

For Bathsheba and Ben

A Dirty Death

By Allison Fine
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1. Boris

Now or the day after Now:

On the dawn of a certain day Boris thought of killing himself. It was not a simple thought, because it came out of a lifetime of thoughts and experiences, but at the same time, when it occurred to him it was really quite guileless. The origins may have been complex, but the conclusion—how easy!

On the dawn of that certain day there were no clouds in the sky and the sun beat down relentlessly on city streets, with trees that in their parched moment of realization wished for something in a wordless way, there was no story to it at all. It was a wish for water or rain or something like that. The trees don't run a story because they are the story, and those of us who trudge along cement and debris, fighting our way through the endless mind babble we call the human experience, often hear the murmur of a tree or a shrub but cannot understand a single bit of it. The fact is, we are ignorant and the trees, while they may know it at some deep, primordial level, make no judgment about it at all. They have the endless compassion and their roots run deeper than ours.

On the dawn of that certain day some kind of human hum licked the edges of our mind, like a song or a dance or a prayer but nothing that good. More like a bad thing to eat that makes us sick. The human hum was getting sick and we were not going to know how to make it better because doctoring had left our consciousness and all we had was phony medicine that didn't work even in the good times. But

these were certainly not good times, and yet they were not bad times either. It was kind of like standing at the edge of something, a cliff, or a hill or the ocean and watching the possibility of falling, imagining it, hoping and not hoping for it, wondering about it. We could fall. We could not. Some of us worried about falling and others were on the roller coaster scaring themselves with simulated danger.

Either way, it was a state of groundlessness and yet everyone thought they had their feet on solid ground.

On the dawn of that certain day the ground was completely removed. It was free fall for everyone.

On the dawn of that certain day, one characteristic movement of his arm in sleep woke Boris Volguine from a nap. The morning was over because he willed it to be through sleeping through it. So the thought of killing himself lingered in the air, but not as heavily as it was in the earlier hours.

The book he had been reading, *Vibrational Medicine*, slipped off the bed onto the floor and the noise startled him. His cell phone buzzed on the nightstand next to him and the number made him cringe: his brother again. He ignored it. *The human form is a grid of magnetic domains; Boris reviewed in his head, and therefore acupuncture works. The nervous system is connected to the neurons and their functionality and hence the connection between neurological function and the total nervous system.*

Boris was a hypochondriac, not a doctor, and hence a good deal of his time was spent in copious and detailed study of the body, the bodily functions, coupled with an unorthodox measurable study of the inherent currents and flows of spiritual

awareness. He understood the internal energetic current was inextricably bound to the thought process and the thought process was affected by millions of conscious and unconscious perceptions that have their primary source in what Boris called The Overself. He had a problem with God, the word and the concept, but Overself fit nicely. According to Boris's studies, there are preexisting conditions, so to speak, on the soul level, and these conditions demand some kind of response. These responses govern biological functions and for each human being this is subtle, different and filled with tiny adjustments and changes.

He took his blood pressure. 160/90. Not good. First thing in the morning and he was already stressed.

Then:

In 2005, in Russia, where Boris lived before Syracuse University brought him over to teach Russian History and Political science, before 2006 and Anna's death, her murder, although, of course, no one would confess or admit to a murder since Putin's boys took care of it quietly, (she was murdered in front of her apartment, on the street where she lived and he often stayed), there was a war going on although no one owned up to it, because, after all, since *Parastroika* Soviet Russia was dead, right? And there was no war except the usual war between those who represented the state and those who represented change, and of course, there were always the poor. You didn't call them *proletariat* anyway—such a passé phrase.

There is a war going on in my country now but I'll be damned if I can really name its source, like a river or a mountain or even a cloud, it has something

mysterious about it, frightening of course, not an act of God or even tinged with a religious flavor, this source has no source. Except, perhaps, our imagination, as in thinking: what is there in the blank space between the stars?

Boris wrote these words as part of a large essay he hoped to include in a memoir that Penguin had already given him quite a healthy advance for. In spite of this, his longing for Anna, his missing her, gashed a hole in his heart and made everything he wrote seem plain and stupid.

I knew a woman named Harriett; he continued to write on the Mac Airbook his faculty friend Garnet had bought when he first came to Syracuse. Garnet, red, deep red, like her hair and her deep-set brown eyes with flicks of red in them. I knew a woman named Harriett, an American who I liked very much although she was naïve and incapable of understanding the sarcasm of the Russian nature. Harriett wrote about hotels for travel companies, she was kind of a mental concierge who owned the terrain of each hotel she stalked and wrote about. As a result, her travels led her into strange places. Her travels led her to me, to Moscow, much before all those events that I am about to tell transpired. I loved Harriett for her silliness and her intermittent explosiveness, her expulsion from everything that was worn and weary or jaded. Harriett was not cynical; in fact she wore you out with her endless enthusiasm. She became for me during those times, just before I came here to Syracuse, a kind of Icon of kindness, if there can be said such a thing. Of course, even though Anna could not understand completely my friendship with Harriett, she was too busy to be jealous. Harriett was an imitation that was real, a fake painting better than the original; an American who was truly hopeful.

Boris stopped writing because as he already knew the writing process was as much about thinking as it was about writing. He remembered trying, in vain, to teach Harriett many times over and over:

“There is propaganda (lies) and there is reality!”

“Reality?” she exploded, “Ha! I am interested in reality, Boris, the truth. Which is why I am here.”

“I became a journalist because I wanted to write the truth,” Boris told her, “but now I understand there is no such thing.”

“It’s in your blood I guess, to question everything and be angry. I understand. But it is also in your blood to stalk people for their stories! To ferret out the hidden agendas, to expose the nastiness that chokes the human impulse!” She shouted this, as if by shouting she could make him agree with her.

“There is no “human impulse” as you put it!” he shouted back. *“It’s like fucking seaweed...(he spoke the Russian word for fuck—Harriett understood it though her Russian was spotty at best).*

“Seaweed? What do you mean?”

“Seaweed choking swimmers venturing out in unmapped portions of the ocean and beach.”

“Oh God, Boris,” Harriett spoke, holding her head in her hands. *“How do people live in your Russia?”*

“Not how Putin says we live,” Boris told her, lighting his fifth cigarette, *“but how we really live.”*

"How you really live?" Harriett spoke this last sentence with a tinge of awe, regret, sadness, dreaminess and something else—like the foam on top of a latte, it was lovely to watch, not much to drink and inexplicably gorgeous anyway. *Just not grounded enough to get hold of*, Boris thought. Which is exactly why he fell so madly in love with her because she was impossible to possess and infinitely easy to fool. She didn't get jokes, especially if they were "on" her, but she had an uncanny insight into the inner workings of people's hidden agendas. She could spend an entire day unpacking the unseen agenda of people that they knew and if Boris were to investigate it all he would find out she was right. This unnerved him and fascinated him at the same time.

Harriett led him to activities like shopping expeditions and daily drives out into the outer suburbs of Moscow and even two weeks in the country, which Boris loathed. With no one else could he do these things. They spent an entire day at Bitzevski Park, wandering among the forest and avoiding the hills at all costs because of his smoking. He couldn't breathe even on flat ground in those days. Now, of course, he'd had to give it up and actually went to the gym on occasion. But then—then, Harriett was insistent that they needed to get out of Moscow and find a fresh approach. He loved the neighborhoods where all the people were running around and there were dirty markets outside on every inch of street but Harriett soon tired of these places and wanted open air and space. And so, open air and space was what she got from him. And more. Much more.

Anna was quietly disapproving. Her book *Putin's Russia* had just been released and it was extremely critical of Putin's world and his rule and of her

country. Many thought her a pessimist but she insisted that her love for her mother country was alive and well and that it was out of love that she criticized things as she did. In their conversations Anna would often cite that it was women like Harriett who could bring creative and gorgeous men to their knees and destroy their work. Boris disagreed of course, and anyway, he assured her, Harriett was simply a short term romance, nothing lasting.

Anna had no charisma, so to speak. Certainly not the kind of luminous beauty and leadership charisma of a Benazir Bhutto who lived, as the New York Times described her, “in the eye of the storm.” Anna, too, was in the eye of the storm, but in a different way. She wrote about the “dirty war” in Chechnya and quite ironically Boris wrote of her demise as a “dirty death.” Naturally this got him arrested and when it came to the attention of—well, that was all the old story. He was here now, in Syracuse, with his third marriage tanking and two grown step-children from wife #2 who completely hated him.

In the dawn of that certain day Boris received a phone call from Garnet.

“Boris, what are you doing? Did you forget we’re having lunch?”

“I fell asleep.”

“Again? Are you depressed?”

“No.”

“Tell me about your work.”

“Never mind.”

“No, not never mind! I’m coming over!”

“Look, Louise just moved out. Couldn’t you wait?”

"You need to talk."

"No, YOU need to talk!"

"Whatever. I'll be there in a minute."

She hung up so there was no choice in the matter. He would not kill himself today. What is it about women? What is it about men? *When we're young we have to beg for their attention and when we get older they won't leave us alone!* He thought. As soon as one woman moved out of his life another one moved in! While he enjoyed a certain aspect of watching this dance unfold, another part of him wished to run off to the house in Narragansett he sold two years ago to pay for his divorce. Just sit there and sit there and stare at the ocean and grow completely blank. Although of course, he wouldn't go blank. But he could certainly kill himself there and not be found for months, or maybe weeks. Or days. With all these women barking for his attention it probably wouldn't even be hours! But the house was sold. Wife #2 saw to that. She took the money from the house, went to Paris for Fashion Week, sent her youngest daughter from a previous marriage to Vassar and that was that.

Garnet arrived with a package of homegrown eggplant and some strawberries. *What was she planning to make with that?* He wondered.

What are you working on Boris? She asked as they stood in his country kitchen, shoving all unwashed dishes and the jar of honey and the half used garlic over to the side of the sink so she could pull out the chopping board and begin making something for him to eat.

You forget to eat, don't you darling?

Don't call me darling.

All right, my darling, she said and reached to kiss him but he moved away just in time.

I don't care, she said and pulled all sorts of things out of a satchel he hadn't seen her bring in. *I'll make ratatouille and everything will be all right. After dinner we'll go in your office and you'll show me the chapters you're working on.*

After dinner he did show her, against his will but it was her will that seemed to dictate things.

In order to do this book I gotta go back, he said, weaving his fingers together in such a way that made Garnet ache and want to pull him to the floor and have sex with him immediately. But of course, she didn't because their friendship, as two faculty members whose spouses were always traveling or in Boris's case, simply gone or something, was precarious. His third wife would be his last, he vowed but Garnet was a determined woman in her forties and her husband had cancer so it wouldn't be long and she wasn't going to play the grieving widow.

Boris read:

It begins with my birth and my childhood I suppose, as all memoirs do. Perhaps the chronology of life, as we know of time now, is an illusion. After all, some scientists are now posing the possibility of time moving backwards and forwards, of alternative universe with doppelgangers much like ourselves. Still, I am a journalist, and as such, I like the hard and interesting terrain of what we call facts. I need the illusion of chronology, it makes me feel safe, as if I can somehow map the universe of my one life and bring it into some kind of comprehensible reality; a known factor, like the blue vase I keep on the windowsill because of the way the light from the sun shines through

it into my room: comprehensible, as much as we can know and yet mysterious as well. For who can say where sunlight comes from and where it goes once it fades? It's not enough to say it is the sun and that's that. The sun is what? A star? Are the earth and sun just our dream, something we, as part of some giant squid of a Mind, conjured up to amuse ourselves out of boredom?

They'd had a delicious and filling dinner and his reading made her weepy and jealous at the same time. Her jealousy for Boris's talent and expertise and his dreamy way of writing made her angry enough to pull his shirt off and demand that he take her right there, crawling into his lap while he sat on his big office chair, the manuscript pages falling off his lap and of course, he did. But he had no idea of her anger—he just thought she was passionate. And he simply could not imagine a woman being jealous of a man—how could that happen?

On the dawn of a certain day, the next one as a matter of fact, Boris literally had to shove Garnet out of his bed and pack her into her ugly green 2002 Subaru Impreza so he could get on with his writing and his work and prepare for the class he was teaching that evening, a graduate seminar in Comparative Politics at the Maxwell School. He loved the subject but he hated teaching and he especially disliked this class. It was filled with vitriolic, angry and bitter thirty-year olds who were paying way too much for their education and extremely bossy about it. In addition, they had no idea of what really happened in Russia and had no curiosity about it as well. None of them thought to stay after class and ask him questions

about what it was like to be a key player at a major junction in history. To them, it was just old stuff from a century they were glad to be rid of. Most of them had not read his previous two books *Dissolution and Solution* and *Freedom for the People*, and no one had even an inkling of his one novel, *Article 6. What an ungrateful generation they were!* Boris mused to himself, with not a little bit of anger and bitterness of his own.

Listening to the Berliner Philharmonic play the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat major under the passionate, muscular and quietly explosive hands of Yefim Bronfman on the piano with Sir Simon Rattle conducting, Boris lost himself once again in the travelogue of memory. Sometimes the memory could be triggered by looking out his window in the writing room (his office) and seeing the traffic negotiate the corners of the two streets meeting there, often there was no traffic but the sound of the ice cream man's bell in the summer, or the distant train, the tree right outside of his window gave him comfort and often sent him into reverie. He named the tree Mabel, not knowing whether the tree was a *femme* or *homme*, but it was inconsequential either way; the tree was his and it spoke to him in a language that went far beyond gender. However in this case, in the case of Mabel, it was a nurturing and very comforting influence and he stuck with the feminine.

The travelogue often brought him to the same day, the same discussion the same experience over and over again. He felt that until he understood the significance of everything, or at least some things, he would be reliving this day forever!

The day was a certain day—fall was nearly over, although trees still held the color, and winter in Moscow would be blanketing them soon enough. Boris and Anna were having a discussion, one of their last as it turned out, about how Anna could ramp up her public image a bit more, go on talk shows, go to America and explicitly let the Americans know about what was happening in Chechnya, perhaps tell them the real story of Putin? Anna had zero interest in self promotion, she was not outgoing, and *anyway Boris*, this one beautiful fall day in Gorky Park, which had become the center of all kinds of cheap venders and attractions, *the Americans know all about Putin. If they wanted to do something they would. In these days of post-colonialism it's all about the money anyway. They only send the jackals in when the place cannot be bought. Russia may have resources but they will never be able to tap into ours' like they do in South America and Africa, anyway.*

Americans cannot understand Russia, Boris agreed. And they certainly cannot control us!

No, but they can drain us of all our greatest people! she replied.

Yes, Boris answered, feeling guilty. He knew and he knew she knew that he was already planning to leave Russia to teach at Syracuse. It was only a matter of a few months before he would leave Russia forever.

I will never leave Russia, Anna said quietly, prophetically.

The once majestic park had been denigrated into a tawdry imitation of something glorious. Post Soviet days had not seen grandeur for Gorky Park, the famous park that even Americans saw in the movies. Boris left in 2005 before they

began renovating the park in 2011 in an attempt to bring it back to its former splendor.

On a certain day, a rare fall sun fell upon the shoulders of Boris Volguine and Anna Politkovskaya as they sat upon a bench and discussed this and that.

On a certain day, October 3rd 2006 to be exact, four days before Anna would be murdered in the elevator of her apartment building, two friends discussed the weather both internal and external and scoffed at certain projections which were bound to come true but which neither of them could be certain of in either time or place.

Listening to the Brahms made Boris cry and he couldn't think anymore. Great music could do that to him—pop him right out of whatever reality he thought he was inhabiting, which of course was the essential illusion because as he roamed the halls of memory he allowed music to carry him back and forth between present time and past time and even occasionally into future time, so what was reality? But the memory of that last meeting with Anna continued to haunt him, he could hear the exact dialogue repeated in his head, although to be quite accurate he went home that evening and wrote most of it down in his diary. He perhaps had some kind of premonition that whatever Anna had to say might need to be preserved?

I'm just interested in the stories of ordinary people, Boris. That is where history is really written—in the eyes, the faces and the day-to-day activities of everyday people.

*But who is everyday really? Isn't that just an illusion? We're all extraordinary!
We're all special!*

*That's not true Boris and so naïve! Come on. Okay, you're special maybe. I'm
not.*

You are. You most definitely are!

You're a romantic, Boris. You belong in America!

*America is not idealistic—they're just as cynical as we are—maybe more so, he
told her, not believing it for a minute.*

*The average American believes in the lofty ideals of democracy, most of them
have no clue they are participants in the evil corruption of the corporatocracy and
their neo-colonialism.*

*Please Anna not now on this gorgeous fall day. And anyway, are things better
here?*

*Of course not! She looked down and then straight at Boris for a moment. I
know you're leaving Boris. It's okay.*

The last movement of the Brahms took Boris off guard as he sensed the impressionistic quality of the movement. Wasn't Romanticism the predecessor of the impressionists? Brahms was certainly the leader of the Romantic Movement. He gave Beethoven permission to incorporate everything from Baroque to Classicism and move on. Many people love Brahms but continually cite Beethoven as the undisputed master of the classical mode but—Boris was not a musicologist so the

“but—” pretty much stopped him in his tracks. He could go no further. For him, music was largely a pre-verbal visceral experience.

2. The Day After Now or the Day After the Day After Now: Garnet

Garnet Glass had a terrible night's sleep and she was worried about Boris. Something in her wanted to fly out of her bed and drive in her car to his house. It was 3.a.m.. It was always 3 a.m. it seemed, when the air tightened and the world collided with dreams and all kinds of fears and worries became the operative reality. She could only guess at what Boris had been through in Russia when Putin's boys finally murdered his best friend Anna and arrested him. They tortured him before John, (her dying husband) and she took hold of the whole story and brought Boris to Syracuse where he was treated like a King!

Garnet resisted the urge to feel that Boris owed her anything, but of course, she deeply felt that he did. Not only did he owe her (and John, to be fair) his life and his career, but perhaps she felt he owed it to her to treat her as a female goddess of the highest order. Boris was, of course, incapable of doing this with anyone. Every piece of him resisted perceiving others as he perceived himself: as something special. As much as he admired Anna, she was a pragmatic and truthful friend and he never worshipped her.

His mother was a large Russian woman with a common mind and a kind of dirty sense of humor; often making others the butt of her sarcastic wit— although one could hardly call it wit. A sentimentally religious woman robbed of the ability to

see past the iconography of the church with its ritualistic claptrap; a woman with a mean streak and absolutely no inclination toward self-awareness. He certainly did not worship her; he loathed her. Her large body made him sick as he grew older and she grew shorter it seemed. Towering over her sick body in the last two weeks before she succumbed to stomach cancer, he became aware of just how large he had grown in direct proportion to how small she had gotten. This made him pity her and pitying her allowed him to pretend that he loved her, but he never did.

When he was a small and very intelligent little boy his father (a professor of Physics at The Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology), told him, (Boris was six at the time) that he had a woman that he saw during the summer months and at odd weekends during winter. They rented a *dacha* near Trusovo Village and Boris's mother was *none the worse for her ignorance*, as his father put it.

Several years later his father took Boris out one day to meet this woman, a beautiful young girl, probably no older than twenty, studying at the Institute, (more than likely a student of his father's) with very long blond hair and long limbs, long face, big, huge sad blue eyes—everything about her was long including her constant air of longing and her despondent smile and worshipful manner. The planes of her face were smooth and even, except for the hint of a certain cruelty in her cheekbones that might come out later life. The eyes, while melancholy, also seemed somewhat dull, without any compassion whatsoever. Boris perceived even at that young age that she was incapable of being sad about anything other than herself.

At the curiosity-laden age of eight when Boris finally met her he knew enough to despise her. He never thought to despise his father for having her.

Instead, he longed to do the same thing when got older, but his famously passionate nature forbade him and as such he found himself constantly entangled in love relationships where jealousy and anger and hurt and hunger were all intertwined in a very uncomfortable way. He was an ardent man and his father was cold.

However, all this didn't matter any more, except as it affected how he viewed women. There was a certainty in his very deepest soul that he owed nothing to any of them. Perhaps it was his mother? Even the mention of the word *mother* became problematic to Boris. Could he even admit he hated her? *Mommochka* would have been the way she said it, in the young years when her large body and mean, loud voice would sail over the air into his ears. *Come to Mommochka Boris!* Sometimes Boris would come, with a scowl on his face; sometimes he would turn his back to her until she came up behind him teasing him, taunting him, pushing him, until he would turn around and say to her: *You go away! Go away!* Then she would mock cry, for which he absolutely despised her, until he came and kissed her rough cheek, where sometimes real tears would appear.

She was acting, he was certain of it, but her theatrical skills were limited to the manipulation of Boris's emotions.

What the hell was the matter with her? He asked Harriet one of the nights, the dark cold nights, when they would lie in his bed, smoking Gauloises and keeping their feet warm with a hot water bottle at the end of the bed.

Oh for God's sake Boris, you're a grown man. Can't you get over your mommy issues?

Spoken like a true American. Once more with feeling!

She kissed him then.

There! Is that feeling enough?

I love sex with you but we have zero intellectual rapport!

Ouch! That hurts! You think I'm stupid?

No—I think you're-- oh what the fuck.

I'm not going to be your therapist Boris.

But you're studying psychology.

I quit school. I write about hotels. And I travel. And anyway, you are not my patient! You're my lover! And I am going back to Tulsa and marrying Rob because he has a ranch and he's an environmentalist and he wants kids!

He'll never be able to get you crazy like me.

So true.

At this point he made her crazy with his sexual prowess and she loved every second of it.

It still wasn't enough.

On a certain day, it could have been yesterday, two years ago, last night, last month or even tomorrow. On this day Boris decided enough was enough. But, how to pull this off? He didn't have the guts to shoot himself and suppose he lived, brain dead and in a wheel chair or something? No. He needed to enlist someone to help him. He remembered Primo Levi's suicide. After so-called recovering and writing *Survival in Auschwitz*, becoming a famous writer, he threw himself from the staircase of his apartment house in Turin. And then to have Eli Wiesel, (*the weasel*) a

much inferior writer to Levi, unceremoniously announce that Levi had “died forty years earlier at Auschwitz!” How jealous are the inferior and stupid to the fallen high and mighty!

Post Traumatic Stress is not funny! Boris mused to himself out loud, in his office, looking over the memoir he was half-heartedly working on because his publisher offered such a handsome advance. How could he refuse? So, he refused passive-aggressively by refusing to do more than a page every other day or so. In between teaching classes and fucking Garnet and remembering past women he had fucked and of course Anna, who he did not fuck.

What was he seeking really? Ultimately? Boris sat, drumming his fingers incessantly on his desk, thinking of playing the Brahms yet again, so he could cry at the third movement, but he realized that before he could cry he had to laugh and before he could laugh he had to realize that what he was actually seeking might be completely unattainable: comprehensive, absolute freedom from the fundamental ambiguity of life itself—freedom from the ultimate doubt about being human. He stole that idea from the meditation teacher he had been listening to for two years, but what matter? It was his idea now because he claimed it and she probably brought it in from some other teacher before her. Who cared? The ambiguity was there; there was no ground and there was no ownership, so did it matter if he lived or died? And if that were the case, then didn't it also really stand to reason that perhaps it might be a total waste of a good body to kill himself?

On a certain day Boris realized that there was really nowhere to go, and that in all honesty, he was already hastening toward his death...so why shorten the journey?

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