



PSUL Magazine: *Fiction Contest*

Honorable Mention

The Organs of St. Petersburg

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“The Organs of St. Petersburg” is an homage to Nikolai Gogol’s famous 1836 short story “The Nose,” in which the titular organ of Major Kovlayov mysteriously disappears from his face and goes on a surreal journey around St. Petersburg, developing a persona of its own (much to the dismay of Major Kovlayov). My story was written on a phone on a Sunday before anyone in the house woke up, which inspired the early morning setting. Writing short fiction is my hobby. My day job is coordinating educational programs at The Arboretum at Penn State.”

At the very moment that Anna Alexandrovna was deciding whether or not to hurl herself from the Kokushkin Bridge into the waters of the Neva River, the engineer Fyodor Frumkin came hurrying up from Stolyarnyy Street, armed with a pair of pistols and carrying a map. Seeing the disheveled young woman leaning against the bridge, he called out to her: “Excuse me, young lady! Can you tell me the way to the Marsovo Field?”

Without noticing the girl’s distress, Frumkin waved his map under her nose. “I am on my way to an important...meeting...and I have utterly lost my way in this accursed city.”

Anna Alexandrovna traced a route with the forefinger of her left hand. “Walk along the embankment until you reach the second bridge. The Marsovo Field will lie on the right after you cross the river.”

“Thank you,” Frumkin said, tucking the map into his breast pocket. “How long should it take me to get there?”

“Oh, you will arrive before dawn,” the girl replied. “Time enough that you may stop for a pastry at the cafe on Sadovaya Street. They have the best ones.”

Frumkin looked startled. “How did you guess my meeting is at dawn?” he asked.

Anna shrugged. “When a man comes hurtling down the street with a brace of pistols hanging beneath his coat, I can only assume he is headed to a duel, and dawn is when duels take place...” Her voice trembled and tears sprang to her eyes.

Frumkin stared at the girl, then reached out and patted her awkwardly on her hand. “I’m in a hurry, but surely you can tell me what the matter is?”

“Oh,” she cried. “Oh, why don’t you explain why you’re off to get yourself killed, instead?”

“All right,” Frumkin replied. “One day I returned to my rooms and found my heart sitting in my chair, dirty boots propped up on my bed. When I asked who he was, he said ‘I’m Fyodor Frumkin, the same as you.’”

“Is that so!” Anna exclaimed.

“Exactly so,” Frumkin replied. “I tried to live with him, that is to say with myself, but he is lazy, uncivil, and wholly offensive. He quarrels with my superiors, is cruel to subordinates, and is incautious with my money. Worst of all, he is an irredeemable flirt. I was about to be engaged to a lovely girl. But my heart has been exchanging letters – letters of a most indecent sort – with another woman. These letters have arrived at my home, and even at my office, addressed to him, which is to say me, and of course now everyone is talking about what a scoundrel he is, and therefore I am! When confronted he did nothing but laugh, and so now we are to meet at dawn!” Tears sprang to the engineer’s eyes, and he groped in his pocket for a handkerchief. With her left hand Anna passed over her own. Frumkin loudly blew his nose into it and then offered the dripping cloth back to her. Anna received it between thumb and forefinger and tossed it into the river.

“Your handkerchief!” Frumkin exclaimed, looking down at the white square vanishing into the depths.

“I won’t be needing it any longer,” Anna said. “Let us walk together. You may treat me to a pastry from the cafe.”

Frumkin took her arm and they proceeded in the direction of Sadovaya Street, where the air was perfumed with the smell of fresh-baked sweets. As Anna and Frumkin approached the cafe, a short man in a coachman’s uniform stepped out, teeth buried in a large cheese-filled vatrushka. “Fyodor Ivanovich!” he exclaimed, crumbs exploding from his mouth. “What are you doing here? I let you off at the Marsovo Field not five minutes ago!”

“That was my heart, not me,” Frumkin replied. “We are supposed to meet at dawn and for once the rascal is early.”

The coachman gave a snort of laughter. "I myself am missing my..." he glanced sideways at Anna. "My nose. Let me give you and the little lady a ride to the field."

"I am only going as far as the Novo-Konyushenny bridge," Anna objected. "And I want a last slice of Charlotte cake first."

"They didn't make any today," the coachman said.

"Look at that line," said Frumkin anxiously, peering into the cafe. "If I am to arrive on time, surely there is no time to waste on cake." He turned to Anna. "Why don't we take him up on his offer? I shall pay him enough money to take you back to the bridge, after."

Dawn was just breaking over St. Petersburg as the coach whisked Anna Alexandrovna and Fyodor Ivanovich over the Novo-Konyushenny Bridge and the dusty Marsovo Field, well-trampled by the troops of the Pavlovsky Regiment, appeared before them. Frumkin stepped down from the coach and bowed most courteously to Anna. "Though our acquaintance has been short, I shall treasure it eternally, or so I hope," he said, before turning and striding resolutely out onto the field, where his heart could be seen, lounging in a louche manner against the plinth of the Suvorov Monument.

The coachmen and Anna Alexandrovna watched as Frumkin and his heart exchanged brief words. They marched ten paces, turned, fired, and fell in unison to the ground. The coachman shook his head sadly, wheeled his horses around, and sent them back towards the Novo-Konyushenny Bridge.

When the coachman handed Anna down to the street, she stepped immediately to the edge of the bridge and put her feet up onto the railing. "Miss, not that it's my business, but wouldn't you prefer to simply go home?" the coachman asked gently.

"Oh, I would!" Anna exclaimed.

"What has happened that has distressed you so?"

"Haven't you noticed?" the girl said, bitterly, using her left hand to pull back her right sleeve, revealing the hand that wasn't there. "One night I woke up to the scratching of a pen. When I went to light the candle, I found that my hand had departed my wrist and was sitting atop my little desk, writing a letter."

"A letter to whom?" the coachman asked.

"When I went to see, my hand purposefully spilled a bottle of ink all over the page," Anna said. "Every night I tried to keep myself awake to see who she was writing to and at last I caught her, that is to say myself, and wrested the letter from her. I found it to be entirely immodest. Later I found my drafts in a drawer, and I discovered that she is, or I am, exchanging letters with a series of gentlemen all over the city, toying with their affections and even pitting them against each other. I would not be surprised at all to learn

that my hand and poor Fyodor Ivanovich's heart had been in correspondence. I can no longer stand to be the source of such mischief."

The coachman leaned against the edge of the bridge and lit his pipe. "St. Petersburg is plagued by independent body parts," he said. "I have one myself, you know. A...nose."

"Your nose?" Anna scoffed. "I can see it there on your face."

The coachman sucked on his pipe. "Not exactly a nose," he said, at last. "An...unmentionable organ. At first, I was enraged to have it separated from my body, yet – because he is a terrible layabout – still utterly dependent on me. Just when I had resolved to strangle him, I came home and discovered him in bed with my wife. I thought to myself, 'Well, here's a stroke of luck!' Now he keeps that shrew occupied when I'm at work."

"A shocking story!" Anna cried, blushing.

The coachman shrugged. "That's the problem with you bourgeois types," he said. "Always agonizing. What's my heart doing, what's my hand doing, what's my head up to when I'm not thinking!" He held out the sack of pastries from the cafe. "Have a vatrushka," he said, "and for the love of God find a way to live with yourself."