Closed City

By GREG BLAKE MILLER

All punctual people are punctual in the same way; each impunctual person is late in a manner all his own. This is why people who are late are interesting, if infuriating. The things that can happen to make one late are endlessly entertaining, particularly if you are capable of being entertained by lies. And the things that happen once one is hopelessly, irretrievably, verifiably late—well, *those* are the stuff from which life is made. The broken schedule, the shattered plan, the individual's unwillingness or inability to paint within the lines of time: These open the world up to chaos—terrifying, ulcer-inducing, humiliating chaos. And who isn't entertained by terror and humiliation? As a species, we have our drawbacks.

In any case, let me tell you about the morning when I was late. I trudged out of the little apartment near Moscow's Konkovo metro station at 17 minutes before 6 a.m. The middle-aged woman who was hosting my summer homestay was a former mathematician and university professor who had lost her job, so she was still sleeping, as she had every right to be, dreaming her way through the nightmare of 1993. The Soviet collapse had not been kind to her; everything she had worked for was gone—the nest egg, the prestige, the nation. Three weeks earlier we had all—even I—been summoned to scoop up our Lenin rubles and take them to the bank for an uneven exchange. I had brought a slim envelope with a month's meager pay from my film studio job. She had brought a battered, overstuffed plastic shopping bag emblazoned in English with the hot-pink words "Pretty Pretty You." We waited in line among the grandmothers and stubbled, beer-breathed uncles, their knuckles worn with work. She returned with the bag neatly folded and a few fresh, new non-Soviet bills in the pocket of her burgundy blazer.

Her husband had left long ago; her son, a computer programmer a few years older than me, popped in from time to time. She tried as best she could to be motherly—warning me not to wear my nice sport coat to Red Square, lest I attract thieves and tricksters; teaching me how to effectively launder without a washing machine; strenuously encouraging me to eat a gelatin-and-meat concoction called *kholodets*. But at 23 years old, wedged between two years of grad school and reaching for a solid hold on the slick surface of adulthood, I had little patience for being mothered. All my life I had been a good son, and what I'd gotten for it, it seemed, was an endless, scalding depression that had begun more than a year before and refused to go away. I was scarred in ways that a mother could not heal. My host tried as best she could to make me feel guilty.

One morning I arrived after staying out all night. She was furious; I can't remember if I had called, but I remember her anger—wide-eyed, exhausted, bewildered. I remember her dingy bathrobe, her blond hair frazzled from a sleepless night. I must not have called. One did not behave as I had behaved. I understood this, because *I* did not behave as I had just behaved. Before that night, she had, on weekend afternoons, taken me to the places she still found meaningful: the swimming hole with a small adjacent well where elderly women lined up for holy water; the ski jump outside Moscow State University where she had once soared like an eagle. After my long night out, she turned to me less for filial devotion than for helpful contributions. I had prepaid for the homestay, but I should have been prepared to offer more. I did what I could, but it was not enough. I was too consumed by my own drama, by the wild angry poetry of a boy who had lost his girl, to understand the suffering of a woman who had lost her world.

On a mild night in early July, I returned from work late and with little appetite. She had already given up on trying to feed me, but that night, for some reason, my place was set with a platter of stringy chicken thigh and wilted cabbage, which I gamely but gloomily chewed. She looked at me; I swallowed hard; she swept the plate from me, put it in the sink and turned the faucet on. For an hour she screamed at me, screamed in such a way that my Russian deserted me, and I simply stared at her, uncomprehending and mute and terrified. I did not fall asleep until past dawn, and then, suddenly, I was awake, with a sour stomach and an alarm clock that wouldn't lie.

And so, at 5:43 a.m. on the day of my fateful lateness, I walked through the courtyard playground, across a wide muddy-grassy field and descended into the Metro. I rode to the Kievskaya station. I hopped onto Trolleybus 34, grabbed a stanchion, and rode to the studio, where a bus left for our location shoot each day at 6:30 a.m. I showed my pass and walked through the gates of Mosfilm Studio. It was 6:45. The bus was gone.

•••••

After swapping my Lenins, I realized that I'd earned $30 in 30 days. I kept afloat by dividing 15 Power Bars I'd brought into tiny daily doses. I spent 14 hours a day on a film set 40 miles southwest of Moscow, working as a production assistant/translator/dialogue coach for a Russian/Italian/American joint venture. We were shooting a Western, in English; most of the secondary actors were Russian. The set was on a military base; a legendary Russian designer had built a replica Western town where even the Man With No Name would have felt comfy enough to chew his cigarette and shed some blood. I spent hours teaching a wonderful Russian actor named Boris to walk into a bar, fix his eyes on the villain and declare, "You're the only man I ever met who sunk to the bottom and then went lower." The lines would be dubbed, but I had to get his mouth working the right way. Besides, I was from Nevada, and I assumed I could get him to talk like a cowboy.

So now I had to find my way, on my own, onto a Russian military base in the remote countryside. I left the studio, took the trolley back to Kievskaya and hopped on the electric train to the town of Golitsyno. I dozed off and woke to a man screaming at me. *Idiot! Give the babushka your seat!* I looked at the big cheekbones and deep-set blue eyes of the woman standing next to him. Every vessel could be seen—through the paper-thin skin, through the whites of the eyes. I yielded my seat; my head was heavy with half-dreams and hot with guilt. The man, a porcine, stubby-fingered fellow in a newsboy cap, called me an idiot again. I told him I'd been sleeping. "Sleeping?" he shouted to the loaded train car. "The idiot says he was sleeping! Don't you think *she'd* like some sleep?" He put his hand on my shoulder; I shoved it away. "Leave me alone!" I shouted. The words sound less plaintive in Russian: *Ostavte menya v pokoye!* If you say it just right, it means Get Your Goddamn Hands Off Me.

The man leered at me with small, flat blue eyes; I stared back; we rolled onward toward Golitsyno; I stewed, ashamed of having slept while a crumpled old woman and her heavy pack of God-knows-what had clung to the handrail of a rattling suburban train. I loved this country, I loved its mothers, I loved all mothers, past, present, future. Back home, my girl had melted like a candle. Her pain—the victory of her pain—had not drained me of love, only of the ability to love. I was defeated. Only the study of this place—its delicious words, its infinite days of waiting and conflagration, its stubborn will to do what could not be done—had saved me. Now, for the first time, the Russian land was out of my books and onto my boots. I had arrived, ready for rebirth; I had boarded the morning train and found that the currency of my goodwill was no damn good.

•••••

I wandered through Golitsyno's rail station square. Women in kiosks were selling pirated Phil Collins cassettes and pallid beer and small bottles marked Chanel No. 5. A song from a Europop outfit called Ace of Base raged over the speakers: *All that she wants/Is another baby/She's gone tomorrow.* At the far end of the square, I walked into the road and put my hand out. A red Zhiguli coupe pulled up. *Golitsyno Dva—za skolko?* (How much for a ride to Golitsyno 2?) The man, heavyset, heavy lidded, wearing a leather jacket on a hot day, looked at me with narrow eyes.

"That's a military town," he said. "A closed city."

"I work there," I said.

He shrugged. "Five thousand."

As we rumbled over the crumbling highway, he took me into his confidence. Over the course of the summer, my mild accent, in short bursts, had helped me pass as a brotherly visitor from the former Soviet republics; it was a cozy identity: not quite a Russian, but not quite a foreigner; one day a Georgian, the next a Ukrainian. The car's tuner was set to Russkoe Radio; the genius bard Vladimir Vysotsky was singing about the Great Fatherland War. His rock-grinder of a voice sang with unreasonable faith—*Oni pomogut nam.* (They will help us.) Who was this "they," I wondered? It was a curious song: Russians do not want help; even when they say they want it, they resent their own words. Still: Where did I fit in? Who would I help?

"Goddamn fucking foreigners," said the driver.

"Tired of them?" I asked.

"They promise everything."

"Do they deliver?"

"Fuck."

I let the comment stand. I would have let it stand for all time. The wisdom was unimpeachable. But something had seized the driver. He took both hands off the wheel and pulled up his left pant leg. The wood was sanded but not stained. He knocked.

"You see this fucking thing? You see it?"

"I see it."

"I earned it, fuck your mother. *Earned.*"

"You've earned a lot."

"They won't stop until it's all gone."

"I hope that's not true."

"Oh, it's true, fuck. Why would you doubt that it's true? It's already gone. They won't stop until it's more than gone. Fuck you. Who the fuck are you?"

"Just a guy going to work."

"What the fuck work do you have at a military base? You're a soldier? No, doesn't look like it, does it? What are you trying to do, going to one of our bases, fuck?"

"We're shooting a movie."

"A war movie?"

"Yes," I lied. "A war movie."

He nodded, coughed, straightened his cap. "That's good," he said softly, almost to himself. "A war movie. Show them how we fought."

"They should all know how you fought."

He turned to me with a twisted upper lip, as if he'd just made it through some dental mishap. "What do you mean, *you*?" he said. "Where are you from, anyway? Georgia?"

I stared at the man; I couldn't look away. I remembered words from the Passover Seders of my childhood: The Wise Son, even 2,000 years after Exodus, always says *we* came out of the land of Egypt, never *you* or *they*. A culture's sacred history remains forever in the first person.

"I meant *you*," I said, "as in *you* personally."

"Personally? Personally! Fuck. How old do you think I am?" He knocked on the leg again. "This is Afghanistan. You're a dimwit, aren't you?"

"It's entirely possible."

"Or a foreigner. Israeli? Emigrant, right? Back to rob us."

I said nothing.

"Tell me, fuck, who are you?"

The car screeched to a stop. The road was empty. A wall of silvery birch trees stretched into the distance behind a barbed-wire fence.

"What are you stopping for?" I asked.

"We're here, dimwit. What's with you? You don't recognize where you're going?"

Relieved, I reached into my pocket for the 5,000 rubles I owed. When I pulled out my wallet, a small spiral notebook fell out. I'd scribbled freshly learned Russian expressions on the page, alongside their English translations. He looked at the notebook before he looked at the rubles.

"You're a foreigner—a real one. A real fucking foreigner!"

I handed him the 5,000.

"I am," I said.

I pocketed the notebook and opened the door and stepped out of the car.

"Fuck your mother," he said.

I closed the door, and off he drove. I walked toward the barbed-wire fence, the glimmering birch grove. A bored-looking soldier manned a small gate. The bus had entered here each morning, but everything looked different now. Everything *was* different now. I would look for an apartment that night. I would not return to the apartment of the woman who needed what I could not give. I would not try to soothe a nation that had asked me for nothing and had already given me all that it could—a culture, a passion. I would long for nobody and denounce regret and live quietly and selfishly, slaking my thirst for this air far from home. Of course it would all end in failure. It's hard to live needing no one and needed by no one.

The hoarse drone of the Zhiguli engine faded behind me, taking with it a fellow human being who disliked me to the depths of his soul. I did not have a pass to get through the guard gate. I strode half a mile along the fence, then turned, climbed through the barbed wire and walked to work.