

EXTERIOR – DAY
by George Malko

"This was just before we met." The small dining table was covered with piles of papers and faded manila folders clumsily stacked. Six years after her husband's death Johnny Luddin's mother finally went down to the basement and had the super bring up several boxes of old papers. She had been going through them for several days now, examining some, a few of them over and over, others put aside almost brusquely, with barely a glance. Or so it seemed to Johnny. What she wanted him to see was a black & white photograph, ornately crenelated around the edges; it was not a place, it was a picture of a group of men.

It took Johnny several moments to recognize his father among them. In the lower left corner of the photograph someone had diagonally written, "*Mer Noire, 1934*," in tiny, precise letters. It was Pyotr Mikhailovitch's handwriting and covered a patch of bare ground faded by time to look even paler. The men in the picture had been arranged on the few steps and veranda of an old house made of rough-hewn timbers. The photographer had backed up far enough to make sure everyone would be included. There was a small open area fanning out in front of all of them; it looked like a modest little apron. "Who are these people?" Johnny asked. "What was Papa doing with them?"

"A script," his mother said. "A revolutionary scenario. They were all writing it together."

Johnny laughed, then scrutinized the picture more intently. "That's crazy. All of them writing together? Why? Papa would never do that."

"He did it for the food," his mother said. "They were able to make it go on for months. In the mornings they swam."

There were other photographs in the thick brown folder, some Johnny recognized as having seen or been shown when he was younger. But most were unknown to him, curiosities, preserved faces his mother herself had difficulty identifying or even placing geographically. A few were quite remarkable. Most of them were mounted on stiff cardboard to create frames and borders. One such border was imprinted, in French.

"Photogr. des Theatres Imperiaux"

G. A. Fischer

Sankt Petersbourg

"I think this was when your father was first invited to study in the theater school," Johnny's mother said. "He was the youngest to have a serious audition. He was eight years old." The boy in the handsome school uniform solemnly staring out at Johnny did not look like anyone he knew, or had ever known.

There was another photograph, even more singular. It was of Pyotr Mikhailovitch in his teens. He still wore a school uniform, but the shiny buttons were gone. The tunic no longer had a handsome high collar and the sleeves were cuffless. The date on the picture was 1925. "I do not know where this is," Johnny's mother said.

In the photograph, Johnny's father sat on a wooden bench with his mother, his father, and another man of about the same age who resembled Johnny's grandfather. Johnny guessed it was an uncle. The adults sat on one part of the bench, aware of the camera, their looks in its direction clearly acknowledging its presence though their expressions were ill at ease, with something very polite, almost tolerant. They were letting the picture be taken. Johnny's father sat towards the other end of the bench. It was out-of-doors, a country setting, the weathered wooden wall of a hut or fence behind the group. Pyotr Mikhailovitch held a book, elbows propped on knees, and gave the book his full attention. He was partly turned

away from the others. In his threadbare outfit, his eyes fixed on the pages he held, Johnny sensed his father's resentment. Pyotr Mikhailovitch, he understood, clearly wished to be elsewhere. Studying the face more closely, Johnny saw that his father was, at the age of sixteen, trying to grow a beard.

Johnny looked again at the Black Sea photograph taken in 1934 and saw that his father was beardless and much more cheerful even though almost everyone else in the picture seemed either sullen or solemn. Pyotr Mikhailovitch's inscription, though in French, didn't lighten the mood. "The Black Sea," Johnny's mother said over his shoulder. "Your father said parts of old Hollywood reminded him of Sochi."

"How?"

"Palm trees?" she suggested and then frowned. "Some of the architecture was ornate." She nodded to herself and the frown disappeared. "Yes, he said it was old and ornate." She spotted a face in the photograph and lightly rested the tip of her index finger on it. "This is ... yes, Lev Sovalin. He was your father's closest friend."

Surprised, Johnny peered more closely at the barely distinct countenance visible between the shoulders of others. "I never heard of him."

"Your father seldom mentioned his name. I think something happened to him." Johnny's mother cleared her throat, almost politely. Johnny understood. He did not have to ask what that "something" might have been. As ignorant as he was of the fate some had suffered, her words carried the same oblique pronouncement of doom he had heard before, about others. "Your father once told me Lev had encouraged him to leave."

"Maybe he helped him escape," Johnny said, and felt his breath suddenly quicken. Suddenly, he was close to a clue, a real clue.

"Your father did not have to make any escape," his mother replied, and then added the words Johnny had been hearing all his life: "He just left." It was so pointedly empty an explanation, it left Johnny with nothing to grasp, to force into

himself and make the vagueness of it all bearable. Meanwhile the question itself remained, became quickly fixed; with time, it became the central mystery of Johnny's life.

"But why, Mama?" Johnny found himself asking yet again. "He was known in Russia, his work was being recognized. Why would he walk away from doing what he loved?"

"Well," Johnny's mother began, her tone reasoned, as if calmly laying out the key points of a solid dissertation, "you know the restrictions which existed under the Soviets. And here—" she indicated the Black Sea photograph "—they went as much for their *art* as to be fed. No, with his ambitions, it would not have been impossible for him to make such a decision."

"But he loved Russia—he dreamed in Russian, thought in Russian." Johnny hesitated, wanting so desperately to know. "Mama," he pressed, "Papa prayed in Russian."

"Yes," his mother said quietly, nodding her head. "I will tell you what I think, what I have always believed. He never said this, but I think he always thought it would be temporary. A look at life in the West. Some work. His name achieving some recognition. And then home."

"Would you have gone with him?"

Johnny's mother nodded again, without any hesitation. "Of course. Wherever he went." She looked at her son and the faint traces of a smile touched her eyes and mouth. The smile faded and she gave a small shake of her head, not of dismissal but regret. "I have not thought of these things for a long time. I have never liked trying to speak of them." She scanned the papers and folders and photographs spread out on the dining table. "It is looking through this. I thought it would be easier." She turned without looking at her son and started for the door. "You must excuse me."

Johnny looked back at the group photograph, seeking some clue to their state of

mind, their... what? Maybe they looked the way they did because some Moscow big shot wanted a photograph to show the Minister of Culture; maybe this was the way one was *supposed* to look when pretending collectively to produce a script. Maybe his mother was right. They were just hungry. He looked back at the papers and folders and manila envelopes strewn about on the table.

A pale blue folder caught his eye because it had the name of a movie studio embossed in the lower right-hand corner. Johnny opened it and found a prim sheet of vellum quality personal stationery, "**Harry Remsher, Artists' Representative**," in raised faded gold letters across the top, an address on Wilshire Boulevard below it. The typed letter was dated May 6, 1942. "Dear Pete:" it began, "They read it, for what that's worth, and the answer is 'No.'" It was from Pyotr Mikhailovitch's agent during the two fruitless years the family had lived in Hollywood; he was the one who had persuaded Johnny's father to change his name from *Ludinev* to Luddin. Peter Luddin. He thought it would help him get work. "They're all fools," the letter went on, "and of course I told them they are. They agreed you're the kind of class guy they should be working with, but on this particular movie they obviously are thinking about something else. God only knows what. Pete, you're brilliant, and about this you're probably right in some esthetic corner of your soul. But for our sake, yours and mine, don't embellish. Ever. Rewrite, but don't change. You know what I mean, so stop pulling *your* hair. I couldn't decide whether or not to share their comments with you and then figured what the hell, you're a pro, maybe it'll give you a slant on how to romance them next time. The point though is, don't ever take any of it personally.

"Warmest, (this was written in pen) H.R.

"P.S. For what it's worth, I loved it. I understood it, I liked the people you wanted me to like, I was with them. I think you should finish it.

"P.P.S. I don't quite know what your real point is, but I really loved it."

Under the agent's letter, Johnny found a smaller piece of paper engraved with

a single raised initial, "D". The note, written by hand, was brief, and harsh. *"You read this and sent it to me anyway? For Christ's sake, Harry, he moved it to some Russian city! What fucking good is that to me, please tell me? I am shooting up around Tahoe, it's going to look like Minnesota, and the Black Sea is full of foreigners. I was so stunned, I read the whole thing. I don't get it. What's it about? You promise me talent, I want talent. Talent, to me, is somebody who knows that a movie about two loveable lunks from Minnesota is not a movie about two intellectuals in Russia. I don't care about them and don't want to care about them. Screw the bastard who had to stay behind!"*

Under this, Johnny found another note, a long one in his father's hand, along with several carbon copy pages of a screenplay, withered and going brown. They were held together by a rusted paper clip. Johnny's heart began beating rapidly, the ancient carbons rustling like husks as he separated them with frightened fingers. "Have you seen this?" he called out to his mother.

The tone of his voice made her appear in the doorway and she saw the folder Johnny held. "What is it?" Johnny held it up, the letter from the agent on top. Her gaze went to it and she saw and recognized the name on the stationery. "Hollywood," she said, and Johnny saw her body stiffen. "I am not interested in what those people had to say to your father."

"But this is Papa's writing." Johnny showed her his father's note, trying to keep calm.

"No," his mother said firmly. "They wasted his time, they insulted him."

"So then you've seen this, you've read it."

"Not one word." For a moment Johnny thought this was just her old stubbornness, a glimpse of that personal but cold intractability she silently insisted was hers to invoke. But then he saw the angry set of her mouth, her lips compressed, something making them go rigid. Anger flared in her eyes as well, and

with it Johnny saw and began to understand the resentment; it was as if once, so long ago, she had said nothing when her husband had been flayed by the futility of trying to satisfy the unwritten rules of a business that had absolutely no interest in who he was, or what he had ever done. Hollywood had forced Pyotr Mikhailovitch to see that he lacked any significance. His widow was still furious with them both, the film community for doing it with such silky indifference, her beloved husband for allowing it to be done to him, even for one moment. When his mother turned and left again, Johnny said nothing.

His father's note, he immediately understood, had been intended as a memorandum to the producer, "D":

Most in the group you will meet are not bound to one another by any particular sentiment. They are not a "band of brothers." Simple good luck (and a bit of clever intriguing) has brought them to this oasis. Art doesn't unite them. It is ambition. So think of them (even the two who genuinely are friends) more as ... frolicking musketeers. Oleg has something of Athos, or Porthos (endearing flamboyance with a dark side, the young drinker already brooding). Misha is a convenient d'Artagnan; he is more d'Artagnan's first cousin, forever nameless. Let us remember, as we think of the film we wish SUMMER to be, that the musketeers never openly betrayed one another. Their fate--those truly close--was to break one another's hearts. I am very enthusiastic.

Beneath the memorandum, the first of the surviving screenplay pages was numbered "8". Johnny began to read.

EXTERIOR/SOCHI - DAY

We are in this legendary seaport and resort city on the shores of the Black Sea. The sun is bright and very warm. There are palm trees.

Men in open-necked white shirts and women in loose summer dresses promenade. Deserving workers of the State on holiday, they are clearly enjoying themselves.

OLEG

comes out of the dim doorway of a featureless office building. He wears his only

jacket over his wrinkled white shirt. Both jacket and shirt are drenched in sweat.

Oleg stops to take off the jacket, but first takes a crumpled piece of paper out of his jacket pocket--he has looked at it already, he knows what is written on it.

He slings the jacket over his shoulder and heads down the street. Near the corner a man has stopped to light a cigarette. Oleg stops before him and indicates he would like a light, too.

The man holds the burning match out. Oleg ignites the piece of paper, nods a thank you, and walks off, the paper burning up in his hand.

INTERIOR/BEDROOM - DAY

In the tiny room, a battered dresser with no bottom drawer stands between two cots.

Oleg has the top drawer open and rummages through it. He still wears his good pants but is shirtless, his undershirt gray with old and new sweat.

MISHA'S VOICE

My clean shirt, for your information, is hanging up to dry.

Oleg turns. Apprehension flickers for a moment in his eyes.

MISHA

leans against the doorframe, a comb in one hand, scissors in the other.

MISHA

Should I grow a beard again?

OLEG

Absolutely.

Misha crosses to toss comb and scissors into the still-open drawer, which he then closes.

MISHA

How did the "interview" go? What did they ask about? Let me guess: "Who is drinking too much?" "Who is talking too much?"

Johnny stopped reading. What he was holding had to be autobiographical—
Sochi, the two friends. So which one of them is my father? There were no physical
descriptions. Except for mention of a beard. Had his father ever worn one? Misha or

Oleg? The dialogue would have to do it.

MISHA

How did the "interview" go? What did they ask about? Let me guess: "Who is drinking too much?" "Who is talking too much?"

OLEG

"Who is eating too much?"

MISHA

(delighted)
Really?

OLEG

"Is anyone religious?"

MISHA

I hope you told them I pray regularly. Daily. Twice. Morning and evening.

OLEG

They would not believe me.

MISHA

No interest in our work?

OLEG

"Who is doing little or no work?"

MISHA

(rewarded)
Ahh ...

OLEG

"Who is doing too much?"

MISHA

Idiots. I thought it was our French visitors that were making them nervous.

OLEG

(a tiny hesitation)
Well, yes ... they want us to keep an eye on them.

MISHA

Did you tell them we are, you and I in particular? At least on Juliette.

OLEG

I do not think that is what they had in mind.

MISHA

What they have in mind is a mystery, my dear friend.

He goes over to perch on the window sill and looks out.

OLEG

(almost a warning—)

Misha ...

But his friend has seen something.

MISHA

She is swimming nude again.

(turns)

I hope you did not tell them she does that often.

OLEG

They already knew.

Misha collapses with laughter. After a moment, he partially recovers.

MISHA

(still grinning)

So, what do you think they really wanted?

He looks questioningly at his friend.

Johnny stopped and reread the last few speeches. Misha was his father. Whether there had ever been a French woman in his life was immaterial. The rhetoric, the sense of almost tender contempt, the implicit irony. There was no question about it. Pyotr Mikhailovitch was Misha.

EXTERIOR/THE MAIN CABIN - EVENING

Young people make their way along the birch-lined path.

On the broad cabin veranda some sit, handing around a bottle of wine. Oleg and Misha are to one side, JULIETTE standing on the ground before them.

JULIETTE

(French accent)

I want to wear something special.

She touches Misha's hand and smiles warmly at him before hurrying off. Misha sighs happily.

OLEG

Misha ... be careful.

MISHA

They leave tomorrow. Tonight I intend to be happy.

OLEG

You are always happy.

He rises and crosses to secure one of the bottles--not wine, vodka. He returns, swigging deeply, and offers the bottle to Misha, who gives a shake of his head.

MISHA

Not tonight. I do not need it.

OLEG

I do.

Johnny's father always had something to offer guests, usually a bottle of vodka waiting in the freezer, flavored with translucent peels of lemon or orange which Pyotr Mikhailovitch methodically removed from the fruit with a very sharp knife and then slipped into the neck of the bottle. He sometimes let Johnny put in a peel. Together they would watch it glide down and settle into the clear liquid. Pyotr Mikhailovitch himself seldom drank, except for an occasional glass of wine.

MISHA

(quietly)

Oleg ... tomorrow they are gone! Who here cares? Who is watching? You, maybe. And you are too busy to watch.

OLEG

Misha—

MISHA

Hear me out, dear friend. All of us have been asked to watch this or that. We nod, and do nothing.

OLEG

It is not just the French they want me to watch.

He takes another swallow. This time Misha watches, sensing something.

Who? MISHA

OLEG
They made it very objective. No one person singled out.

At random ... MISHA

OLEG
I stuck my hand into a bowl and pulled out a name.

One of us? MISHA

He waits until Oleg has to nod.

MISHA (CONTD)
What if you had chosen your own?

OLEG
*They told me mine was the only one left out.
(clearly distressed)
What a stupid system ...*

He takes another drink.

So? MISHA

OLEG
Misha, for God's sake! Don't you understand?

MISHA
(a quizzical pause)
Me?

He begins to laugh.

MISHA (CONTD)
How sublime! You may as well have chosen yourself.

HOLD ON his face as he roars with laughter.

INTERIOR/THE MAIN CABIN - NIGHT

Smoky, crowded, people at several tables eating noisily.

AT ONE TABLE

Oleg sits catty-corner with Misha, Juliette to Misha's left. Oleg is leaning over, voice low but intense, talking to Misha, hand clutching a full vodka glass, his face red.

OLEG

All they suggested was you might have "ambitions."

MISHA

I assume you laughed.

OLEG

*I said your ambitions are artistic, creative.
(pauses, clearly uncertain)
—Like mine.*

MISHA

*(grown thoughtful)
They make you the authority on me.*

Oleg suddenly grabs Misha's hand, spilling vodka.

OLEG

You watch, you will be asked about somebody, too.

MISHA

It should be you. Forget the bowl. You watch me, I watch you. It would make things so simple.

OLEG

I am not "watching" you!

The words hang in the silence between them.

EXTERIOR/NEAR THE SMALLER CABINS - NIGHT

A full moon hangs over the still waters.

MISHA

fills a wooden bucket at the shore and heads back towards

THE SMALL SAUNA

in a grove of birch trees, smoke curling from its chimney.

INTERIOR/THE SAUNA - NIGHT

Oleg sits on one of the top benches, stripped to the waist, weakly slapping at himself

with a birch branch.

Misha comes in, pulls off his own shirt, and throws water on

HOT ROCKS

which send up clouds of dense steam.

Oleg shrinks into himself with discomfort, muzzily shaking his head.

OLEG
Ayii — it's scalding!

He looks around, as if recognizing his surroundings.

OLEG (CONTD)
Where are the girls?

MISHA
Asleep hours ago.

OLEG
(rising unsteadily)
Me, too ...

Misha's hand slows him.

MISHA
Oleg, are you going to watch me tomorrow?

OLEG
It was out of a bowl! You will see. Next week you will have your own bowl.

MISHA
(shakes his head)
No. This one was for you.
(sees Oleg's confusion)
They know we are friends. Close friends.

OLEG
(reaffirming it)
The closest. Brothers, almost.

MISHA
They want that. You, to watch me.

OLEG
It could have been ... anyone!

MISHA

No. Only me.

OLEG

—The bowl ...

MISHA

All mine. The only name in it.

OLEG

(suddenly devastated)

No—!

And knows it is true, has to be true.

MISHA

(after a moment)

Did they threaten you? Tell me, what if you have nothing to report about me? Absolutely nothing.

OLEG

(sad cunning)

They would not believe me.

MISHA

And—a for instance—if I do disappear...

OLEG

They will be furious.

Misha gets up and pours more water onto the rocks. They steam heavily, obscuring the small room.

MISHA

It will satisfy them, though. Confirm their suspicions.

OLEG

They would kill me.

Misha comes over and sits down next to his friend.

MISHA

I do not think so. Not if you rush to them shouting, "You were right! You were so right!"

There is a silence, and then Oleg lifts his head to stare through the steam at his friend.

OLEG

My God ... Misha ... Are you thinking of trying to go away?

MISHA

The thought had never entered my mind.

Oleg sighs with obvious relief, and then crosses himself. His eyes close. He sits back. He hears more water splash onto the hot rocks. Steam obscures him momentarily.

He reappears, his face wet with steam and perspiration. He wipes it. His eyes open.

OLEG

We will just have to be careful. Very, very careful.

There is no answer.

OLEG (CONTD)

Yes, Misha?

He looks around.

THE STEAM

in the small room is dense. It is not settling.

Oleg rises, leaning on a wall to balance himself.

OLEG (CONTD)

Misha—?

From his face, a look of alarm slowly appearing on it, we —

DISSOLVE TO:

EXTERIOR/A CRUISE SHIP - DAY

The ship sails along the coastline of the Black Sea.

EXTERIOR/ON DECK - DAY

Juliette stands at the rail, staring across the water. Something makes her turn.

MISHA

stands nearby, looking at her.

JULIETTE

(French accent)

You came!

She is immediately at his side, clutching his arm to gaze at him adoringly.

JULIETTE (CONTD)

How long can you stay with us?

Misha turns and looks at the distant shore.

MISHA

Ask me tomorrow.

JULIETTE

Tomorrow we will be in Istanbul.

MISHA

After I take you to lunch in Istanbul. Ask me then.

JULIETTE

What shall we do now?

MISHA

Hide ...

There the pages ended.

Johnny reread them slowly, his hands trembling as he tried to absorb the stunning truth he held. He took the photograph and went over to the window, where the light was better, and found Sovalin's face. It seemed more discernible now. Very ordinary, there was nothing unusual about it. It was just a face, seen between two other heads. One of Sovalin's shoulders was visible, someone's hand on it. Johnny followed the dim shadowy form of the hand and arm. It was his father's, resting on his best friend's shoulder.