Peter Flew

Greshniki

This creative text details the author's impressions of people and events that took place in Russia in 2003. It recalls 'Greshniki', a nightclub in St Petersburg that hosted gay rights organisations and offered a space for people on the margins to meet. Names and descriptive details have been changed to protect identities.

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Later, I would think of 'Greshniki' as the cradle of our lives. It was shortly after the millennium, a time when gay life existed in the half-light of Peter's 'abstract and intentional' city. A whisper between two worlds, it murmured in the fading courtyard at dusk, and on the street corner at dawn. 'Greshniki', or 'Sinners', was a threshold in between, blending night into day. There, you recognised the men you encountered fleetingly outside. Those men who stood behind you on the escalators. Who ate their meal politely in the restaurant alone. Whose glances seared as you fixed on your book. However, in 'Greshniki', these inchoate figures took bolder form. In that damp building by the Griboedov canal, gay men searched for others and themselves too. As a man of nineteen, I made my own relationships behind its vast steel doors. I drew close to those men from Vasilievskii island and far-flung Krasnosel'skii. They shared with me the loose threads of faith and sexuality across the divide. With one, I explored further than small-town England had allowed. Writing at a distance, twenty years on, I understand that we danced with the shadows and were the captives of our unconscious hinterlands. 'Greshniki' brought our fractured selves together before we lapsed into lives apart.

(i) Day

I first entered 'Greshniki' on a Saturday afternoon in the spring of 2003. It was the venue for 'Kryl'ia' [Wings], a Russian gay rights organisation. My landlady smiled quizzically as I left for the city centre. Although Natal'ia was friendly and caring, we danced gingerly around the questions of romance. The silence that surrounded my inner life in England had stalked me to her kitchen. When pushed, I made up a girlfriend. I returned the conversation frequently to her dream of a holiday in Prague. Getting out of Natal'ia's flat meant a modicum of fresh air. My reasons for being in Russia were opaque. There was a desire to learn the

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language, to 'understand' the culture, but also a naïve search for connection, a place called home. I had discovered 'Kryl'ia' in an internet café as I searched for ways to join the faint dots of my adolescent experience. As loneliness enveloped me, I looked to 'Kryl'ia' to overcome my sense of estrangement, which had been magnified by St Petersburg.

From *marshrutka* to metro, the anonymous tower blocks of Prospekt Zhukova were swapped for classical facades. Despite the receding winter, the canal by 'Greshniki' remained frozen. Next door, the Kazan' Cathedral looked lumpen and grey. Just like the gay pub in my faded seaside town, I had to knock to be let in. As I waited, a familiar sense of isolation bred inside. A pair of eyes glared from a hatch in the door before I was shown upstairs. Alexander Kukharskii, the founder of 'Kryl'ia', met me in the corridor. In his late fifties, he had once been a university professor; his sexuality had strangled his career. With warmth and curiosity, he showed me to a seat where a small group drank tea in silence. The room was sticky with beer, its dusky light filtered through painted glass. As we waited, a young man with long hair entered. He scanned the assembled group before sitting by my side. Kukharskii welcomed us before another attendee moved forward to read a paper on literature. The man with long hair noticed my confusion. Guessing a linguistic barrier, he interpreted scraps of the proceedings. Regardless, I failed to make sense of the talk. The meeting felt formal, even academic. I did not appreciate Russia's tradition of the circle (*kruzhok*), nor the significance of gathering in that way. In Bristol, I had gone to Old Market Street to discuss condoms and medication. In 'Greshniki', it was poetry of the Silver Age.

I sat with my interpreter friend afterwards in a coffee shop on Nevskii. Misha laughed at my incomprehension as we watched the pedestrians tramping by. Why had I come to Russia, how had I found 'Greshniki'? I had no neat answer for him. 'Kryl'ia' was the only place Misha came to meet gay men in Petersburg. Although he was a regular, he told me he preferred to observe rather than lead the charge. In fact, his passions lay elsewhere. He was twenty-seven and worked in the education department at the Hermitage, where he was an expert on religious art. He spoke ecstatically about the paintings. For him, they were icons, gateways to transcendence not experienced elsewhere. He invited me to join his training programme before our second coffee was ordered. The offer was generous, but one I struggled to accept immediately. Rather than commit, I left an empty pause as our drinks were served.

Natal'ia stared archly as she passed the phone to me the next day. Misha had called and he invited me for tea that afternoon. He proposed going to the flat where he lived with his mother. Despite my reservations, I agreed to go. Misha was concerned I would get lost; he came all the way to Kirovskii zavod to collect me. His English was precise, and he articulated words in a staccato over the rolling noise of the metro. Conversation with Misha dwelt on religious and cultural themes. That day, on the escalator of Vasileostrovskaia station, we talked about homosexual men in Russian history. Meanwhile, the man behind us was eavesdropping. He interjected to confirm that Gogol' was most certainly gay. He flashed a grin as he passed us at the exit turnstile. Even Misha was shocked that a stranger could intrude on such a 'delicate' matter. I noticed quickly how gay men in St Petersburg were attuned to risk. What seemed innocent could quickly turn into trouble. I recognised it as the pervasive fear of the classroom, a feeling that I thought I would escape in my move from home.

Tea was grander than I had anticipated. His mother shifted plates of salad around a large mahogany table. There was little room to spare for the glasses of sweet wine she wanted to set down. Although she spoke little English, we only talked after she left the lounge. He directed me to the food; once or twice, he briefly touched my hand. Misha had never discussed his sexuality with his mother, though the question had lingered between them since he was a child. His awareness had developed at a young age. He recalled running his fingers over the huge granite atlantes of the New Hermitage as his mother lifted him to the stone. He was mesmerised by the veins on the enormous feet. They seemed to pulse as each toe arched to resist the pressure from above. From the vantage of adulthood, he saw that as the moment that augured something new, a knowledge that would test his faith. For me, it was seeing a lone man with his bike in Patterdale. Something stirred as I saw him leaning against the dry-stone wall from the back window of the family car. These were silent moments, when question marks were traced, and another world came into view.

My time with Misha was spent mostly walking the lines of Vasil'evskii, where conversion could flow. Beyond a momentary touch of the shoulder, or a brush of the hands, we kept physically apart. On these walks, we frequently returned to the topic of religion. I shared Misha's childhood immersion in Christianity. He grew up in Orthodoxy, while I was formed in English nonconformism. Curiously, we had both toyed with monasticism in our youthful devotion. While the Baptist Church had

little outlet for eremitic prayer, Misha went to the Orthodox seminary. There he hoped to submerge, or struggle against, his homosexuality. However, he was expelled when an affair with a fellow seminarian was revealed. The matter was handled discreetly, and his departure was made to look like his choice. When friends and family asked what had happened, he claimed it was a matter of religious conscience. Shortly after, he converted to Catholicism. It was then that he embraced the religious art of the West. He described the Hermitage as his cocoon and told me how he prayed in silence before Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*. The only vestige of his Orthodoxy was his long hair. However, in the context of 'Kryl'ia', and the gathering social winds, it seemed to signify transgression rather than obedience.

Misha asked several times if I had thought more about his programme, but I felt conflicted. I struggled to separate an act of kindness from feeling corralled. There was no common language that would simultaneously make me feel safe and give Misha the connection he desired. I let the gaps between the calls lengthen, before letting the phone remain in Natal'ia's hand. It was the inarticulate withdrawal of an inexperienced young man. I sometimes think about that first afternoon tea on the island and the photo his mother showed me that day. It was of her son kneeling before John Paul II, whom Misha had met in Poland the year before. A hesitant smile was traced on his lips as the pontiff's hands lay on his head. He looked at total peace. His mother glanced between her son and the image with an all-encompassing pride. Perhaps there, under the pope's hands, amid the worlds Misha occupied, he found a moment of feeling whole. I did not attend another meeting of 'Kryl'ia' and would return only to 'Greshniki' at night. Some weeks later, I inadvertently saw Misha leading his students around the Hermitage. We both broke into flushed smiles, before continuing our separate ways.

(ii) Night

It was late spring; the snow had thawed. After weeks sat in Natal'ia's kitchen, I was longing for some excited pleasure, the thrill of a cavernous beat. From up high, I could trace the dusty tracks that lead to the trolleybus. I had been fearful of going out at night. Now I could no longer supress my instinct. 'Greshniki' was the only place I thought to venture in my search. I sat alone on Nevskii and picked at salmon *bliny* while sipping a beer. I mustered my courage. In Bristol, the few forays to the clubs of Frogmore Street had felt thrilling. It had been an adrenaline rush to wave at my schoolfriends as they passed by. However, I had

been left unmoored by St Petersburg. I was unsure about what to do, how to behave. As I approached the entrance of 'Greshniki', a multitude of scenarios unravelled. What had been anonymous in the light of day, seemed disconcerting as the night drew near.

A pair of eyes glared through the small grate; the wait to enter was interminable. Inside, 'Greshniki' felt less a portal to liberation, than a break from the storm. Compared to my earlier visit, it seemed uncluttered. There were no cups and saucers lying around, no idling dust motes in the air. Instead, a profound darkness shrouded the bar. The only light came from the strobes, which were punctuated by bodies walking through the beams. The atmosphere seemed heavy, underscored by the convulsive music. The only place I could sit was on the seating wrapped around a rostrum on the dance floor. I rested there awhile and observed the room filling up. The majority were lone men looking hard into their beers. Every so often, they paused to flash their eyes across the room; I searched for a momentary glance. In this thick mood, the music made me feel comatose. However, that feeling of somnambulance was soon broken. As I swept the space before me, I was kicked in the head by a dancer twisting above on the rostrum. Alone in his movements, he carried on circling. I felt my head for blood, but only my dignity had been bruised. However, while most looked away, I was met by a hesitant smile. After I returned to the room with a fresh beer, I saw it again. Slowly, I was drawn into its orbit.

Pavel spoke little English and so I tried to speak Russian. In the dark of the club, I learnt he was a year older and studying history at the university. On the metro ride home, he told me he shared a room with his mother; they lived further south in Krasnosel'skii. That morning, as the day broke across the suburbs, the sky curled with dark reds against the deep blue. Something promising emerged in the silence between our questions. I felt at ease, and we swapped numbers before I left the trolleybus. Natal'ia was alert to the speed with which I retrieved the handset later that day. She grinned as she passed over the phone; the blush on my face compounded the confusion. Over a few short phrases, I agreed to meet Pavel that afternoon.

It was a bright day on Nevskii, the kind that retains something of the winter. I could see Pavel in the distance wearing a leather jacket to break the chill. He greeted me with a shy glance, and we searched each other as if to detect the remains of our first encounter. Our footsteps soon fell into a regular pattern, and we explored the streets toward the river. The conversation was hesitant, the stillness punctuated by the

odd question. We established reference points – 'do you like Elton John?', 'have you heard of Zemfira?' – before we lapsed into a studied reserve. He pointed to different statues and took me to his favourite cathedral. The incense from the morning remained in the air, vespers was yet to begin. I lit a candle, the first in an Orthodox church. Despite the linguistic distance, there was something reassuring about being with him. Only St Petersburg intruded on this calm. By the New Hermitage, two lads cadged a couple of cigarettes. They had no obvious malign intent but looked at us with derision. We paused to smoke as we waited for them to move away. Above us, the atlantes struggled to shoulder all the weight. From the moment Pavel lit my first cigarette, something flickered into life.

Shortly after, I went to his communal flat. It was 2003 and these *kommunalki* continued to exist. While my area was dominated by 90s high-rises, his was peppered with stubby blocks from an earlier age. Even today, those southern suburbs still dominate the Petersburg of my mind. The bathroom and kitchen were shared, while his room was divided by a linen sheet. It was a sunny afternoon, and we sat with his neighbours drinking beer. A huge German Pointer called Dan loped around and munched on slices of sausage. I was a curiosity at the kitchen table. Bogdan, who lived down the hall, made playful jokes at my expense; his girlfriend, giggled mischievously. Neither asked how I had met Pavel, but they understood enough from the ellipses in our conversation. This Russia was welcoming, friendly, almost open. It was not the heaviness of the street, but the intimacy of home. Drink flowed; we laughed. Even Pavel's mother, whose skin was pale and careworn, found a moment to smile. She smoked incessantly and sparred playfully with her son. That night, she slept in a neighbour's bed, while Pavel and I settled on the sofa in their room.

As the dry months beckoned, several weeks were spent in that flat. It was a hazy summer that followed the shifting sun over the kitchen table. We travelled rarely to the centre and did not return to 'Greshniki'. Instead, we watched TV, drank beer, and prepared *pel'meni* at home. Behind the dusty curtain, the sexual embrace occurred in the daily rhythm. We ignored the constant hum of the *kommunalka* as we touched each other in tender silence. These were new experiences for me, like nothing I had explored at home. In that small pocket of St Petersburg, we learnt to move a little more freely in the world. After the bright mornings entangled together, we would walk on the scrubland between our homes. Once or twice, we made it as far as Prospekt Zhu-

kova; Natal'ia smiled as she sat us down for dinner. Later, we sometimes entered a neighbourhood church. Pavel's faith was easier, more experiential. His was a religion of icons and candlelight. We drew close as we murmured our prayers in the dusky warmth. It was not my faith, but I discovered something in the words. Meanwhile, a looming despondency gathered. I had no prospect of being able to stay in Russia. Even if it was possible, Pavel questioned whether we could withstand the city. Yet while he hoped to leave, he was not able to settle abroad. As my departure drew near, our romance peaked with an almost breathless desperation before it shrugged into its conclusion. On the escalator down to the metro, we whispered half-heartedly, 'What will I do without you?'.

On the evening before I left St Petersburg, Pavel gave me a family icon. Initially, I refused the gift, but his mother pressed it into my hands. It was a depiction of Tikhon Kaluzhskii stood in the hollow of a tree, where he was said to have lived in quiet contemplation. The icon was of a type found in villages across Russia: late nineteenth century, ten by eight centimetres, painted on tin. Having passed it down the generations, they now wanted me to take it to England. I accepted the gift and left the next day. Years passed before I heard from Pavel again. Despite a two-year sojourn in Spain, he had remained attached to St Petersburg and decided to return. At one point he taught history in a school, later he worked in real estate. His mother died in 2014. I told him the icon of Tikhon remained on my bookshelf; he said he was glad it stood in my home. Despite his reassurances, I felt it was not mine to keep. One day, far in the distant future, I will return it to him.

(iii) 'Greshniki'

In his short story *The Reservoir* [Vodoem, 1989], Evgenii Popov depicts the ghostly vision of two skeletons on a raft in the water. They are the spectres of two gay men. As they grip one another, they softly sing the refrain of a well-known pop song: 'There's no need to be sad, life goes on'. Before death, these men had lived in the half-light. Only as ghosts did the locals of the reservoir understand they were gay. I did not go behind 'Greshniki''s doors again. It closed for the last time in 2008. Perhaps now, all these years later, things are different, but I am not so sure. In Moscow, last summer, young gay men gathered for techno parties and were visible in the parks on the river. Yet those I met all wanted to leave. Berlin was a popular choice. Since 2022, that seems even more remote. I wonder too, what has happened to that older genera-

tion of men who went to 'Greshniki'. The toll of being compartmentalised leaves a lifetime of scars; I can trace their outline as middle age draws near. Did the men of 'Greshniki' slide further into the margins, or did they manage to escape? Or are they like Popov's skeletons, living between two worlds, longing for a lasting embrace?

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