REVOLUTION SQUARE

By Greg Blake Miller

I WAS BEING WATCHED. I could feel it in the way a foreigner feels things in a foreign land, in a dreamlike way, with more unconsciousness than consciousness, a knowing much more akin to not knowing. Not knowing is the most beautiful and terrifying thing about being far from home. In precisely the circumstance where your instincts—uninformed, full of rank misinterpretations of simple social signals—are most likely to be wrong, you must trust them most. They are all you've got, and at the moment what I had was the sense of being watched. The old lady with the tattered plastic bag that said "Beautiful You" was watching me. The smiling, partially torn blonde pictured on the bag, striding in an outdated pantsuit, was watching me. The Kazakh shuttle merchant with his wheelbarrow of burlap sacks was watching.

The decades were watching—a statue of a crouching man with a German shepherd, a bronze girl with a baby on her shoulder. The dog's nose was golden from the touch of Muscovite hands. It was said to be good luck. I did not touch the dog; one must be careful with watchful dogs. The escalator out of the Revolution Square metro station goes up forever. One feels like Aeneas leaving the dead, the watchful dead, behind.

I was wearing a slab of a leather jacket. I had purchased it, as one did in those days, in a secondhand store in Seattle's Belltown, when Belltown was still a dump. I had worn it up and down the history-tattered streets of Moscow. I had worn it this very day into the laboratories of soil chemists who patiently explained to me, the foreign reporter with strangely local concerns, everything I wanted to know about lead and how it found its way into the air and into the dirt and into the children. Westerners—correspondents, writers, lawyers, souls adventurous enough to come here but overflowing with educated-middle-class anxieties—had been saying the Moscow dirt was unsafe for their children. My Muscovite scientists were eager to dispel this notion. They were watching the Westerners, too. They were somewhat amused with what they saw. That day, they saw my leather jacket, bought in Belltown but looking for all the world like something passed down from a Bolshevik great-grandfather, and they trusted me as one of their own. There are few better feelings for a foreigner.

My hair was thick, almost shoulder length swept back on top and pouring back over my temples. Some of the men in the statues had hair like this. I had not shaved for three days. I was 26, with the codified morality of an old monk and the roiling romantic grandiosity of an American adolescent. I lived those days like an A-minor chord, urgent, troubled, combustible. I worked until after midnight each night at the newspaper, wearily made my way from the office on Truth Street, across the tenement badlands around Savelovsky metro, toward the train home. Each night I stopped at a tiny kiosk to buy a bottle of a minty-green herbal soft drink called Tarkhun. I was addicted to Tarkhun. It tasted of a cough syrup from my childhood. That night, as I waited for the sleepy-eyed attendant—a man so old his skin was translucent—to count my rubles, two large young men with rasping coughs waited behind me. Their chests were touching my back. This I disliked, but I had come to accept it. In Moscow, in those days, this was how one waited in line. An extra inch was daylight for a line-hopper. The old man counted and counted; I had, it seemed, been paid in very small bills. In the mid-1990s it took a lot of very small bills to buy a bottle of Tarkhun.

The old man stopped counting and looked at me, full of sorrow for the generation of idiots that had been thrust upon him. "There's not enough here," he said. "Don't you have five hundred more?"

I reached in my pocket, found a crumpled wad. The big chest behind me pressed forward. I uncrumpled the wad. A big hand settled on my shoulder. I liberated a thousand from the wad. The big hand squeezed. I took my Tarkhun, the old man reached for the money, the hand on my shoulder shoved me aside. I spun and shoved back and threw off my backpack, and the world had made me 13 years old again. The bully and his bully buddy stood four feet from me, grinning with the prospect of battle. I rushed the big man, collided, found myself in a headlock. Tighter, tighter, blood to my temples, blood to my eyes, blood pooling within me, gathering, ready, exploding—

I threw the big man off of me. My plastic bottle of green cough-syrup soda pop went skittering across the cement. I had held onto the damn thing through the whole struggle. There were two squares of pockmarked sidewalk between the big man and me. The old monk and the crazed teen within me were in complete accord with the third member of my interior trinity, the voice of Bruce Springsteen. No retreat. No surrender.

Davai, I said. *Come on*.

The big man's big friend looked at him and said the same word: *Davai*. But in his case, it meant: *Let's go*. And beneath that, unspoken: *He's not worth it*.

I wasn't worth it. The big men walked away. It was probably good for me that I wasn't worth it. In the moment, though, I felt like Menelaus when Paris is whisked away by the gods. I stayed on the field of battle a moment longer, then picked up my Tarkhun and walked to the train. The longer I rode, the more I felt the eyes of Moscow upon me. I felt strange judgment from their Muscovite heads: *There goes a dead man. Another foreign corpse*. I had read plenty of stories of men, foreign or not, winding up with their heads bashed in at midnight over far less than taking too long in the soft-drink queue. I understood that I was lucky, that I'd gotten off cheaply. But I also felt good and righteous and my trinity was singing the Boss: *I had skin like leather and the diamond-hard look of a cobra … When they said sit down I stood up … Walk tall, or baby don't walk at all.* My hair was a mess, my shirt untucked, my face wrinkled in a Mickey Rourke sneer; I was a student of this country, an admirer, a lover, and I was at war with it.

I was nearly to the top of the Revolution Square escalator when I saw the soldier waiting. At the top, he took me by the right arm; another soldier materialized and took me by the left. They walked me into a small, white room. They asked me who I was, where I had been. I told them I had been at work, and that after work I had bought a Tarkhun. They asked for my passport and disappeared. The door was locked. I felt glorious. Either my life had gone terribly wrong, or *this* was living. *Living*. I decided I was alive. Ten minutes passed, then 20. I had some growing up to do. But I was alive. Thirty minutes. Perhaps I was headed for Butyrka prison, where our newspaper's intrepid photographer had recently photographed inmates left naked, emaciated, pissing on the concrete. I thought about Lyubyanka, where Stalin had kept his enemies while they awaited the bullet in the back of the head. I thought about my hero, the diplomat George Kennan. I thought about writing. I thought about Tarkhun. I still had it with me, there in the white room. I took a sip. The soldiers came back.

"We are looking for a Chechen," one said. He handed me my American passport and opened the door. "We apologize for the inconvenience."

"Thank you," I said.

Illustration by Garfield & Adams