

November 22, 2006

It came to me in a vision as I began for the last time to slip out of consciousness. A luminescent trail, throbbing; this grime-soaked city will now have another spurious layer of history to digest. The tourists will follow, meeting on Wardour Street daily at noon (£5 concessions, £10 everyone else). It makes more sense than the pilgrims of O'Connell and Dame Street – I am indeed a palimpsest for my nation.

Wasabi and soy spilt on lacquer easy-wipe tables. Scaramella, tarantella. (Did he embed it within the slippery fish, curled tight?) Afterwards the street names of Soho acted as an incantation: Broadwick, Beak, Great Windmill. My next rendezvous was under the trees in the small churchyard of St James's, amongst the purveyors of jewellery from Hungary and blankets from India. Nobody remembers anything untoward from the day in question.

It is true, the heavy set Lugovoi and I then tracked north-west through Mayfair to the Millennium Hotel on Grosvenor Square, the wealth sitting fatly on the streets like a stuffed goose. The shaven heads of the Americans were paired silently around the bar, and the bottles of whisky and amaretto glowed amber. (I would have known, tasted, if it had been slipped into my drink.) From this point the footage from CCTV becomes even more unsatisfying.

My face is flashing on the television, unrecognisable, while here in real life my internal organs are being laid to excessive waste. The experts cannot tell what has invaded my system, but I have seen the laboratories with their stark benches, and I know. I miss the endless white nights in Leningrad, the bridges cracking upwards at four in the morning allowing the ships, unwatched, to slide through. Hubris to believe I could escape the long shadow of the regime. My mind wanders further. Winter in Voronezh, and I find one of the missing Fabergé eggs half-buried in the snow.

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