

The Red Banner of Labour
by Roisin Coyle

for Eoin

She was in St. Petersburg for a week, well four nights really, and she was already in awe.
She had learned about the Siege of St. Petersburg, when it was Leningrad. Or Petrograd.

One of them anyway and she was in love with their stoicism. Unreal endurance. Their stubborn refusal to admit defeat. By all accounts, this city should have been razed to the ground, but it wasn't. They hunkered in, they ate glue and they threw concerts. When they knew the attack was coming, they didn't flee. They signed up to fight. Eileen wondered what she would have done. She imagined herself standing side by side with her fellow comrades. She liked to think that she would have stuck around too, signed up, battened down the hatches. And they didn't just survive. They managed the hell quite well. As one in three of them died, only a tiny percentage turned to cannibalism. Given that people were dying in the streets of hunger and all that available flesh was just walking around, weakened. Given that they were eating glue and parts of machinery to keep the hunger pains at bay.

She read the recorded stories of cannibalism. Mostly family members killing other more disposable family members. For the good of the stronger ones. Probably a lot more cases of strangers killing each other. But they were less salacious stories, a bit too predictable to be front and centre. She was drawn to the darker ones too, although she supposed with cannibalism cases, they were all quite dark. But the more disturbing ones, the mother killing her youngest to feed the older child. They were the stories she'd remember. They were the ones that she would morally weigh out. If it had to be done, could she do it? She removed any doubt from the situation. Doubt was part of an alternate test and she would factor it into the testing story at the later point. So, for now, the younger would definitely die. The older could survive, with a little help. This one was both a moral quandary and a test of her logical strength. Once she had revisited the story a few times, she liked to imagine the two children in greater detail. That was the more difficult test. If she imagined the cute giggles of the baby, her innocence and trust- it was always a female baby, a little frailer and less likely to survive than her male counterpart. If she could imagine that and still maintain the logical strength to smother her, then she was proud of her logical resilience.

She was travelling alone, an independent traveller as she liked to see herself. She loved the feeling of freedom. Complete choice. Where would she visit today? Where would she stay tonight? What would she eat for dinner? Sometimes she liked to make very uncool choices about her trip. Just to prove that she was in complete control. She would eat in a Burger King or go to the only English language cinema in town. Things that a person pretending to be an independent traveller couldn't do. They thought they were free, but really they were being controlled by yet another set of rules. She worked hard to make sure that she was doing as she pleased.

Today, she decided that she would visit the Arctic and Antarctic Museum. Her walk to the museum was a more difficult one than she had imagined. As she slid across the iced footpaths, elderly women looked on in contempt, their ski poles keeping their sturdy, stubborn bodies upright. She smiled to herself as she could imagine what they thought of her. A weak, fragile tourist. She was smiling because she could see herself in them. She could imagine what it would be like to see each day as a fight for survival. To know that a walk to the shops for some rich tea – they wouldn't need to eat anything sweeter – to know that could be their last walk. They prepared for it and struck out, in search of biscuits. She could imagine their independence. She could feel it. They never acquiesced and she knew that she wouldn't either.

She slowly climbed the slippery steps leading into the museum, not a handrail in sight. The building seemed deserted, only a couple of souls wandering the halls. She bought an audio guide as the exhibit was mostly in Russian. It was an impressive collection, full of information, articles and a stuffed wild animals section crowned with a giant polar bear. She came across the exhibit on Scott's exploration and she was drawn to a page from his diary. The last page, according to the audio guide. She wondered why the last page of the famous British explorer's diary was there, in Russia and why it lay separate from the rest of the journal. She imagined a vindictive political dispute over ownership. A violent fight and the final page ripped away from its companions, an unhappy compromise. The page

itself only contained a handful of words. At first, his words were full of acceptance. Scott knew that death was coming and he wanted to greet it with a stiff upper lip, but in the postscript his resignation collapsed. His last words were full of desperation, a plea “For God’s sake, look after our people”.

She imagined his anguish and wondered if these words gave him any comfort, knowing that he had done what he could for those he loved. But as she moved away, she found herself thinking that he might have regretted dropping his stoic mask in his final moments, his plea puncturing his carefully worked portrait of a gentleman explorer. She was trying to decide which version was more likely when she found herself staring at an old photograph. It showed a surgeon, complete in gown and mask, and he appeared to be operating on himself. The label read: Leonid Rogozov. She alerted her audio guide to her discovery and found that Leonid was indeed performing an appendectomy on himself. She looked again at his focused face, intent on completing his task. The only doctor stationed at Novolazarevskaya Station in the Antarctic, he became ill during a particularly isolating blizzard. With no other means available, he chose to operate on himself rather than die from a burst appendix. She imagined his horror when he realised he needed the surgery. The panic. But in the photograph, he seemed calm. He was a man at work, wrist deep in his own stomach cavity. She looked at his face, the face of her new hero.

The audio guide gave her the basics of the story, but she needed more. She read up about the operation. It took nearly two hours in all, in the middle of the night for some reason. Maybe he knew he was running out of time. He kept his illness a secret for the first while, he didn’t want to scare his colleagues. Maybe he didn’t want to say it out loud. He had two assistants, a meteorologist and a driver, they didn’t have any medical training but would hand him tools and hold a mirror for Leonid to see what he was doing. He taught them how to give him adrenaline, in case he passed out. He also taught them how to aspirate him, but surely at that point, if he was unconscious and not

breathing, surely then he couldn't survive. Maybe it was just a comfort for him. Or maybe it was a comfort for them. The station director was present in case one of the helpers fainted. The only use of pain medication was a local anesthetic into the abdominal wall. Once he got inside his stomach cavity, he couldn't afford any more. He was threading the line between pain and consciousness.

The operation nearly failed immediately, as he nicked his blind gut on his way to the appendix. It was at that point he realised the mirror wasn't helping him. The mirror reflection was causing a confusion in his already pressured co-ordination and he couldn't rely on it anymore. He decided to carry on the operation using his sense of touch to guide him. A half an hour into the surgery, he began to feel the side effects of the anesthetic so he had to rest every four or five minutes to manage the growing weakness and nausea. But he soldiered on, removed his rotten appendix, applied antibiotics and stitched himself back up. He insisted on instructing the cleaning of the surgical area, also his bedroom, before taking sleeping tablets. She wondered if this was a pedantic move or just the high of survival. He was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labour when news of his success travelled to Moscow, but he didn't want any of the fame that it offered. He simply went back to his practice and continued his life. The endurance, the determination, the focus. The modesty. She was in love.

She thought about her morning. She was suffering from a head cold, sore throat and runny nose. The sight of the cold Russian streets, the ice and the sleet, made her want to hide away. The act of getting up had seemed a cruel one, but she had a limited amount of days left and she couldn't simply miss out. So she had struggled with herself and, persuaded on by promises of hot drinks and painkillers, she soldiered on, heroically saving her holiday. But now she felt so weak, surely Leonid would have laughed at her self-pity. When he found weakness within himself, he cut deep and removed it. No fuss, no pity. She would do better. She would identify her own weakness when she felt it engulf her, she would cut it out. She could be ruthless too.

She found a print of the photograph and had it framed. She kept it above her mantelpiece, as close as she came to having a religious icon. She told everyone about him, in gushing tones. She liked to use him to flirt with interested men and to shock timid women. She found that the men would hide their disgust, they saw the more gruesome elements of the story as part of their domain. It would be unmanly to run from the details, as they believed that they would have endured the same. Given the appropriate medical training. Any flicker of disgust or horror would have proven them incapable of the feat and so unable to measure up to Eileen's Soviet lover.

She sought out women who would hate the story, who couldn't see the glory in it. She was disappointed when she misjudged them and they actually were actually interested. But on the whole, she was skilled at guessing people's limits and she enjoyed how they edged away from the photograph, shielded themselves from the details. Every wince showed her that she was more like him than most. When they missed the heroism of the act, she felt a little sorry for them. Some asked if he was good-looking, without the surgical mask. She thought that they had missed the point, trying to understand her passion and relate to her. But really they could just see through her. They could see her using them, publicising her own strength by highlighting their squeamishness, and they resented the implication.

As the years went by, the photograph remained at the centre of her sitting room and she used it to keep herself strong. If she returned home, after a particularly grueling day at work, she imagined his skepticism in a thick Russian accent as he peered at me over his open wound, "Stressed? What is the meaning of this word?". It made her laugh, shook her out of her self-pity and on with her evening. If she managed something difficult, he would grudgingly praise her. She joined a rowing club and began to train daily, her back and legs would ache in the evenings and he would say "Maybe you are not as...pitiful as you seem". When the weddings started and she found herself on terrible, seemingly

endless dates, she would return home to him, imagining his deep throated laughter. She would laugh too at the absurdity of it all; the enforced joy of the proceedings, the repeated conversations, the tear-inducing embarrassment of the speeches. He would giggle like a child when he saw her trudge in from another circus. She would roll her eyes at him and he would understand. Then she would wriggle out of her uncomfortable clothes, impractical heels and cosy up to him with a vodka on the couch. They agreed that weddings were not their type of scene.

Interested and interesting men came and went, but her real loyalty lay elsewhere until the love of her life made his entrance. Gary, an ordinary name for an extraordinary being, she thought. Suddenly, it wasn't enough that he was interested, she wanted him fascinated. She introduced him to her prized photograph but rather than trying to impress her or be impressed by her, he wasn't that interested in the game. Gary thought it was an impressive act, but none of that glory seemed to trickle down to her. Gary was immune to acts of glory and didn't feel the need to try and identify with Leonid. She tried to explain her relationship with the photograph, how it inspired her and made her feel strong. This was an unprecedented step, none of the others required this explanation, and she felt Leonid's shock at her betrayal. But her honesty played better with Gary and he was duly fascinated by how she was inspired and what she wanted to be.

A distance began to grow between Eileen and Leonid as she became closer to Gary. Leonid would mutter snide remarks to her about Gary's lack of physical strength as Gary was a small, slight man by nature. When Gary would struggle carrying in a bag of coal, she could feel Leonid temporarily stop his surgery to judge Gary's progress. When Gary complained of a headache, she could hear Leonid snort in derision. She knew that these interruptions were intended to make her doubt her love for Gary, but his flaws seemed unaccountably adorable to her. She would help him with his coal bag struggles and they

would heave and stumble together. When a headache completely incapacitated Gary, she would soothe his forehead with her cold hands.

Leonid, realising his initial approach had failed, decided another tact. He would mention, just in passing, that she had missed yet another rowing session. He would question, casually, why she couldn't fit into her favourite tight, red dress. He would reminisce about the times she went travelling, alone, and how she seemed fearless in her freedom. She knew what he was getting at, she had felt herself get a little sloppy, a little weaker with all her love. She re-joined the rowing club with vigour and for a while, the atmosphere between them relaxed.

But she found it difficult to keep everyone happy and Gary became resentful of her time commitment to the team, the daily rowing sessions monopolizing her time. Leonid was encouraging, he loved to see her active and fit as she was before. He also loved how Gary and Eileen would bicker over it, relieved that Eileen was finally beginning to question her devotion to Gary. To Leonid's disappointment though, they seem to get over the disagreement and Gary would even occasionally accompany her to race meets, cheering her on from the riverbank. Leonid, limited by his existence as a photograph, never had the option to see her in action and so his resentment grew. He stopped trying to engage with her, kept his head down and concentrated on his stitches instead.

Another few years past and barely a word had passed between them. Worse, she didn't even seem to notice. Her bump had started to show and he was disgusted by the change in her. One day, she dropped the TV remote in front of the couch and struggled to pick it up again. Her bump had expanded quite a bit over the last month and a certain portion of the floor was unavailable to her. She kicked the remote to various locations on the floor, trying to achieve the correct swooping angle. After a few moments, she managed to reach it and she flopped down on the couch to get her breath back. All of a sudden, she looked him in the eye. The first look he had received in months, maybe even years.

He saw shame in her eyes at being brought so low in front of him. He was shocked that he could elicit any form of response from her and delighted that she still cared enough about him to feel shame in particular. He returned her look with one of pity. But a generous pity, one which he felt showed her the depth of his love for her. A look to encourage her to change and improve her ways. She began to cry and he felt a wave of relief. Now he knew that she wanted him back. She wanted things to be as they were.

She saw him looking at her, his half masked face full of pity for her and she saw what he pitied. She was so tired to not feeling like herself, of being big and restrained, unable to join in, unable to help herself. The struggle he witnessed was part of a daily routine of physical comedy that she now had to endure. And the worst was that she had to pretend to be delighted with these indignities, in a permanent state of bliss, showing off her supposed glow to the world and convincing them that she would be a fit mother. She couldn't publicly show her fear or her doubts. Even if she did, like in the doctors' that morning, she'd just told that it was pretty natural to worry and that the baby was doing well. They didn't mention the corrosion of her identity or the distortion of her body. Only her function as mother mattered now and from somewhere within her, the non-mother part of her was panicking. She remembered walking through the streets of St. Petersburg, strong and free, and she realised what she had lost. She could hear Leonid remind her that this was a phase, that her inhabitant would be expelled soon, that her body would be her own again. She thought about the prospect of the birth and she cried a little harder.

Leonid felt that maybe it was time for some tough love. He reminded her that she had gotten herself into this position. That women did this all the time. That woman had done it during the Siege of Leningrad, as they dodged falling bombs and snacked on glue. That it was the ordinary natural order and not something worth losing your composure over. If he could operate on himself, with limited pain relief and no support, then she could do what women had done forever. She was a little resentful of his

mentioning his surgery, it felt like he had already overplayed that card, but she knew that he meant well. And that he did believe in her ability to give birth. Coming from him, that meant a lot.

When she finally did give birth, it was a long and drawn-out labour. In her addled state, she insisted that Gary took a photo of the birth, of their child's head crowning and the mayhem that surrounded it. Gary thought it was a gruesome idea, but was not in a strong bargaining position due to his involvement in her current agony. He took the photo, no flash, in the hopes that she would forget or beg him to delete it later. She did neither. Once they were settled in at home, she asked him to print off the photo, 5 by 7 inches, the same size as her prized Leonid Rogozov photograph that still hung over their fireplace. Gary was in a quandary. He had wanted to replace the photograph for some time, but now dreaded the prospect of what he imagined might be the replacement. But he remembered that she had yet to see the crowning photograph and maybe, blown up to size, she might rethink any plans she had for it. Gary presented it to her, along with a declaration of his love for her to cushion the blow.

To his surprise, she was not horrified but proud of what she saw. She saw the look of determination of her face, the pain but also the concentration, the focus. She saw the blood and unnamed bloodily fluids but also the crown of a now very familiar head. One that she had grown in her body, with her life's blood and continued to feed with her strength. She looked at Leonid, his eyes focused on his operation and saw the same determination. She placed her photograph on the mantelpiece and in time, it hung side by side with Leonid.

Leonid rolled his eyes at his new companion, laughing at Eileen's self indulgence. He wondered how her act could possibly compare to his? Where was the heroism in this mundane act? But Eileen's photograph countered that she had given life with her act, he had simply saved his own. That she had willingly chosen her heroism, he had only been

a victim of fate. That her pain had been a choice, whereas his was a result of poor planning. He bristled at this insult and began listing the honours he received, the fame that he rejected. Her photograph didn't contradict him, she saw that she had hit a nerve. But she didn't back down either, holding his glare while he ranted on. As he ran out of ammunition, he noticed her focus, her steely reserve. For the first time, he saw the beauty in her pain, the dignity in her stoicism. Leonid was unaccustomed to these feelings since, as a photographer, he had missed out on a lot of life. She was more worldly than him, as photographers go, and guided them through their courtship over the next few months.

Gary was a little horrified as he realised that the birthing photograph was a more permanent fixture but he was certain that it wouldn't last in position. He thought that Eileen would be embarrassed when they had visitors and that every time the photograph needed to be hidden from view it was less likely to be reinstated when the visitors left. But he was wrong, she prized the birth photograph as she prized Leonid. Eileen continued to use the photographs on visitors, but the action had changed. She sought out the same groups but now she used her photograph to shock proud men and to encourage timid women. The photographs hung side by side for years, content in their own struggles and united in their strength.