, that is, who had recently completed a slender volume of essays on the cosmological fragments of Philolaus and Archytas. He was a man who counseled his students to live according to reason, and who never tired of impressing upon them the importance of Aristotle's famous dictum about happiness consisting of the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. This did not, however, prevent him, one hot August afternoon, from drinking warm champagne out of a paper cup on the merry-go-round of a small amusement park. He was celebrating his birthday with Molly Blue, perhaps the most sensationally beautiful graduate assistant in the long and distinguished history of the university. In good looks, as one of his colleagues had remarked at coffee, she surpassed the Aphrodite of Cnidus, and possibly even the one at Milan—though beauty of a different sort, to be sure, less serene, less cold. The merry-go-round was not going round, for the park did not open till evening, but Gotsen's head was spinning. He had never, in eight years of marriage, indulged in such dalliance, but Miss Blue was too much for him. "How do you do, Molly Blue," he sang to himself, "please may I go for a walk with you?"

Besides, his wife had left him, gone to visit her parents again. These visits loomed on his horizon from time to time like ominous storm clouds, but he was too liberal to forbid them—not that one could forbid a storm cloud—and too indifferent to go with her—not that she invited him. So while she had spent the morning packing her suitcase and preparing concoctions of wheat germ and brewer's yeast for the trip, he had sat at the piano in his underwear singing snatches of Brahms's *Neue Liebeslieder* and improvising variations on "How do you do, Molly Blue." He had said nothing to his wife about his birthday, and she had not mentioned it either.

"When you were little, Mr. Gotsen," Miss Blue was saying—they had been dis-

cussing their respective childhoods—"did you ever sit on one of these benches, or did you always ride on a horse?"

"I always rode on a horse. The benches are for grown-ups, big people." He waited for her to draw him out, but she said nothing and they sipped their champagne in silence. Gotsen resolved that at the count of ten he would get up and sit down next to her. "One . . . , two . . . , three . . . ," he counted silently, "four . . . , five . . . , six . . . ." This was how he managed to get out of bed on cold winter mornings. "Seven . . . , eight . . . , nine . . . , ten . . . ." He leaned forward slowly, his heart pounding. A fly that had been buzzing noisily lit on the edge of his cup. He brushed it off with his left hand, expanded his chest, and, leaning back, drank off the rest of his champagne.

Molly's green eyes were smiling merrily. Gotsen felt he was being challenged and paused to regroup his forces.

"Wouldn't you like to be," he said, after a time, speaking slowly and deliberately, "a minor character in a Russian novel?"

"I can't say I've given it much thought," she said, laughing in surprise. "Why not a major one?"

"Because you'd have too many problems." He crushed his paper cup. "But if you were just on the fringe, you could be really wild, mad. You could do all sorts of crazy things; you wouldn't have any restraints. You wouldn't have to worry about how much things cost, or about consequences."

"I thought happiness consisted of the soul acting in accordance with virtue," she said, still smiling.

Gotsen knew she was twitting him and considered it unfair. "That's all nonsense, of course."

"Well then," she said, "tell me what you would do and I will be the judge."

"First off," he began, his voice betraying a certain amount of excitement, "I should get hold of a big farm wagon and load it up with champagne and bowls of caviar and big easy chairs and a piano, and then I should invite a few close friends, and we'd get horses to pull us and naked girls in long boots to serve the champagne and some Jewish musicians to run alongside, and we would drive all over town drinking and singing."

"Wonderful. And what will you say to the police?"

"That's the trouble, you see. And who's going to pay for the champagne and caviar? But if we were in a Russian novel it wouldn't matter; we could get trained bears to take care of the police."

Gotsen led a rich fantasy life and welcomed this opportunity to share it. But as he went on enumerating his various projects—each one more extravagant and incredible than the last—he suddenly realized that it was within his power to enact the most insistent fantasy of all, and this was frightening. He told himself that this too was a fantasy, but with every laugh, every smile, every gesture, she seemed to say, "No, Mr. Gotsen, this is no fantasy, this is real life."

"We'd better go," he said.

Gotsen drove home, crunched in the driver's seat of Miss Blue's old Volkswagen, in a state of suspense. He felt that something had been settled, but was

not sure what. Having stopped the car under the *porte-cochère*, he followed Molly into the house, which was large and Victorian and cool; the shutters had been drawn. She curled up on a large Chesterfield sofa and waited. The sofa, thought Gotsen, like everything else in the old house, was elegant, but faded. "Faded elegance," he had said to his friends, and everyone had been glad it was faded, for otherwise it would have been pretentious and inhibiting. Instead it stimulated the imagination so that, in the first years of marriage, he and his wife had often fancied themselves impoverished Russian aristocrats, living in exile, and called each other Alexey and Katya. They had eaten lumpfish caviar and drunk cheap white wine under the dining room laquear, and they had served tea in an upstairs bedroom which boasted a large Venetian mirror and deep red lacquered wallpaper, brought from Paris over half a century ago. And, as they had once fondly calculated, their child, Anna—dead now—had been conceived in a hilarious bout of drunken love-making on the very sofa on which Molly was now curled.

She stood up. Alarmed at the thought that she might leave, Gotsen waved his hand in front of his face, as if trying to brush away a cloud of gnats. "Don't go," he said, and she didn't. He led her upstairs to the bedroom with the red lacquered wallpaper.

Before he had even kicked off his shoes she was standing, her tiny skirt and panties at her feet, completely naked before the Venetian mirror. This unnerved him. "Why," he said to himself, "didn't she let me undress her slowly? And look at that hair; good God!" He was horrified at the long swath of wild unruly hair that leaped out from between her legs and reached almost to her navel. His own wife had a nice neat triangular patch of hair. This was monstrous, unthinkable. The merry-go-round inside him ground to a halt. It was time to get off. Flushed and confused, he finished undressing and curled up instinctively on the bed. She lay down behind him and kissed the back of his neck.

In the security of his Russian dreams Gotsen had, of course, seduced countless princesses and countesses, *femmes de société* and chambermaids. No one had been immune to his charms. Moreover, it had never occurred to him to be afraid. But now he was afraid, and there was nothing to be done for it except to get dressed again.

He sat on the edge of the bed in painful silence while she adjusted her clothes in front of the mirror. "The true philosopher doesn't give in to 'fleshly lusts,'" she said, quoting somebody's translation of Plato and putting her hands on his shoulders. "And what does Aristotle say about the reason governing the passions . . . ?"

Gotsen looked up into her merry green eyes and couldn't repress a smile, though he thought she was being unfair again.

"Be a good philosopher for just a little while, Mr. Gotsen." She kissed him. "I'll come back tonight."

"You may call me Alex," he said.

She came back that night. At first Gotsen's self-conscious embarrassment was

so overwhelming it nearly choked him. His fragile little ego, his very soul, was in the playful hands of his graduate assistant, a laughter-loving girl ten years his junior. What if she were to drop it, or toss it aside? But she did neither. She kissed his eyes and rubbed his back and read to him from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and made him laugh in spite of himself. In return for this he loved her to distraction. And, of course, one thing led to another.

In the days that followed he was absolutely mad, wild with happiness, delirious, eager to plunge into the most desperate sensuality. They tried whipping each other in the manner of Catherine the Great, but collapsed in laughter because it hurt too much. They licked their wounds in front of the Venetian mirror, like cows with newborn calves. She rode on his back, as Alexander's mistress is said to have ridden on Aristotle. They spent an entire afternoon in the bathtub, and then went for three days without washing, smelling each other like dogs and making love in the attic, which was like a giant oven. They greased each other from head to toe with petroleum jelly and wrestled on plastic sheets. No fantasy was too bizarre, and neither could embarrass the other. "Alex," she would say whenever he tried to be serious, "do you fart in bed and then cover your head?" And it was better not to be serious. They never once spoke of the future, of Mrs. Gotsen's imminent return.

When Mrs. Gotsen did return one morning—rather unexpectedly—she found her husband sitting at the kitchen table while his graduate assistant washed up the breakfast dishes. "She came to help clean up the house," Gotsen explained. His wife said nothing.

The next day she came to his office. He had been contemplating an advance copy of his book, *The Cosmological Fragments of Philolaus and Archytas*, and did not want to be disturbed; but there she was. He could see she had been crying.

"Alex?"

"Yes?"

"There's something we'd better talk about. Alex, you know I was too young to get married."

"I thought we'd been through that."

"Alex, I've seen Peter again. I saw him last time too, and the time before, and we tried to work things out, but we couldn't. I love him, Alex. When we're together we're just so happy. I don't want to hurt you, Alex, but we're so happy. Nothing else matters. Nothing can change it." She was crying.

In the pit of his stomach Gotsen felt the whole world turn. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. You know how my mother didn't like him, Alex. You know that, Alex. Otherwise I would have married him. You know that. I could kill my mother. Why did she do that? It was wrong. We were so happy. We just walked around holding hands and feeling sorry for everybody we saw because they couldn't be so happy. No one could be so happy."

They sat for a while in silence. The yellow-gold light of the afternoon sun

seemed out of place in the air-conditioned office, where it lent a peculiar intensity to the commonplace furnishings.

"You'd better leave me alone," he said. "I'll come home after a bit."

Gotsen sat alone in his office for the rest of the afternoon, holding in his hands *The Cosmological Fragments of Philolaus and Archytas*. Its concrete existence seemed to him more mysterious than the cryptic remarks of Archytas on the *gnomon*, more exciting than the fact that he had demonstrated, once and for all, the genuineness of the fragments of Philolaus. He admired the formal elegance of the Baskerville type, carefully chosen to set off the daring speculations of the Greek cosmographers. He held it to his nose and inhaled the sharp bouquet of pulp and fresh ink.

The shops were closed when he walked home, but the windows were full of fashionably dressed manikins, acting out the good life in little *kosmoi* of their own. Gotsen looked at them standing idly by toasters, waffle irons, de-humidifiers, king- and queen-size beds. He remembered a story about a store that had everything in the world and you got to pick out any one thing you wanted; the only catch was that you weren't supposed to sell it afterwards. He moved on reluctantly. The manikins never made toast in the toasters or waffles in the waffle irons, and they didn't make love in the king- and queen-size beds, and they didn't mind when the window dressers took them apart and put them in storage.

The sight of his big, old, elegant, faded house gave him a queer feeling. Instead of going inside he went round to the back yard, the "back garden" he called it, where he had labeled all the trees and shrubs, as if by memorizing their Latin names he could somehow participate in their mysterious life. A massive oak, *Quercus robur*, protected the house from the afternoon sun, and an eight-foot hedge, *Ligustrum vulgare*, prevented the neighbors from peering in. At the back of the yard a young sapling, unlabeled, threatened the integrity of the hedge. Gotsen tugged at it and twisted it till his hands were sore, but it was stubborn and wouldn't come out. He turned to go to the back porch for a hatchet.

There was a light in the kitchen window and he could see, projected against the dark screen, the shadow of his wife, Catherine. He waved his hand in front of his face, brushing aside a mosquito. She had been the Katya of his Russian dreams, mother of his only child. They had shared good times and bad, and now they were discrete, alone. He moved on toward the porch. There was Molly, of course; perhaps he could marry her. He smiled at the thought. She too had been one of his Russian dreams, but now he was awake. Now he could say only that his dreams had stretched his heart a little, enlarged it, to endure this waking. He fetched the hatchet from the porch and felled the sapling with three clean strokes.