

Sample chapter

Evald Flisar

Tea with the Queen

The next day we placed notices in five newsagent's shops announcing that "a writer and painter will be guiding tourists interested in culture around the artistic quarters of London: cheap, intense, funny, and unforgettable." Oddly enough, on the first day some twelve people were already gathered at the appointed meeting place under the statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square, mostly American, retired couples, a few younger Japanese people, and a handful of hippies from various European countries. Solouhin's Rasputin-like appearance had so excited them that they even appeared willing to forgive his impossible accent, especially after he explained that he was a Russian writer who had escaped the Siberian gulag and had become a slave to the idiotic desire to scrape out an existence in the free world; that is, until his magnificent trilogy would be published and his own house would belong among London's most notable residences.

"You can call me Dostoevsky," he said casually to the group.

After a moment, he introduced me as a painter whom Tito had banished from Yugoslavia because I refused the order to depict his wife as less fat than she actually was in an official family portrait. I did muster a modest measure of patriotism by being prepared to reduce the lady's mass by five kilograms, but not by the twenty that was demanded of me. That was the reason that I, like him, now resided in this brave world where freedom was so absolute that the authorities couldn't care less if we freely collapsed from starvation as we struggled for our five minutes of fame that would come when the fashion-driven gallery owners discovered my genius and subsequently elevated me to the status of most recent wonder of the world.

The Russian's anecdotes on my account were exaggerated but I didn't have the heart to object, especially when I noticed that we emanated a magnetism that attracted more people to our group every day. That

is how, for the price of three pounds per head, we started our daily tours through the parts of London that Dostoyevsky, in his quick and idiosyncratic manner, designated as "important milestones in the most interesting city in Europe." Between locations that were not too far from each other we went on foot on the crowded sidewalks. In order to avoid losing anyone from the group, which grew bigger day by day, one of the participants had to carry a placard with the words *London Literary and Cultural Tour* written on it. This honour usually belonged to me. We conquered greater distances by using the tube. The tour began at ten in the morning and ended at three in the afternoon with one stop at the Italian restaurant, Amalfi, in the middle of Soho where Dostoevsky had negotiated a ten percent fee for each guest he brought. In addition to the fee, it usually happened that one of our more generous clients covered the cost of our lunch. We tended to order with tactical modesty, eating something less bountiful than the tourists themselves did, except, of course, when some merciful American sponsor entreated us to eat enough for bad times as well. On such occasions, we threw caution to the wind and ordered three portions of cannelloni or spaghetti Bolognese and polished off three pints of beer each. Most of our clients saw the opportunity to do something good for two slightly comical refugees from behind the Iron Curtain as a real experience. Almost all wanted to be photographed with us to show their neighbours, relatives or grandchildren just in case we really did become famous one day.

In any case, Dostoyevsky greatly exaggerated our role as "dissident artists" and sometimes it was possible to hear mocking remarks from members of our group. This didn't bother him at all, though it did me. On a number of occasions, I had to remind him that we were not runaway clowns from some Russian circus but serious young men trying to earn a living so we could dedicate at least a few hours a day to our art. It was important therefore not to compromise our dignity.

Art is not framed, was Dostoevsky's predictable response. Art *is* and *must be* everything we do, each step we take, each gesture, each word. All of our lives must be created as if we were writing a novel: not with the recording of schematic stories, but openly, researching all possibilities, finding the central flow of events that carry us ahead on the rules of our own internal dynamics. And if these dynamics demanded

that we abandon writing and painting, then so be it. To dedicate art to life, that was our goal, and not the other way around, because, after all, we had long since outgrown primary school didactics, and time itself was eminently in favour of improvisation.

As the days passed, his words aroused concern in me, even fear, since Solouhin was the best example of a man without a centre I had ever met; a man who improvised each day with the same ease as if he were brushing his teeth. Actually, I didn't know him that well, what remains in my memory is a series of his improvisations which revealed that he liked me in his way and felt responsible for me – in the same manner that an older brother might care for a younger one who had entered the wide world for the first time. The problem was that he took on this responsibility on his own, without even my implicit consent, simply because he wanted to play the role of a generous man initiating a less experienced acquaintance into the mysteries of the big bad city. It was my mistake that I didn't refuse this kind of relationship the moment it started, when I could have done it without jeopardising our friendship which was very precious to me.

It is true that Solouhin did not show all his cards in the beginning and that we slid into our mutual dependence almost accidentally as we looked for points that might connect us. But I did sense early on that he was appropriating my life as if he saw in it the material for the novel he could not write. His daily efforts to reshape my ideas and plans brought him happiness and a feeling of accomplishment because I, as he openly admitted, was significantly less stubborn than his fictional characters. More and more I came to believe that my life must not become just one of his improvisations and that we must soon, perhaps even tomorrow, have a conversation about this.

It wasn't at all clear to me why he dragged me along with him on the tours that he could have easily done on his own. Honestly, he needed me for nothing more essential than collecting three pounds from each participant and to take care, to the extent possible, that we didn't lose anyone in the crowd. In addition I was expected to say some educational words when the subjects of Canaletto or Constable came up. At such times, he would inevitably insert a bit of spicy information, which he had dug up the day before, God knows where, and didn't bother to tell me about. This was to emphasize that he was indispensable and that, in

all respects, I was merely his assistant. It is true that he honestly shared the proceeds with me and made sure that I ate as much possible each day at Amalfi; given that the whole thing was his idea, I could only be grateful.

Of course, the London this self-appointed refugee from the Siberian gulag presented to largely uninformed foreign tourists was more than anything else the invention of a writer who wanted to take revenge against the city for the indifference with which it blocked his efforts to become a part of its élite: in other words, that this person, this Someone, Aleksey Ivanovich Solouhin, like Conrad and Nabokov before him, would become much read and adored, and thus one of the reasons that tourists came to London in the first place. This was not terribly obvious, but his pain, being a mirror of my own, was close and familiar and it often struck me that some of the more perceptive tourists also perceived it.

All the same, Dostoevsky, a natural performer, never slid from irony to cynicism; his acute senses told him that a negative tone in a London tour guide would lose customers as fast as it causes a writer to lose readers, and so he remained (regardless of the fact that he was becoming increasingly fed up with the role he played each day) entertaining, all-knowing and polished.

"Look," he said, entering Ebury Street, "one of my friends who likes to listen to Mozart – his wife contends that he breathes Mozart from morning to night – was strolling through the city with his five-year old daughter and came by here. He pointed to this very house and said: you see, this is where Mozart once lived; here, in this house, he wrote his first symphony at the age of eight. The little daughter was amazed: I didn't know Mozart was a man, she said, I thought it was another word for music."

This pleased our clients so much that they seemed to yearn for more anecdotes. And thus Dostoyevsky averted the tourists, without their realizing what was happening, from asking questions about more specific matters about which he knew very little. His gift as a raconteur never failed him; sometimes I got the feeling that he just made things up as he went, and if an anecdote was met with a good response, he incorporated it into his repertoire. As he did with the following one about Marx: "For five years, he lived in poverty on Dean Street where he secretly copied from others his most celebrated work, *Das Kapital*. At least,

that's the conclusion that a certain Mr. Leoni came to (the present owner of the house and of the Italian restaurant Quo Vadis on the ground floor) when, rummaging through Marx's former rooms, he discovered a carton of books in which numerous sentences were underlined and the margins filled with Marx's comments in German. Mr. Leoni was very disappointed to realize that this most renowned book had not sprung fully formed from the great thinker's head. From then on, Mr. Leoni always voted conservative."

It happened from time to time that Solouhin's hypnotic voice would capture even me and I would slide into the role of one of the tourists experiencing the otherwise known London through the eyes of the caustic Russian. Dostoyevsky had the rare gift of imbuing the words he repeated each day with authentic enthusiasm. It was due to this facility that so few of our clients requested to be taken to the Highgate Cemetery where they could see Marx's bust and stand at the grave in which his bones had long ago putrefied: Solouhin knew how to muddle people to the extent that they forgot about Highgate altogether or even (and this never ceased to surprise me) believed that they had actually been there when we returned to Soho, which was Solouhin's favourite neighbourhood.

"Ladies and gentleman, we have arrived in the heart of the most lascivious square mile in London." The ladies blushed; the gentlemen would have liked to linger in the narrow streets in which neon lights twinkled from every storefront: porn film, peep show, topless bar, Swedish massage. Solouhin, in order to assuage any feelings of embarrassments, immediately began to reel off information about the history of the neighbourhood: how an avalanche of lust was triggered by the curvaceous Italian, Theresa Conelys (the lover of, among others, Casanova, and the mother of one of his many daughters), who came to Soho in 1760 and, with the rich experience acquired in the beds of several European capitals, made a career under a series of names: Madame Pompeati, Madame Trenti, the Sultana of Soho. She took up residence in the aristocratic Carlisle House where she threw renowned masked balls attended by English nobles, foreign ambassadors, and artists of the theatre such as the playwrights Garrick, Sheridan, and Goldsmith. At that time, Soho was a neighbourhood of palaces and shacks, the home of both wealthy notables and the ragged predecessors of the *lumpen proletariat*. It served as a shelter for refugees

from all corners of the world. In the sixteenth century, the French Huguenots came and Greeks fleeing from Turkish violence.

"One year ago, there arrived in Soho the genius writer Aleksey Ivanovich Solouhin, known to his friends as Dostoevsky, who did not remain in Soho but instead moved thirty-two times in twelve months, exactly as many times as Dickens did throughout his life," he said every day in the same tone and at the same place, in front of 21 Doughty Street which is now a museum. Here our clients could look at the high table at which Dickens stood and wrote while chatting with his visitors. "Geniuses have at least one privilege: they need not behave as ordinary people."

And then onward to new literary pathways: to Southwark, south of the Thames, where Dickens wrote his novel *David Copperfield* and where his father spent half of his life in jail because he could not settle his debts; and then to Kensington to the house on Young Street in which Thackeray wrote *Vanity Fair*. Later, walking by it with a friend, he supposedly exclaimed: "On your knees, man! Do you not know that this is the house in which *Vanity Fair* was written?" Then he added: "I shall kneel with you because I also have a very high opinion of the book in question." And then to Chelsea to Tite Street where Oscar Wilde lived, and around the corner to Tedworth Square where Mark Twain resided for some time. Legend has it that this giant of words, during the most difficult decline in his career and life, met Wilde by chance and greeted him with a doffed hat, "though that is not possible," Solouhin concluded victoriously, "because by the time Twain travelled to London, Wilde was already in jail in Reading." Twain came to Europe to escape the creditors who were bankrupting him: he tormented himself in the house on Tedworth Square, writing his only bad book, *Following the Equator*. News went around that he was sick and dying and the New York Journal sent instructions to send five hundred words if the writer was sick and a thousand if he were dead. Twain responded with the words that have since become immortal: "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

At this point, the tourists, of which at least ten and at most twenty joined us each day, were so tired that some of them could hardly bear to go on. It seemed to me that even more than the walking and the abundance of information, it was Solouhin's manic babbling that

tired them. The stream of his words didn't stop for even a second; he spoke, narrated, improvised, lied, entertained, joked as if his life depended on it, and I was amazed that he didn't realize how exhausting it was to listen to him after the first hour, during which he was redeemed by the fact that he was new and amusing, especially when he took us in the Tube and other passengers looked at us as if we were members of some alternative theatre group hired by the London Underground for loud entertainment.

All my efforts to soften his fanaticism fell on deaf ears and a lack of understanding. ("We'll lose them with silence, my dear Willy; words are the chains that bind them to us.") In vain I explained that once they'd paid us their three pounds, they needn't be chained to us any longer than they themselves would like to be. Although I managed to convince him each time, he nevertheless would fall into the same eager trance as we walked the city each day, almost as if he were propelled by an engine that he did not know how to stop. More and more I felt that Solouhin was not his own master; or indeed that someone else resided within him, some usurper that occupied his body and lived off his blood.

Precisely at this point in the tour, in front of the house where Mark Twain had lived, we too were overcome with weariness, especially Solouhin; his taut energy would suddenly collapse and I would sense in his eyes a combination of despair and anger so uncharacteristic that they hardly seemed to belong to him, at least not to the Solouhin I knew. "I would shoot them all now," he once whispered to me, "from the first to the last." Without doubt, there existed not only Willy I and Willy II, but also two Solouhins. The only difference was that we (both Willys that is) were somehow connected and functioning in an argumentative harmony; it would never happen that one would not even realize what the other was doing.

With Solouhin, I didn't have that feeling, and I began to fear that Solouhin II, when the time was ripe, would be manifested in a way that would astonish even Solouhin I, and that it would be a dramatic and spectacular event.

Yesterday it finally happened. Some hotshot from Boston had, from the very beginning, been following Solouhin's explanations with an arrogant, mocking expression, making comments now and again to his tiny bespectacled female friend. Just after Solouhin had

cited Twain's famous words, he nonchalantly remarked: "In your case, it might have sounded a little different. Something like: *Reports of my gulag experience have been somewhat exaggerated.*"

For an instant, all eyes hung on Solouhin's face. Surprisingly he didn't frown; he even smiled agreeably as if he were participating in the joke made at his expense. The smile remained fixed on his face even as he took a step toward the Boston hotshot and, using both hands, slapped him twice, once with the left and once with the right. In the first moment, the victim of the attack couldn't believe what had happened. The group, which that day numbered some twenty people, stood paralysed. The first to react was the hotshot's friend who rushed at Solouhin and kicked him in the shin with the sharp point of her right shoe. Solouhin's great paw, which had always reminded me of one of Frankenstein's limbs, casually swiped the glasses from her face, broke them, and tossed them to the ground where what remained of them lay crumpled under the heel of Solouhin's enormous shoe.

The next to react was the astonished recipient of the slap. Though he quickly raised his fist, Dostoevsky, who had never mentioned he was a kung fu master, threw himself into the air and thrust both his feet straight into his victim's face with such force that the blow crumpled him, raising a blue welt on his cheek, and causing him to fall to the ground with a bloody nose.

"This is terrible," said someone in the group. Another woman exclaimed: "We must call the police!" A fat woman from New Zealand started to run through the square screaming: "Help! Help! Help!"

At this point, Solouhin leaped onto the chest of the tourist from Boston and started to jump as if he were trying to pound down an uneven tile. His gorilla weight had probably already broken three, four bones with the first jump; I feared that he would soon crush the man's entire rib cage.

Now three male members of the group lunged toward Solouhin. He shook them off with one wave of his huge arm and continued with his rib breaking; it was clear that he wanted to kill the unfortunate fellow who had dared to insult him. The three men rushed toward him again, two more joined them, and it appeared that they would finally subdue the mad Russian. But no, Solouhin ran toward me, who was watching the events as if nailed to the ground, and pulled from my

hands the placard with the words *London Literary and Cultural Tour*; he swung it and with one great sweep knocked to the ground all of his attackers. I have never in my life seen such cold-blooded and masterful rage combined with such a pleasant, icy smile.

Now we both noticed that the woman who had been running through the square screaming and calling for help had succeeded in engaging a chubby bobby who, billy club in hand, was rushing toward us. Solouhin fled with long kangaroo jumps toward the nearest corner and disappeared. Although I was as shocked at his outburst as the others, I had no choice but to run after him.

I barely managed to catch up; I don't know if either of us had ever run so fast. We ran along the Thames toward Earls Court and didn't stop until we heard a police siren above the noise of the traffic; at that point, we ducked into the nearest pub and came to rest at a table in the darkest corner. We immediately noticed that some of the guests were wondering if our out-of-breath condition might have some connection to the sound of the police siren that had just wailed by. In order to banish suspicion, Solouhin immediately launched into a lecture on health.

"Jogging, my dear Willy," he said in a loud voice, "jogging will solve the problems of the world. Although today, to put it mildly, we have overdone it. Not to mention the exhaust fumes we've inhaled. Next time, we'll run in the park."

We each had a beer and then walked on in the hope of putting as much distance between us and the unpleasant scene as possible. But outside the sense of menace only grew; we knew they were looking for us. At every corner, we feared running into them. We turned into a half empty pub in a side street and again sought out the darkest corner.

We finally dared to look each other in the eyes.

Both of us knew that many things in that look would have to remain unsaid. Words would not allow us to pretend that we had not reached a critical point in our relationship. And then each word would rest on the next word until we had built a wall across which we could only hurl insults. I could have asked: Why did you do it? And he probably would have answered: I don't know, something just overwhelmed me, I'm sorry, but now it's too late. We both knew that there was no rational explanation for his actions and that he was more surprised by them than anyone. At the same

time, we both sensed that his outburst of violence was rooted in the growing discrepancy between the dreams that had drawn us to London and the cold reality that not only caused us to lose hope but even to lose air to breathe. Words at this time would inevitably have forced us to confront the fundamental question: did it make any sense to persevere? And because we both sensed that the answer would not be positive, we wanted to avoid the question altogether. We still had enough strength for illusions, too little for truth. And so we agreed on a conspiracy of silence in order to give ourselves one last chance.

When we finally did speak, we did so simply and practically, like cautious thieves who wanted to avoid the hands of the law. We pondered whether there was any possibility that the police would knock on our door the following day. In a city of eight million, it would be a miracle. No doubt they would try to trace us through the newsstands where we had hung our advertisements, but in places where masses of people went on errands each day, the owners would hardly be able to remember us. The tourists in our group, in contrast, could describe us very precisely, especially Solouhin, who was such an imposing figure that couldn't be missed in a crowd. They would probably be able to lead the police to us. And yet amidst all the violence that takes place daily in London, our case would hardly attract the best men in the Scotland Yard. Immediate migration would not be necessary; it was important to avoid for some time the places where we had taken the tourists. Of course, our means of earning money had now disappeared but this occasioned a sense of relief more than regret; our days had become terribly repetitive recently. We were ready for something new. And by this time we had earned some money, not as much as had been stolen from me, but enough that we could afford a little rest.

Above all, I felt that I must once again dedicate myself to painting; not only in order to protect my deflated self-image as an artist but also the undiminished faith that, at least in the long-term, art was the only thing that could bring more money than what was needed for mere survival.

Dostoyevsky was unable to muster sufficient strength to get on with his novel or search for an agent and keep sending his creations to addresses that had not yet rejected them. "I must clear my head," he said. "I have to get out from under this gravel that's buried

me. What I need is enough money to live for half a year; I'm not the sort of writer who can write while working. When I write, I must live with my characters day and night. The intrusion of the real world has confused me to the point that my imagination is crippled; first I must heal it again."

He disappeared the next day and I could only wonder where he had gone to get well and in what manner. Like myself, he belonged to the class of people that can only deal with reality in small doses; one drop too much and we are carried off to a place where it is impossible to keep our balance. But while the events of the previous days may have struck Dostoyevsky as reality, they appeared to me as a sort of dream-like confusion, like one of his narrative improvisations peppered at the end, as if he were writing a story, with a reversal, with a brutal physical showdown. Only by wrapping the events in an imaginary mist could I push them away far enough so they wouldn't consume me.

Nevertheless, the painting I was slowly dabbling at during the days Solouhin was away contained a number

of grotesque Munchian elements, shaping itself into a scream of protest in the hope of turning the world's attention toward the rights and dignity of the dispossessed among whom, it was now clear, Solouhin and I had landed after briefly scaling the summits of euphoria.

The figures that appeared on the canvas looked their best at about two in the afternoon when the sun shone on them; at that time, it almost looked as if they held in their hands, not umbrellas, but placards; they hurried along with them, aggressively projecting themselves into the space in front of them, heading somewhere to the left, towards an invisible fortress of resistance, toward gaping mouths from which dictates and ultimatums emerged. They were blind and deaf to their immediate surroundings and under the feet of these humiliated and insulted figures could be seen, carelessly trodden over, a white puppy and a rosy baby that had fallen from its buggy, its mother standing horrified to the side, and the reflection of the sun in a puddle on the ground, also trodden upon, of the sun that the rushing figures had failed even to notice.