

THE ROAD TO DONETSK

A novel by

Diane Chandler

“A touching love story that illuminates the aid business. Compelling and enjoyable.”
Clare Short (former Secretary of State for International Development)



blackbird

For Nick

“I might remind readers why, with all its faults, this is a lucky place to be living in.”
Andrew Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain*

Prologue – April 2014

Donetsk was on the news again today. It's become headline material, even out here; the hostages, the burning buildings, the thugs – and those Russian tanks gathering in ever greater clusters along the border. Afterwards, I managed finally to get through to Svetlana. She says it's tense in the village, that some of the youths have left to join the pro-Russian activists. Her relief that her son is too young was palpable down the phone line, and my concern for her rebounded at me as a long-distance echo, "If you need to get out, then come here."

Those youths from the village, now hurtling through the streets of the city, launching their petrol bombs, they were barely born back then. I can still see their hot little faces, just awakened from their naps, as they ducked around our legs in the wooden hall which served as the kindergarten – along with its many other communal roles. I see them hoisted onto the shoulders of the men returning from the mine, the pinpricks of coal dust emblazoned in their foreheads. It will be those children who are fighting in Donetsk now. But then, of course, most of them followed their fathers down that mine, with its rickety ceiling props and high methane levels, so what do you expect? The country has barely changed since it won its independence over two decades ago. The inertia of Ukraine, I used to call it, and people would nod vigorously – yes that's just the word. Inertia.

Back then though, there was so much hope, so much commotion. We Westerners were crawling over Ukraine, passing on know-how in the ways of democracy and the free market, helping this bold new nation through its transition from communism. But did we ever really know where that transition was to wind up? Not where it is today. Ukraine means 'borderland' in old East Slavic and perhaps Russia was never really going to let go, perhaps it allowed Ukraine to fray at its borders, scrunching it back in when the threat of union with Europe seemed like it might actually happen.

At least the winter is over. The TV pictures show a landscape that is still barren, but I know that it will be strewn with sunflowers before this conflict reaches its zenith. There are blue skies and sunshine, a warmth in the air, and the soldiers at the checkpoints can feel it on their backs, even if the inevitable still awaits them. In the village, come April, spring was always quick to arrive and life would begin again; the chatter at the well, the goats straining on their chains, the whitewashing of the squat houses with their roofs of corrugated iron, the storks taking flight from an old chimney top.

The TV cameras homed in on the airport, on the offices of the regional government – I even caught a glimpse of that hotel. How can there be conflict in a city I know so well? Where all the buildings are so familiar – so benign? I can feel myself there, as if it was all just yesterday. What is going to happen to all those people I knew? I picture their faces, I see them laughing, dancing at a party deep in the forest, or contemplative, stirring sugar into strong black tea, and the memories overwhelm me. The past twenty years fall away, and I remember so vividly that first time I went to Donetsk – with Dan.

1

“You wanna come to Donetsk with me?”

I was sitting at my desk awash with documents when Dan phoned. We’d met the day before at the launch of my programme.

“Donetsk?”

“It’s where the coal mines are. Thought you’d know that, Vanessa?”

What if I’d said no? What if I had never gone with him that day? But I was still so young and that provocation in itself was sufficient, plus the fact that this was of course a prize of an invitation so I paused for barely a moment.

“Of course,” I said, “down in the east. When were you thinking of going?”

“Flight’s in two hours.”

“This morning?”

“Yep. You got your passport?”

“Yes, but we’re not leaving the country, are we?”

“No, but Ukraine’s still communist in all but name and there’ll be checks.”

“OK,” I said.

“I’ll pick you up in thirty.” And he hung up.

I flustered about the office, checking my handbag for my passport, which had not left my side since my arrival in Kiev a few weeks before, and stuffing background papers in my briefcase. I have to smile when I look back on those eager days – I even forgot to pack my camera. From behind her computer, Irina threw me sullen glances, while Sasha sent faxes with his back square on to me; they must both have found this impromptu daytrip as bizarre as it was.

When he pitched up with his driver, Dan was slouched on the banquette seat, his arm loosely thrown about its back. He wore chinos and a crimson polo shirt, while his cream jacket was bunched up on the back window, its stripy lining spilling like the silk of a hot air balloon. I climbed in beside him, wishing I’d worn a longer dress that day and as we set off for the airport he turned to me with his languid smile.

“Settling in OK?”

“Yes thanks, making good headway with the programme.”

“Well, you made an impressive start yesterday.”

“Thanks.” I felt myself flush.

He contemplated me for a few moments. “You’ve just got to know that they’ll play you, these people, they’ll tell you what they think you want to hear. But can you second-guess them? That’s the real skill to this game, it can get tricky.”

I laughed, only vaguely clear. “Thanks for the tip. I’ll have the chance to suss them out when we get down to the detail at our workshop next week.” I paused but he said nothing, so I added, “I really want to get it right.”

“Sure you do.”

As he smiled at me, I took the chance to observe him. He must have been in his late thirties – a good ten years older than me anyway – his cheeks held the crease that comes with age, a baggy line drawn out from the nose down to the corner of the mouth, only in Dan’s case it was as marked as Yogi Bear’s. His hair was coal black and dishevelled – messy even – and his eyes, the colour of walnuts, were gentle, as when we’d met. He

reached behind him for a paper bag and offered it to me. Inside were two doughnuts.

“Thanks.” I took one and held it for a moment as he bit into his.

“You get a place yet?” He sucked sugar from his fingers as he spoke.

“No, still at the hotel.” I took a bite of my own and gulped it back. “Once we’ve finished the programme design, I’ll head back to the UK for a month or so while we put the contract out to tender, then I’ll find a flat in the autumn.”

“Ah.” He scrutinised the last of his doughnut. “Yours have any jam in it?”

“Little bit.” I flipped my hand to show him the red ooze.

He pushed his into his mouth. “Mine didn’t. But then life does that to you, don’t you find?”

I smiled while I watched the tip of his tongue working on the last grains of sugar at his lips, and then I turned to the view from my window, my thighs peeling like Sellotape as I shifted position on the vinyl seat. Get a grip Vanessa, you’re a professional, I told myself, still callow enough to enjoy the weight of that word when applied to myself. I could see why so many people had told me about Dan, but I was not about to be waylaid by some guy, however high up the ranks he was. I was in Ukraine on a mission – well I was there to change the world, wasn’t I? We travelled on in silence until we entered the birch forest which surrounded Borispol airport.

“What projects do you run in Donetsk?” I asked eventually.

“IFI mainly.” He turned and saw my frown. “Inward foreign investment.”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“Most of it from the States – plenty of rich pickings down there. We’re setting up an IFI department for the Governor, which is the purpose of our meeting today.”

“Is there scope for the Levshenko Programme down there?”

He snorted. “There’s scope for everything down there, Vanessa.”

The plane to Donetsk was a squat propeller affair, which looked like some cartoon character from a kids TV programme as if it should have a face and a cheeky smile. We were last on, having enjoyed the VIP lounge, which consisted of a couple of benches in a side room and a glass of iced water. We climbed the steps which ran up beside the tail of the plane and were making our way in through the hold when I pulled up short at the scene before me. Beside the heaps of cases, there were several people standing around, chatting and smoking. A row of worn canvas loops hung down from the ceiling, and I realised that these passengers were going to be strap-hanging during the flight. Incredulous, I turned back to Dan, who winked at me.

“Different strokes, Vanessa.”

He took a window seat at the front of the plane, placing his briefcase in the saggy overhead netting which served as baggage compartments, while I placed my own case by my feet, intending to brief myself on Donetsk during the flight.

“So what’s the population?” I asked him as I fastened the tatty seatbelt.

“About a million,” he said, lengthening his own; there was a hint of a paunch.

“And how many coal mines?”

“Well over two hundred.” He glanced at me. “Does that trump the UK?”

I turned down the corners of my mouth in what I imagined could pass for a sage look and nodded slowly. “Pretty much the same, before the cull.”

He raised his eyebrows at that, as I remember, and it did feel good to have filled a gap in his knowledge. He went on.

“But they’re gonna have to close half of them. That’s a hundred thousand men, in terms you or I care about.”

I tutted gravely. “How are we going to find jobs for all of them?”

“Aw, may as well skip a generation, focus on the youth.” He yawned as he spoke.

“Surely not?”

I frowned sharply at him, but Dan was reaching across me for a glass of red wine from a tray offered by the stewardess. I declined the drink, my expression overly cross as I grappled with his cynical reaction. My empathy for the unfortunates of this world broiled inside me; I wasn't going to let him off there.

“You can't just give up on them,” I insisted, as he put his nose to the glass and breathed in. “In the UK, we got thousands of miners back into work. Loads of them started their own business too, guys with a passion, a hobby maybe, which they managed to make a living out of when the pit closed.”

Dan took a lingering sip of his wine. To anyone else, this message may have been clear – leave the technical stuff till we get to our meeting – but not me, I persisted.

“There was one miner I knew who just lived for his roses, spent all his time in the garden, deadheading and stuff. Now *he* set himself up in horticulture – and he made good money from it too. Another guy I knew started recycling old conveyor belts from the mines, making new things with them...” I scabbled through my mind to remember what things. “Tool bags, for example.”

When I'd finished I waited until Dan finally turned to me. “Roses and tool bags, eh?”

His mockery smarted, and at first his eyes held only amusement, but then they softened, until finally he seemed quite unguarded.

“You have to start somewhere, don't you?” I muttered.

He continued to watch me until finally he said, “I guess you do.”

It was me who broke the moment, reaching forward to unclip my briefcase, while Dan closed his eyes and settled back in his seat, the wine glass held balanced at a loose angle on his thigh. He remained silent until take-off and once we were airborne it was impossible to talk over the din of the propellers anyway, so I spent the flight flicking through my documents, highlighting in yellow as I went. Of course, I was trying to impress Dan, but he was oblivious to me, making hefty inroads into a John Grisham paperback. As would I these days, of course – I never used to retain the facts in those background documents anyway.

When we came into land after an hour or so, I found myself gripping the armrests. I'd not flown much before and had no particular fear back then, but as we approached the runway the plane seemed to be tilting over. Across the aisle, I could see the tarmac skidding outside, but a glance at the window beside Dan brought only glimpses of sky, and I still swear today that the plane landed on one wheel first, tipping us sideways at a terrifying angle. I braced myself, eyes screwed shut against the squeal of tyres.

“It's OK,” I heard Dan say gently, “we're not gonna die today.” I felt his hand on my forearm, the warmth and weight of it both calming and rousing.

Opening my eyes with a smile of thanks for him, I caught a movement in the seat behind and I swung round to see that a woman had stood up and was reaching for her carrier bags in the baggage nets.

“Saditsya!” Sit down!

Even I understood the command of the stewardess as the woman snapped back and made a great show of smoothing her skirt before sitting down again, while Dan and I shared a knowing smile. But then, once the plane had come to a standstill, I snapped off my own seatbelt and I too jumped up from my seat.

“Saditsya!”

This time the passengers joined in with the stewardess and Dan grinned at me. “Got to wait for the pilot to get off.”

A good five minutes then passed before finally a stout man, eyes bleary, skin flushed, ducked through the door of the cockpit and walked the short length of the aisle to thunderous applause, both from the cabin and from the baggage hold.

A black Volga from the regional government met us and swept us into the city of Donetsk. We passed swathes of factories spewing toxic clouds into the cobalt sky, which soon lost its battle to camouflage them and became engulfed by billows of grey. When we crossed the vast river, my eye was drawn to the rows of flower tubs which lined the bridge, each of them packed with roses, the vibrant pinks and oranges of the blousy, old-fashioned heads softening the view across the water to the Soviet monoliths beyond. And finally, we drew up at that colossal building in the main square which housed the regional government.

The Governor of Donetsk, Vladimir Zukov, was a short barrel of a creature who bustled out of his office and bore down on Dan. As they shook hands, the man clasped Dan's arm, the way American statesman do on TV, then he pushed him through the door and swung his arm around my waist to propel me in too. I tried to ignore the squeeze he gave me on the way.

Inside his office, a wall of windows had been thrown open to the stunning July day and a breeze rifled the heaps of papers on his desk. Behind that hung an oversized framed photo of Leonid Kuchma, the new President of Ukraine who had been elected just days before, his eyes gleaming somewhere in the distance, seeking a glorious future – or perhaps a glorious past. Taking up the whole of another wall was a tapestry of the Donetsk coat of arms, the bottom section a swathe of coal-black, the top stitched into a striking royal blue. A fist, chunky and chiselled, held a hammer high up in that sky, beside a luminous gold star, and, as I gazed at the image, I was startled to find myself welling up. I blinked back the tears, staggered by the emotion it had stirred in me.

We took our seats around his French-polished meeting table and the Governor boomed at Dan in Russian, while the translator Dan had arranged for my benefit struggled to keep up. “Dan, you are my friend, my buddy, and you are good friend of Donetsk.”

“Good to be back here, Vladimir, good to be back.” Dan's voice was full of rich warmth. “And this is Vanessa Parker, from the Levshenko Programme.”

The Governor threw me a quick nod – I'd say he thought I was Dan's love interest – and with a flash of annoyance I did fleetingly wonder if there'd been others before, other women he'd whizzed down to Donetsk as some kind of trophy to ease his negotiations.

“Ah, such good times we had in Chicago, Dan...” the Governor cried, adding in English, “... in Vindy City.”

More grey suits joined the meeting and greeted Dan equally effusively, with again the briefest of glances my way. So I sat back, biding my time, and observed Dan in operation; the genial smiles, the locker-room bonding, as he talked about the need for tax breaks for American companies who might invest in Donetsk, as he won them around to his point of view. It didn't occur to me that Dan might also have been trying to impress me – such was the awe I felt for the deputy head of the USA's colossal aid programme for Ukraine. At that point, Dan was the epitome of strength for me, although it would only be a matter of hours before I was to witness his fallibility. Finally, he took the chance to introduce me properly and I sat forward, smiling at him and then at the Governor.

Vladimir Zukov cocked his head at me. “Aha, you are also here for official business?”

The translator captured his undertone perfectly with an intonation which infuriated me, and I launched into a defiant opening gambit about my own aid programme, about how I was in Ukraine to help create new jobs in the wake of communism. But as soon as he heard the size of the budget – which was a hefty sum for an aid programme back then – the Governor interrupted me.

“Three million pounds, you say? I hope we will see some of that money in Donetsk,

in our city of million roses.” He swept his hand towards the open windows. “We are most important city in Ukraine, we have educated people and coal mining, which is biggest industry in my country.” He paused, and then added, “Sadly many coal mines must now close.”

For a brief moment I sensed a connection, a chance to be taken seriously. I could feel the power of that tapestry on the wall beside me – the stark simplicity of a miner’s fist and the memories it evoked of those I had known – and I opened my mouth, to let him know of my passion to help, but the man slapped a palm on the table, and declared that the meeting would continue over lunch. The moment had passed. And then he contemplated me, raising an index finger as a teacher might to a four-year old. “After lunch, we will show you real coal mine.”

The other Ukrainian men chortled then, even Dan smiled, I noticed, which seemed to me a betrayal of our unspoken Western solidarity in that room, and I felt another spurt of fury. I raised my chin to the whole room.

“That would be great,” I cried, a little wildly then. “I’ve been down lots of coal mines, because I used to manage a programme for miners who lost their jobs in the UK.”

The ‘manage’ of course was stretching it a bit – I’d been an assistant – but the translation was met with a momentary silence, with the surprised glances I’d been wanting, and I sensed myself edging from bimbo to someone of potential value. And so I went on, my heart racing, committing myself further to this region in eastern Ukraine, without any go-ahead from my philanthropic boss Bogdan, whose personal wealth was fronting our programme, and who had never once even mentioned Donetsk. How much of it was the tapestry – all those men to be thrown out of work? How much of it was the way these men had dismissed me in front of Dan? Even today I’m still not sure, but something drove me on.

“I will be launching a massive programme in Kiev, but I could set up a pilot project here. Dan has taken me through the needs.”

I shot a glance at Dan then, and his expression was one of surprise, his lips parted with amused interest, which fired me up even further.

“I could set up a mini Job Centre at one of the coal mines due to close. This would counsel the men, help them find a new job, re-train them even, if need be.”

While speaking ad lib, I was mentally running through the cost of all this; probably no more than a couple of hundred thousand pounds, which we could easily absorb. But I was also aware that the Governor, who had been preparing to stand, had settled again in his seat, that the grey suits had shifted forward in theirs. And so I went further. Much further.

“Job Shops. That’s what they’re called in the UK. And if our pilot Job Shop is a success, then we could help you roll it out to other mines in the region.”

I can still see myself in that office, making policy on the hoof. It was almost as if I were suspended at the ceiling looking down on my mass of spice red hair, bobbing around as I sought to prove myself to this man. And to Dan, of course. The way an aid programme takes shape – it was all so willy-nilly.

Over lunch, I was suddenly one of the lads, I was in the tent. The table was laden down with chicken legs, with pig liver pâté, with a baked fish on a platter, and the Governor plied me with vintage wine from Moldova. In those days, I was no wine drinker – I was more used to vodka nights out with Carole, my best friend from home – but I found myself knocking back the 1965 Cabernet Sauvignon which the Governor had laid on for Dan, and leading the relentless laughter. After the food, we progressed to the toasts, with cognac, which came at me fast and furious, each drained glass instantly

replenished by Vladimir Zukov for the next one. Dan stood and made the traditional Ukrainian third toast to the ladies, while all six men bowed to me and I giggled tipsily, a palm to my chest in modest acceptance. Then I sprang up for the next one.

“A toast to the Governor,” I cried, “to your beautiful city of a million roses, to our future collaboration through the Levshenko Aid Programme.”

Amidst all the cheers, the thumps on the white linen tablecloth, Vladimir Zukov slammed his shot glass against mine and clicked his fingers for the attention of our interpreter.

“May I call you Vanessa?” He leant towards me.

“Please do.” I leant back. “Actually, my close friends call me Ness.”

“Ness? Like the monster? In Scotland?”

This seemed to me the most hilarious pun ever and I collapsed into giggles, banging my fist on the table, an action which by then was the universal language at that lunch.

“You’d better have some coffee, kiddo, you’ve got a coal mine to get through.”

I turned to Dan as he spoke. Again his look was quite unguarded. And I’d say that was the moment. I’d say the kiddo did it.

2

My arrival in Kiev a few weeks earlier had not been how I'd imagined it. It was May 1994, I was twenty six years old, and Bogdan had flown me business class, my first time ever, so I stepped off the plane feeling even more benevolent than when I'd boarded in Manchester. At the perimeter fence, a row of trees was blooming with pink and mauve pastels, creating a soft lens effect against the concrete buildings beyond; my new boss had told me I'd be arriving in the lilac season.

"Kiev is renowned for these few weeks of each year, my dear," he'd said, an avuncular hand to the small of my back, "and how my heart yearns to be going with you."

But there was to be no grand welcome in arrivals. The hall was cluttered with pasty men who seemed to be stalking me, wielding cards with names that were not mine. When I found my own, I smiled gratefully at the face above it, a swarthy one which stood out from the rest. The young man smiled back, jerking his chin in welcome, while I felt his quick assessment of me, cursory but thorough, as if he was storing the data for later. Physically, as well as the curly red hair, he would have clocked a skinny body dressed entirely in denim and feet rubbed red by synthetics (in the days when I still doggedly refused to wear leather). Beyond that, I hoped he would feel the compassion I had brought with me to his country.

"Gaspazha Parker? Welcome in Ukraine. My name is Sasha," he said.

"Hello, please, call me Vanessa."

I spoke slowly and clearly for him, as I'd imagined myself doing, and I thrust my hand into his to shake it. His palm was dry against the clamminess of my own and he seemed to catch this, glancing down and then into my eyes with a look which betrayed the slightest flash of advantage. Then he took my case and nodded towards the exit. I found myself sticking close, following the white T-shirt hanging from his jeans, a crescent of caramel flesh just visible where it had scrunched up and out.

As we joined the dual carriageway into the centre of Kiev, Sasha put his foot down, dodging the many potholes at high speed, and for a while I sat with a fixed smile and clenched the sagging seat. Eventually I relaxed a little and as we entered a dense birch forest I turned to him.

"It's great to be here finally, Sasha, and to meet you. Bogdan tells me you're the office Man-Friday?" I'd forgotten my policy of simplicity, but he'd understood.

"I am office manager," he said.

"Oh. I thought that was Irina?"

"She is programme manager."

That was to be my job title. I felt the sting of a flush to my cheeks; she was supposed to be my assistant, had Bogdan not made things clear? I knew I needed to sort this quickly. "Can we go straight to the office?" I asked, "I'd like to meet Irina too."

He turned down the corners of his mouth. "Irina said I must take you to hotel."

"Please? I am really keen to meet her." And tackle this head on, I thought, though the quickening of my heartbeat might have said otherwise; as a girl who wanted so much to please I couldn't bear the thought of conflict.

In response, Sasha merely clicked his tongue, and we drove on in silence for some time. I sat gazing into the trees scudding by and mulled it over. Bogdan did already run some tiny projects in Kiev and I told myself it was likely that Sasha meant those rather than the grand new programme I was there for. Either that or it must have been a language glitch. Emerging from the forest, we came upon a series of factories, chimney upon chimney poisoning the air with their streams of yellow and brown, which seeped into the car and cloyed at the back of my throat.

I glanced at Sasha and tried again. "Are you from Kiev, Sasha?"

"My father is Georgian"

"Ah." Hence his swarthy complexion. "Have you lived here for a long time?"

"I came to Kiev at age of ten years."

"And you like it here?"

He slid his hands further up the steering wheel. "Our lives are difficult."

"I know," I said. But what did I know? Other than what I'd read? Other than what I'd been told by Bogdan? And I made it worse. "I'm hoping our new programme will help improve your lives," I added.

I still cringe, all these years later, when I hear myself. It's one of those moments when I actually whimper out loud, usually in the dead of night. When the gaffes of your life creep all over you, stopping in places to slide inside you and wriggle around – *I'm still here, I can still shame you*. But back then I really was there to change the world – and I thought I could. If he considered me vacuous, however, Sasha simply nodded.

We sped on towards the city and past an abandoned development of tower blocks, some already ten storeys high, with the cranes left hanging in mid air. The unfinished pods caught my eye, the blue sky visible through each one of them, and I could feel my camera sitting in a bag at my feet. They would have made a fascinating photo (economic blip, or hope abandoned?) but even I knew better than to take the camera out and shove Sasha's difficult life in his face. I felt his glance on my cheek and turned to smile at him.

"Is your first visit to Ukraine?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm very much looking forward to it."

"Your first time with aid programme?"

"Well, I've been working on a similar programme in England, social regeneration in the mining regions." I frowned at my complex words and tried again. "I helped coal miners find new jobs when the pits closed."

"I think you will also help us here," he said.

I smiled, and returned his compliment. "Your English is excellent, Sasha."

For that I was granted the makings of his own smile, and I caught sight of a gold eye-tooth. My shoulders softened against the car seat and we fell into a more companionable silence while I smiled idly at the sights from my window. Down below us a river came into view.

"Is that the Dniepro?" I asked. I'd read that for centuries this river had served as a trade route from the northern Baltic down to the Black Sea, that now it was contaminated by the aftermath of Chernobyl. Later, I was to take a boat trip along it with Dan.

Sasha nodded and pointed across the expanse of water to a statue on a hillside, a cloaked figure holding up a cross. "Volodymyr, great founder of Kiev."

"Oh yes, I read about him, back in 837, I think? That's a lot of history."

His head dipped; I appeared to have notched up another peg.

The outskirts of Kiev reminded me of Salford back in the early eighties when I first moved there with Mum; vast stretches of tufted wasteland between random clumps of buildings, the apartment blocks straight from the high rise estate I used to skirt round on my way home. Here, the pavements thickened with people and I studied their faces,

inscrutable to me as they hurried along, always with a bag of some kind – a plastic carrier, a net or a holdall. We pulled up at a traffic light which was swinging on a line overhead and I watched the people streaming inside the blocks, followed their invisible progress upwards to one of the tiny windows and tried to imagine what their lives would be like.

A sharp rap on my window snapped me from my thoughts and I turned to see the face of an old woman leering at me. Instinctively I jumped back, then I began to scabble in my pocket for cash and made to wind the window down, but Sasha tutted and reached across to stop me, shoving my fingers from the handle.

“Eta bizniz, Vannysa!” he said, scowling the woman into submission.

As she backed away, he set off in a screech of tyres, while I took a surreptitious glance at him and grappled with his reaction – how could an old lady begging be any kind of business?

After a further ten minutes or so we had reached the city centre and Sasha turned onto a wide boulevard. The concrete blocks suddenly gave way to the most remarkable buildings, many of them ornate with sculpture or plastered with colour, and the pavements were swathed with lilac trees. Later in my life, I learnt that every flower has a meaning of some kind and that lilac is the floral symbol of lost youth. It still brings a smile to me now as I remember how the trees swayed shaggily overhead in canopies, their pastel cones reaching out to me as if greeting my arrival in Kiev.

“Boulevard Kreschatyk,” Sasha said proudly and slowed down for me to absorb the scene.

“This is amazing.” I smiled as I gazed out on the six-lane boulevard, which is Kiev’s answer to the Champs Elysées, and actually far more impressive. “OK if I get my camera out? I’m into photography – I mean I *enjoy* photography.”

That earned me another click of his tongue. “I understand, I am *into* paintings.”

“Ah. Which are your favourite artists?” I asked, removing my lens cap.

“I find paintings in old houses in Ukraine and I sell to foreign ex-pats.”

“Oh, I see.” I grinned to myself and studied the side of his face.

He smiled too and turned to me. “You want buy, I sell. Good price.”

“OK, I’d like to see them sometime.”

And I snapped a shot of him, gold eye-tooth and all.

The building which housed the Bogdan Levshenko programme was well situated, in the old Jewish Quarter of Kiev, but our office was sunk below the street and my stomach churned a little as I followed Sasha down the steps that first afternoon. He opened the door onto a musty room and I saw a young woman in a dress of canary yellow sitting behind a desk directly ahead of me. Having prepared my opening greeting, one of warmth and cheer, I marched in, smile in place, hand outstretched.

“Hello, you must be Irina? I’m Vanessa.”

I beamed at her, taking in the pale pixie features, a small beaky nose and a cupid’s bow at her lips. Like me, she would have been in her late twenties, and she too wore no make-up, indeed her ice-blue eyes needed none. It took more than a few moments for her to stand, unsettling beats during which she held my eyes with hers – they were intelligent eyes, somewhat anxious perhaps. Then, finally, gracefully and soundlessly, she stood and offered a chilled, limp handshake.

“How do you do.” Her English was good but with a slight whine to it.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” I went on. “I’ve heard from Bogdan that you’re doing a wonderful job running the office.”

There was a barely perceptible frown, but she didn’t respond, instead she gestured

behind me. “You will sit here,” she said.

I swung round to see a desk jammed into the tight corner behind the door. My chest began to thud and I turned back to Irina, for a moment making a point of studying her own desk, centre stage in the office. Whether I bottled it, or whether some instinct told me I should not rise to this, the moment was brief, and I thanked her and turned to place my briefcase on the desk, its metal surface scratched with Cyrillic writing, which could have been profanities for all I knew.

But then, instead of squeezing in behind the desk, I turned back and swung myself up to sit on top of it, in what I hoped was a boss-like manoeuvre. Legs dangling, I smiled at Irina, and began to look around the office. Old metal filing cabinets lined the room and above them the plaster peeled away from the walls in butter curls. The edges of the stained beige carpet trailed nylon threads and left patches of concrete exposed, which made me shudder a little. Beyond the barred windows, I could see the feet clipping by on the pavement outside and I smiled at Sasha who was leaning on the windowsill observing our stand-off. He smiled back at me, somewhat amused, I could see. I jumped then as Irina let out a sudden string of instructions at him, which at first he seemed to ignore, but then he slowly heaved himself up, took a kettle and made for the corridor.

I kept my smile in place, legs still swinging with a bluntness I did not feel. Of course, I should just have made small talk, should have commented on the office, asked her about her family or something, but I hadn't even begun to know how to manage a tricky situation and I blundered in.

“Once I've settled in, I'd like you to brief me on how you run things here, Irina, OK?”

“Why have you come here?” Her face remained inscrutable and I half thought I must have misheard her.

“To manage the new programme,” I muttered, adding in my confusion, “to help Ukraine.”

“Huh.” It was the sound of perfect scorn. “Ukraine needs no help from West.”

“Oh!” It was all that came out of me.

Stung, I jumped down from the desk, slid in behind it and switched on the chunky computer. I could feel her glare and it befuddled my mind as I stared into the grey fuzz, willing it to heat up, while Sasha returned to make the tea. I couldn't begin to fathom her apparent instant hatred for me. After a few moments, Irina ceased her scrutiny of me, picked up the phone and spoke into it in Russian at rattling speed, so I pretended then to sift through my briefcase, pulling out papers onto my desk, shuffling them into piles. When Sasha handed me my cup, he winked at me and I sensed he'd spotted a chance for alliance against persecution, which calmed me a little. I sipped at the black tea, savouring the warm liquid and its hefty dose of sugar which washed through me, and I did feel a little better. But I knew that I needed to get myself out of there, so I announced that I wanted to change some money and asked Sasha for directions.

Emerging, a bit like a kitten on its first time through a cat flap, into the busy streets of Kiev, I then only made it a few blocks down before I flattened my back to a building, my palms pressed to its cool stone. Her scorn had stung me to tears which I blinked back roughly. I'd never actually managed people before, but had visualised myself as the benevolent boss, shepherding her staff, who themselves would be eager and willing. But what really hurt was that I'd arrived that day puffed up with the notion of helping, expecting a warm welcome, and had received instead a kick in the face. Was her reaction going to be the norm out here? Helping people was how I got along, I knew that much. What I didn't realise then, of course, was that it was also a need, a need which defined me. And as I look back now, I realise that this was at the root of all that was to happen.

I pushed myself off the wall and began to walk along the pavement in a daze. And

how was I going to do my job without her? I'd yearned for a chance like this, to run my own overseas aid programme, to really do good in the world, but I wouldn't know how to start without her co-operation. Why had Bogdan employed her? And why had she taken the job if she was so defiant? As I paced through the old market building, completely oblivious, on that first day, to the beauty of its white colonnades, it did occur to me that I could just sack her and recruit somebody more malleable. But that would have seemed like instant defeat. And I knew too that I also felt sorry for her, there was something about the anxiety in her eyes. So I had to find some way to bring her round. Perhaps I had only to get my depths of empathy across to her, show her that I understood how harsh her life must be.

By the time I'd found the money changers and sign-languaged my way through the purchase of Ukrainian currency, I'd convinced myself that she was simply fearful of me and the change I represented for her, which was all very understandable. On the street outside the office, an old lady sat on a camp stool astride a bucket of flowers, so I bought a bunch of lily of the valley and presented it to Irina.

She looked up at me expressionless. "I have flowers in my garden," she said.

"But... I thought they'd brighten the office." I felt the heat already spreading on my cheeks and glanced at Sasha, but he was engrossed at the photocopier.

Irina made a point of glancing around her as if insulted, then she fixed her eyes on mine. "The soul of the Ukrainian people is not bright," she said.

I knew that I had flushed a mottled crimson and I began gathering my papers together, shuffling them into my briefcase.

"Will you take me to the hotel then, Sasha?" I muttered.

He nodded and left the room, returning with his jacket and a mug of water for the flowers which had been left trailing on Irina's desk, their perfume and delicacy now suddenly frivolous.

The Hotel Kievskaya was a hideous concrete slab, some twelve storeys high. At the foyer window a grubby curtain had come loose, looping down like the eyes of a bloodhound and, as I followed Sasha inside that evening, I took in the varnished browns, the dust motes caught in a single strand of sunshine, and I steeled myself; this would only be temporary until I found an apartment.

"I come tomorrow nine o'clock." He nodded kindly, his brown eyes soft, and he left me at the desk.

"Thank you Sasha." I felt quite desolate as I watched him walk away.

The lift cranked its way to the top floor and the doors opened onto a woman knitting, her booted legs crossed, her white shirt straining across her stomach. She ignored me while she finished her row, then she let out a morose sigh, took a key and heaved herself to her feet. At the end of a corridor she opened the door of my room and closed me inside it – another great reception. I stood for a moment, half expecting to hear her key turn in the lock, then I shuffled to the window, looked down onto the sprawl of the city and sighed; on the inside looking out.

I was hungry, but, far too troubled to venture out and explore Kiev, I opted instead for the hotel restaurant, where, to compensate for my lack of intrepidity, I ordered *varenyki*, which the menu said was a typical Ukrainian dish of ravioli stuffed with mushrooms and potatoes. Then I splayed open the report I'd brought with me, *Ukraine in the Wake of Communism*, and stared into it while I tried to make sense of my day. I felt utterly miserable. I'll admit it now, I had expected more than a warm welcome that day – I had expected gratitude. Now, I find that shameful of me, but ask any man or woman on the street how they view overseas aid and wouldn't they respond as I had? Aid is a generous giving by us and a grateful taking by them – as if it's sheer altruism

on our part? Well if you scratch away at that warm fuzzy feeling you'll find that it's much more complex than that, but I for one was far too callow to begin scraping.

Soon after my food arrived, a man I recognised from the plane sauntered in to a nearby table. He had spent the flight chain-smoking in the aisle and again he was holding a cigarette, a fug of smoke clinging visibly to his suit. He flicked his ash at a side plate and smiled over at me as he sat down. His face was kindly, all rubbery and lived-in, clearly a smoker's, and his head sported a comb-over, leaving tufts of grey to fight it out above the ears. Returning his smile, I half wished he had joined me at my table despite the cigarette.

I set about eating and reading with the self-consciousness of the single diner, but all the while I could sense the scrutiny of my waiter who was standing just a few feet away. When I glanced up at him he stared me out, quite openly, and I looked away in a flurry – what was it with these people? I put down my cutlery and flattened the spine of my book in an emphatic show of concentration, but then he was at my side and reaching for my half-finished meal. The man slid the plate away while I grabbed it back from him and for a few moments we actually tussled over it.

"I've not finished," I hissed, clinging onto the plate, until finally he let go and loped back to his post.

Across the largely empty room, the smoker let out a loud chuckle, which ended in a fruity cough.

"Welcome to the Wild East!" he shouted. "And all its crazy people. I'm Jeff, may I join you?"

I nodded at him, warming instantly to his northern accent.

"Do they always do that?" I whispered as he reached my table.

"They call it service!" He laughed, drew on his cigarette and blew the smoke out, reaching for my hand. "To whom do I have the pleasure?"

"Vanessa Parker." I smiled at him and he sat down.

"Very pleased to meet you. Would you per chance be here for an aid programme? Kievskaya's the usual stamping ground."

I nodded. "Levshenko Programme. I'm here to design and manage it, I've just got here."

"Just arrived? Well that calls for shampoo then." He clicked his fingers at the waiter, ordered a bottle, then he leant across the table, head cocked. "I'd heard Bogdan was expanding his programme out here, what great things may we expect from him?"

"You know Bogdan?"

"Oh yes, we go back years."

Drawn by Jeff's paternal twinkle, I too folded my arms conspiratorially.

"He wants to start something major for job creation, but we're not sure what yet, it's up to me to come up with something, design it and then contract it out."

"Well, Vanessa, job creation just happens to be my forte. You're going to need good people for that, here's my card."

He pressed his business card onto the white linen, flipping it with his nail as if playing an ace in black jack. *Jeff Osbourne, Expert*, it read. Though it didn't say in what.

"Are you here on an aid programme too, then?" I asked him.

"Indeed I am. For my sins."

Our champagne arrived, Crimean I noticed, and Jeff opened it with a flourish, letting the waiter traipse after the flown cork, while he filled the two old-fashioned coupes the man had brought for us.

He raised his glass. "To Vanessa's arrival in Ukraine!"

I chinked glasses and sipped the lukewarm fizz, nodding benignly at him; I was enjoying the sanctuary of his easy company, although he did remind me of some

character in a sitcom with his bizarre attempts to sound genteel when he was clearly salt of the earth.

“And how was your first day in this sublime country?” he asked me.

“Well, I didn’t exactly get the warmest of welcomes from my new assistant.”

“Bit aloof was she? I assume it was a she?”

I nodded. “She said Ukraine didn’t need help from the West.”

Jeff sucked his teeth. “You’re about to spend, how much was it?”

“Three million”

“Three million quid in her country. And she’s not welcoming you with open arms, Vanessa?”

Even if they echoed my own thoughts, his words made me uneasy.

“Some Ukrainians get like that,” he went on. “It’s arrogant, if you ask me, and she should be careful because there’s plenty of bright young things out there.”

I smiled, suddenly protective towards Irina. “Oh I’ll give her a chance, I’m sure she’s just unsettled by my arrival.”

He sat back and contemplated me, taking a few long drags on his cigarette before dropping it into the crystal flower vase on the table.

“Anyway, if it’s job creation you’re here for, you’ll be wanting to meet with the Minister for Employment. Balavensky, he’s called. And I can make the necessary introductions, if you require?”

“Jeff, that would be fantastic, thank you.”

“Can you parlski the Ruski yet?”

“My parrot is sick, please fetch me a doctor.”

Jeff let out a throaty chuckle which brought on his cough again. “I do believe I learnt my Russian from the very same textbook. No problemo, he comes with a charming sidekick, Valentyna Tabachuk, who’s fluent in English. Any case, you’ll have an interpreter.”

A trace of self-importance crept over me as I nodded back – my very own interpreter translating my very own words.

“And you’ll need to meet Dan, too,” he went on. “Dan Mitchell, the Deputy Head at USAID, and your guru on all things job creation here.”

I scrawled the name on the back of Jeff’s card. It was one that would come up several times during my first month in Kiev, always with similar accolades, often with a knowing smile. But, of course, during those early weeks in Ukraine Dan was on leave back home in Chicago.



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