



Pork Pies And Stalin

By Harry Jivenmukta

Part One

The butcher's shop had a special cabinet that was pushed out onto the street whenever they had special offers, and then, one of the butchers would stand by it and shout at the top of his voice. It was excellent for me and others like me, who suffered the dignity of limited financial resources. The cabinet hadn't been out for more than a week, but today, there it was and I had heard the shouting out of the butcher before I saw the cabinet itself.

One of the very special offers was pork pies, six of them, for a pound! As I pondered over the other offers, a woman came up and joined me.

They're very cheap, I said to her, pointing to the pork pies.

Yes, she agreed, but I'm not getting any.

Rather surprised by this refusal I probed; But why not?

Well, she began, if I get them, I'll end up eating them all at once, I can't resist, you see.

I glanced at her body but could see no evidence of a serial pork pie eater. She wasn't exactly an hour glass Audrey Hepburn shape, but she was quite slim with straight brown hair, and about forty years old.

You can always tell yourself that the ration is just one pie every day; I stated my advice.

It doesn't work, she simply said.

My brain had been whirring away all this time and a few conclusions had hit me. She would eat all the pies. That meant she probably lived alone; probably divorced, or perhaps still single, although I doubted she was a virgin. After all, a pork pie

eater is likely to have an equally voracious appetite for other kinds of meat as well.

I picked up my tray of six pies, wrapped with cling film and then, as is typical with me, a thunderbolt of insight hit me. Why don't we share them, I asked?

What do you mean? She asked me back.

Well, it's not rocket science, I continued, but the most damage you can do is to eat three, and as I live alone, three are better for me as well. I had deliberately told her I was alone just to test the water a bit further.

Alright then, she answered, and my green light system was beginning to flash.

I should explain what I mean by the green light system. I imagine there are two sets of five lights one above the other. The top five are red and when I meet someone I start at that point. As the signs get better, the red lights at the top start going out from left to right and the five green ones below start flashing on. When there are five green lights and no red ones, that means BINGO! It is all systems go. At this moment, the red lights had all gone out but no green ones had switched on, although one had started flashing a bit.

I paid for the pork pies and then we struggled with the division of them. One of us would have to take our three pies home, loose, in a carrier bag.

I don't mind, she said, I'll have the carrier bag.

I was losing her, and so quickly pushed my turbo button. This button is situated at the side of my head, on the left, and is an imaginary but vital tool in my seduction arsenal. As the turbo

whistled into action and span my brain inside out, a solution came to me.

I think we should eat a pie now, whilst we decide who takes the bag home and who gets the packaged ones.

She smiled and two green lights came on at once.

Let's sit down, I said. There were lots of benches around, and mostly empty because it wasn't a warm day.

We sat a bit apart, conscious of personal space, and I opened the package and gave her one pie, taking one for myself.

No! I exclaimed. It was a deliberate ploy. Shock can break the sensibility of propriety and that is what I wanted. She was frozen for a moment. We should play the pork pie game, I added.

What's that?

I explained. Well before you take a bite of your pie, I can ask you a question. You have to answer it and then it is your turn. We ask each other questions until the pie is finished, and then we achieve two things; we have had our pies and we will know more about each other. Of course, I concluded, the questions would be fairly neutral. After all we have never met before. I was astounded by my own ingenuity at such short notice.

Alright then, she said.

Please, you ask first, I insisted. It is important to get the involvement of your adversary to legitimise the activity.

OK, she said; what's your name?

It's Harry, I replied, and now you can have a bite of your pie. She did.

What's your name? I asked

Wendy, she answered, and I took a bite out of my pie. We fell silent then as we both enjoyed the taste of the really lovely processed pork, with additives, preservatives and eyeballs and offal.

She pondered and then asked; where do you live?

Just down the road, about five minutes from here.

Really? She was obviously interested. I have to get a bus into town. It's really inconvenient and expensive, if you add it all up.

She had fallen into my game, like a deer into the sights of a poacher. And she was just asking questions and answering without regard for the rules of the pork pie game.

What's that star mean? She asked me about the badge on my fleece.

I got it in Russia. You see I have been a communist as long as I can remember. I realised that her speciality subjects weren't modern history or politics as she failed to react to my information in any significant way. I continued; I was there only a few weeks ago.

On holiday? Isn't it cold there?

No, I wasn't on holiday. I was at a conference in Moscow.

What's your job? She asked me.

I was waiting for this question, and pausing briefly to mentally train myself how to say it without sounding pompous, I replied; Oh, I'm just a writer. It sounds more interesting than it is.

She was clearly impressed and in the ensuing silence, between bites of pie, I delivered the 'coup de grace'; I'll show you some of my stuff sometime, if you want. There, the javelin had been hurled into the body of the beast and the bull fell heavily into the blood soaked sand of the bull ring. The bullfighter raised his hat to the cheering crowds and the roses fell about him as he revelled in another kill. The pies were finished, telephone numbers and email addresses exchanged, and the curtain was coming down on the first act of what promised to be a very vibrant show.

But I had one more move to make. Shall we agree somewhere and some time to meet?

Yes, we can, she said although a little cautiously.

Well, I said, since this is our first date, I emphasised the words, was outside the butcher's shop, shall we meet here again, and then decide what to do? What about Tuesday, at 2pm? She had told me she didn't work and I was always careful to pin down my prey as soon as possible to ensure success.

Part Two

Well, I couldn't have written the script better myself, even if I had tried for three lifetimes! On the Tuesday, I arrived outside the butcher's shop at 1.55, five minutes early. The cabinet had already been wheeled outside and one of the butchers was shouting out the special offers. One side of the cabinet was piled high with Melton Mowbray family sized park pies, at £1 each. I smiled at it all and then was overcome by laughter. If you laugh on your own in the middle of town, people look at you to see if you might be more than a bit crazy. I had been thinking about stage two of my seduction of Wendy, but had come up blank. Yet

here it was, the perfect solution provided by the family sized pork pies.

Wendy was about ten minutes late, which I both expected and needed, to stop myself from laughing. I sat on a nearby bench and she sat down next to me; but the personal space distance still prevailed.

Hi, she said.

I went straight for the jugular because the situation was perfect.

You know, I began, we were meant to be.

She shifted nervously.

I continued; just look over there, I pointed at the butcher's cabinet. She listened to the special offers but didn't register anything out of the ordinary.

Well, I said, last week we shared the pack of six pies; three each. Today, they have family sized pork pies. Now how can we divide one of them? And they are our special price of just £1. And they are not just some ordinary pies, but Melton Mowbray. Did you bring a knife to cut one in half?

Wendy began to cotton on to the situation, and I let her ruminate for a while whilst we shared insignificancies of what we had done since we met last time, and how cold the weather was.

I told you last time that I lived just a few minutes from here, I manoeuvred her. So, if we are going to enjoy pork pies today, we could get one and then divide it up at my flat. After all, I don't want to be responsible for you having to eat a whole family sized one yourself, and in any case, I only want half as well.

She smiled and I knew the ruse had worked.

It is cold today, she acquiesced, and we set off to my flat.

Ask anyone; I am really quite a nice guy, and I made her a cup of tea, and offered her some malted milk biscuits! She was relaxed and we just chatted about things I can't remember now. After a suitable time had passed, I went to the kitchen and returned with a large plate, a knife, and the family sized pork pie. I couldn't help a giggle and set her off as well. We just laughed for a few minutes. It was one of those situations where you split yourself up in laughter every time your eyes meet. In the end I offered her the knife and asked her to divide up the pie. As she went for it I put my hand over hers. She recoiled just a bit.

No, that's not right, I told her. You should cut it into three equal parts.

Why? She really was naïve.

Well, I said, one third each to keep, and one third to divide up again, for us to eat now.

The penny dropped and she understood this latest twist to the pork pie game. Her cutting skills were perfect and we had three equal cuts.

And now, you have to tell me what the rules are for the game today, I insisted. After all, we can easily just eat the pie, but it will be better if there are some rules.

She thought for a while, whilst I dunked a malted milk biscuit into my half cold tea.

I can't think of anything, she concluded, and then asked me to think of a game.

Favourite things, I declared, but you have to decide what things they must be.

She thought again, and then said, favourite music.

All my favourite stuff is Arabic or Hindi, I said, although there are some heavy metal ones I like, and sometimes a bit of other English stuff.

OK, she said, you can explain the foreign ones to me.

In that case, I added, I am also foreign and should explain myself as well.

Part Three

It was now inevitable that our relationship would develop around the unlikely delicacy of pork pies, and lots of ideas had come to me. We were going to meet outside the butcher's shop again, but I was not taking any chances that there would be special offers of pork pies on the day. I had cheated just a bit and bought eight snack sized pork pies from the supermarket. It was clearly cheating because they weren't from this butcher, our matchmaker, and they had cost more than £1; in fact £1.87!

Wendy arrived on time and was very chirpy. Have they got any special offers today? She asked.

Well, actually, yes, I replied. Just before you got here, I bought the last of their special offer of snack pork pies, a delicacy we haven't enjoyed together yet. I was lying through my teeth and hoped she wouldn't interrogate me about the fortuity of my purchase. She didn't, and I promised myself that when the time was right, I would come clean and tell her the truth. It's like an insect caught up in a spider's web. It's alright to unravel the truth when the insect is so deeply trapped that it can never get out

again. And so it would be with me. Once the hapless Wendy was caught up in my web, I would tell her. But by then it would be too late and she would be spellbound in love and passion.

I offered her one of the small pies but held her hand so she couldn't take a bite. She looked straight into my eyes, expectantly. What about the game? I asked her.

What about it? And anyway, you are better at pork pie games than me. So tell me.

She was smiling and bright eyed with quizzical interest.

Well, I began as if I was just thinking up a new game, when in fact I had thought it through in depth previously; there are some special rules around snack sized pies. You see, you can imagine full sized pork pies as if they were grown up, but these small snack ones are like seeds, beginning to grow into bigger pies. And we are growing together as well, aren't we?

She swapped the pork pie into her other hand and held my hand now, more than I was holding onto hers. I felt her fingers tighten slightly, like a fish beginning to bite on the hook. And like the angler waiting on the riverside gets excited by the ever so slightly sense of a catch, I also felt something rush through me. This was the moment when I would cement the relationship.

We should think of eight things we can do, to get to know each other intimately. I had used the big word 'intimately'. This is equivalent to someone pressing the fire button to release a tomahawk missile. Girls love words like these because they want the closeness and personal touch; at least that's what experience has taught me.

I must be brilliant, because by getting eight pies and then linking each one to an activity, it meant that we were bound by at least eight more meetings.

I don't know what to say, she began, what do you mean? Then after a small silence; you tell me what sort of things you mean.

I let the silence grow and simply locked eyes with her. After more time than was comfortable I outlined a further rule. We should make a list, four activities each, and then draw lots to decide the order in which we should do them.

We returned to my flat and after a cup of tea and custard creams, I gave her a sheet of paper and a pen, and got one set for myself.

Do you want to go first? I asked generously.

No, she said. I think she was uncertain about this game.

Right then, I began; I'll go first. With a great deal of screwing up of eyes and heavy breaths of deep thinking I said; my first one is to invite you for a meal made by me. I was happy with that because I am a passable Indian cook.

That sounds nice, she said. I choose shopping, in a different town.

Shopping is my least favourite activity of all, I declared, but if that's your choice, I suppose I'll have to go with it.

My next one, I said, is a day out somewhere; either in the Peak or Lake districts. There are lots of coach trips and it will be fun.

OK, she agreed. I choose a film that we each decide on and watch them one after another. I love Four Weddings and a Funeral. What's your choice?

This was getting too girly for me and so I retorted; I'll have A Fistful of Dollars. She tried to hide her distaste but it was clear to me.

Your turn I said, and she thought for quite a while.

What about an evening out, she asked? I don't know where yet but we can think about it.

That's fine, I said, and then added; we should both write a short story that is only about 200 words, about something that's important to each of us.

I can't write, she began but I held up my hand in a peaceful and calming way and told her that I thought she would say that.

I can't think of a fourth one, she said, and then her eyes brightened and she said; you can come round to my flat for lunch or something.

I like the idea of something, I began, but realised it might be too soon and so resisted any more innuendo.

My fourth one, I said, is a mystery holiday. Let me clarify that, I added. We should leave the mystery holiday as the last of the eight activities, and then, if we get on well with the other seven, we can do it. She agreed.

That just leaves us to decide the order of activities, I said, as I began tearing up a sheet of paper into eight roughly equal sized bits. You write yours down and I'll write mine, and then we can screw the papers up and choose them. We did.

You choose first, I invited. She chose the holiday, and so we put that aside as number eight and she chose again, sticking her tongue out slightly at the corner of her lips to aid her concentration. In the end, the order of events was as follows:

- 1 an evening out – venue to be decided by Wendy
- 2 shopping

- 3 a short story each
- 4 films – on the flip of a coin; four weddings first, then my film
- 5 visit Wendy's flat for lunch
- 6 a meal made by me
- 7 a day out
- 8 a mystery holiday

Part Four

The first of our special eight activities was a Spanish restaurant that had a brilliant Flamenco dancer. The young lady dancing was hammering her heels on a small wooden stage and the food was good too.

The least I say about the shopping the better. We got a special bus that took us right to the shopping mall and I had a horrible time, putting up with it only by thinking of Wendy, and how happy she was; and thinking about the pleasures that we would enjoy as we became closer.

The short stories created all sorts of problems. I wanted to spend time with Wendy, but the silence at my flat whilst we concentrated on writing made me feel that I would rather be talking or kissing or something. She had insisted we did this activity together rather than writing our stories in our own time; after all, the activities were supposed to be to bring us closer together. Her story was about the wildlife in the woods near her home, and her love of nature. Mine was about an old man with a crooked back and crooked walking stick, who lived in a crooked cottage. Wendy didn't think much of it but I explained that it was a reflection on life, and that we live in a strange world of oddballs and imperfections. Anyway, I had tried, but she still didn't like it much.

And in this way, the activities continued....

I did break the process by one day walking her to the park. Just past the park there is a shopping street and one of the shops is an award winning butcher's shop. I told her that I felt that we were getting away from our roots, steeped in fat, offal and pies, and so we bought two award winning pork pies, and, returning to the park, we had a picnic. I insisted that we should take a bite out of each others pie, just to make sure they were both identical, and the game of feeding each other, that age old tradition of people just falling in love, was initiated and fulfilled, that afternoon.

We found ourselves easing into each other and the inevitability of our relationship was delivered like a baby in a maternity ward. I just hoped that the lack of a condom wouldn't mean I would really have to go there in the months to come.

Part Five

I had asked her if she trusted me and she had said of course she did. So I asked her if she would go on holiday with me, to fulfil our eighth activity, according to our list, and she said it depended on where I wanted to go. I had said that it would be have to be a surprise and she said she'd think about it. I asked her if her passport was valid and she got excited. Then she said that she didn't have enough money for foreign holidays and I told her not to worry about that. I had it all worked out.

We were at Heathrow, waiting for a plane bound for Moscow. Wendy had never been there before but I did warn her that we were only going to be in Moscow for two days. After that, the adventure would begin, and that was a surprise. I had decided that I had to complete some of the circles in my life. As a lifelong communist and now softened to merely communism rather than the Stalinism of my past, I wanted to visit Kiev, in the Ukraine, and then travel on to Georgia, and the birthplace of Stalin. There

has recently been a re-writing of history, post-USSR, and the legend of Stalin was being inevitably re-cast. I just wanted to experience the reality, as far as I could, so long after Stalin's death, before he had his Disneyesque makeover.

I had planned the holiday with the following itinerary:

- 1 Flight to Moscow from Heathrow.
- 2 Two nights in Moscow, including a visit to my friends at the State University.
- 3 Sleeper train to Kiev, in Ukraine, via Kursk.
- 4 Two nights in Kiev including visiting the cathedral of Saint Sophia and staying at a hotel on the right bank of the Dnieper river that splits up the city into the old historical part, and the new city on the left bank. The left bank didn't interest me much. I also wanted to visit the Perchersky Cave monastery.
- 5 Train to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Stay at a Black Sea resort hotel where English is commonly spoken. Travel to Gori, birthplace of Joseph Stalin, although he was born with another name; Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili. Gori is found inside the red circle on the map below.
- 6 Return depending on how we want to do it – plane or train.

I didn't intend to keep a travelogue of the holiday but perhaps take a few photographs. What I really wanted was to feel the atmosphere and the history of these places. If you haven't been to Russia and the former Soviet Union nations, it is a different kind of holiday to any other you can have; there is poverty, mafia, culture, and a massive historical weight of the former Soviet system that still pervades everything once you get off the tourist track. The other main problem is language; very few people speak English.

Part Six

There is something about the Russian psyche, no, not Russian, but it seems of everyone who lived within the former Soviet Union. I have noticed it before, every time I have visited any of these new countries; no-one seems to smile. Except for the plastic smiles of the tourist areas, as soon as you stray into everyday Moscow, or elsewhere, I have never heard a giggle of laughter or even a smile of welcome. Wendy noticed this as well and I confirmed to her that this was the way it was. But, if you get to know people well, you do get smiling and laughter behind the closed doors of their homes.

In the true spirit of my gaming manner, I told Wendy that we would also play the 'not smiling' game. The rules were simple. Every day we would both have two non-smiling jokers up our sleeves. We could play a joker any time but only twice each in total, every day. When one of us played the joker, neither of us would be allowed to smile for the next five minutes. If either of us did smile or laugh the other would be declared the winner of that point. In this way, I turned the miserable sight of downcast people around us, into an experience that was hilarious. We both reserved our best jokes for these moments, to try to break the solemnity of the other at just the right time.

The first time the joker was played, I said our trigger phrase, 'Russian game', as we were trying to select breakfast items in the hotel restaurant in Moscow.

The fish is remarkably attractive, I said.

Yes, but it's raw, Wendy replied.

That's the way sophisticated people eat it here, I began to half smile, and then stopped myself.

I shall not partake. Wendy always took on a sort of Victorian manner when we played the no smiling game. I don't know if it was deliberate or if it was how she really sounded when being morose.

We sat down at the table after choosing the buffet style first course. She had pancakes and I had raw salmon. It is a really acquired taste, and actually, I don't really like it. I always have the raw fish at some stage on my visits here; it's a bit like a ritual. The salmon is sliced very thinly and eaten with salad and some kind of dip that I have never been able to define.

Mmm...tasty, I began, whilst I chewed and made a face of abject discomfort.

She nearly smiled but then looked into her own plate with extra concentration.

How is it for you? I asked mockingly after managing to swallow my mouthful of fish.

Very sweet.

As sweet as me?

Comparable.

As sweet as me times two?

No, not quite that sweet. She was breaking down and I almost called a win for me as her lips wavered on the edge of a smile.

This fish, I began as I waved a piece of it on the end of my fork, has travelled a great distance to be here with us today. Fancy a mouthful? I asked her, waving the morsel nearer and nearer to her mouth.

She stuffed a big piece of pancake into her mouth to prevent me, coughed it up and I broke out laughing. She had won the game, for now.

And so our Moscow adventure continued. We hired a hotel taxi and asked for the guided tour. Wendy wanted to see the tourist places and I thought this would be a good way get all that out of the way in a half day tour. Personally, I have always avoided touristy things and prefer to see real life, the way the people actually live. I do get a stirring inside me when I go to Red Square though; a hangover from my Stalinist youth.

We got back to the hotel and warmed up, from the cooling autumn breeze outside. Even in the taxi, we had felt cold. Everything in Moscow is like that; a semblance of life as we expect in the West, held together by the flimsiest cover. The hotel looked fine if you look with a vodka enhanced eye, but when you pay attention to detail, you can see the flaking paint of a side corridor off the main one, the slightly skewed fitting of the windows in their frames, and the shabby dress of hotel workers, pretending to be five star. But, I suppose it is real life, and that is the reality I prefer. Everything in Moscow, though, is going through a makeover, to make it more like America; fast food outlets and fashion shops that only tourists can afford.

Russian game, she said, as we about to make love. Now, I cannot comment on how other people might react, but I couldn't perform at all under these conditions, and that in itself was hilarious. I insisted on a draw because we both collapsed in laughter at the same time. Wendy thought that she should get the point because in a draw, the person who played the joker should get the decision. In light of my disappointment at my lack of performance though, she graciously accepted my draw proposition, and I regained a little bit of my idealised macho image of myself. We drank tea, got warm and began to plan the evening.

Part Seven

On one of my previous trips to these parts, I had made friends with Piotre, a Russian man, who worked for some secret service kind of organisation. He never made it clear to me what he did; well he wouldn't would he? I even had to talk with his boss before he was allowed to talk to me or advise me on anything. Anyway, Piotre told me that because of the nature of the work he did, he was not allowed to travel anywhere outside the former USSR, but as compensation, he could have extra holidays within the region, at discounted prices. It was during one of our conversations that he told me about his love of Kiev, now in the independent country of Ukraine, where he was allowed to travel. And that was why our next stop was Kiev. The way Piotre had talked about it made me feel obliged to one day visit there.

I wished I had kept the contact details that Piotre had given me so I could tell him of our plans and maybe meet up with him. The email address he gave me never worked and I wondered if that was because his mail was screened or if it might be because the emails I sent him were from outside his permitted contact zones. In any case, I told Wendy about him and the sights we could enjoy in Kiev.

Besides the Dnieper River, we can visit the old city on the right bank. There are old castle fortifications to see, and we can visit the cathedral of Saint Sophia. Wendy wasn't very interested in my offerings and I put it down to her lack of historical and political awareness. I continued; but, in line with our pork pie fetish, one of the popular foods in Kiev is sausages. I know that sausages are not pork pies, but both are made of pork, and they are sort of cousins. She laughed at that and said we might make a family tree of the pork family. I could imagine the picture of a pig with the different cuts highlighted, and the end product of steaming hot plates of pork dishes joined by arrows, just like in a family tree.

We went on the sleeper train to Kursk, and would continue our journey on to Kiev the next day. The sleeper wasn't the sort of thing you see in films; we didn't have a room to ourselves with en suite facilities. The cabin had four 'beds' two on each side, one above the other. We had been allocated one bed. Each bed was a pull down affair, and at about three foot wide, if that, we had to hold on to each other in fear of falling off. Wendy had the bit next to the wall, and so I was the one who had to hold on with all my skill, hanging halfway off. There were blankets, but I for one wasn't cold and warmed myself from the heater that was my pork fed Wendy!

I never can understand how it is that some people can sleep anywhere without a care in the world. Wendy slept like a baby, and perhaps I might have, if I wasn't hanging off the edge. I contented myself with watching her sleep, and fantasising. And in any case with three other guests in the same cabin we couldn't do anything dodgy anyhow, even if we could have contorted ourselves on this tiny excuse for a bed. So I listened to the time being tapped out by the wheels of the train, and in snatched moments of dozing, I imagined the sleeping people of Russia being disturbed by our train racing through the night, briefly half-waking them from their dreams as we passed by. I wondered what they were dreaming of; perhaps of being on the train themselves, travelling to a wonderland that eluded them in their waking hours.

Kiev was everything that Piotre had said and was a nice change from the makeover that Moscow was undergoing. Kiev isn't a natural tourist spot, and the facilities on offer didn't include 'kiss me quick' postcard emporiums or much in the way of holiday souvenirs. There was hardly any fast food type of outlet; I think the newer post-war east side of the city would have most of that kind of tosh. We ate our first meal in a small restaurant that had seen better days: rye bread, potatoes, and borscht, which is beet soup. We did eat sausages and Salo, which is like smoked bacon, in another restaurant later. And so, with our stomachs

satiated and our pork cravings satisfied, I enjoyed the local whisky called Horilka, and in fact, doubly enjoyed it because Wendy didn't like the taste or the strength of it. This was good news for me because I intended to order the drink for her every time I ordered one for myself, and so, be doubly fortified, at least until she discovered my devious plan and put a stop to it.

Part Eight

We travelled by plane from Kiev to Tbilisi in Georgia, and then got a taxi to the Black Sea resort near Sokhumi, which took hours. Tourism is big business for the states that border the Black Sea, but most tourists are from the region rather than international travellers. And so, I had braced myself for a low quality hotel and resort. I was not disappointed. And, to add to that, we were visiting at the end of the season; it was like attending a funeral! The last time I felt like this was when I went to Scarborough in winter; no shops open, no tourists, cold tea, and storms. At least here there were no storms, just the threat of the winter to come; but the food was really good, if simple, and Wendy didn't seem to mind this graveyard much.

It is time for a new game! I declared; but this time you have to make it up all by yourself and tell me when you have it ready.

Well, I'm no good at games, she said. Then; I'll try to think of one but you have got to give me time.

Very well, I said grandly, and now we should go to the restaurant and eat the leftovers from the holiday season. I wasn't going to let this drab reality infect my originality and creativity! We were the only ones in the restaurant. The cold air felt even colder in this evacuated, empty space, devoid of a soul. We ate Pelmeni, chosen by pointing at a picture of it on the menu, which is meat filled pasta with sour cream. There was also a vegetable version of this dish available but we carnivores weren't going to fall for

that. I had lots of local beer, I can't remember the name now, but it was good stuff. Wendy wanted wine, but the closest they had was vodka, which she disliked and I noted down for future reference. Only one of the staff spoke any English at all but he promised to get some wine before our evening meal. It wasn't a question of looking through a wine list; she would just get some wine, indeterminate, but wine nevertheless.

The game, when Wendy came up with it, eventually, was a game of naming our food. We had to order the dish and hopefully, the wine, and then come up with Russian sounding names that were also funny. In my case I thought that suggestive names would be better, but then again, I have always had a peculiar sense of humour. We had some sort of meat dish in the evening, indeterminate, but definitely meat. It looked like a sort of steak but wasn't beef. I sliced a piece off and held it up on my fork. It looked limp and so inevitably caused us both to smile as I declared it was Zofimoor Limp. There was no more description or explanation required as I delicately sucked it into my mouth. It was delicious and tender, and Wendy blushed nicely, amongst the giggles and glances.

She raised her glass of white wine and said Zpork Vasser. The whole evening was hilarious and we even managed to fill our bellies, although it took a long time.

Part Nine

We went to Gori by taxi. There is clearly a difference between how the West sees its leaders and how the ramshackle Russians treat their heroes or anti-heroes. There was little sign of Stalin except for his small house, now inside a sort of mausoleum, and the lack of our communication skills meant we could only say Stalin, and that elicited no response from our belligerent taxi driver. There might have been some monument or other but we never got to see anything else Stalin related. Since he was a

Georgian, the people there still like to think of themselves like Stalin; the strongman of the region. In history this has often led to conflict with the Russians especially now, in the new environment of post soviet independence.

But we were in Gori, in Georgia, and we decided to make the most of a disappointing day. There was plenty to eat and drink and so we indulged, handing over money in bunches without understanding the prices or the change we were given back. We never understood much of what anyone said and so decided that the game for the day was to pretend we were aliens from outer space. We could well have been because we had no common language or much else in common with the good folk of Gori. After a few beers we sat in a square with some trees and flowers around and zapped local shops with imaginary high powered outer space guns. It was all very childish but also fun.

We had a hotel booked for the night and then had only one task left; how to return to Moscow and then to good old Blighty. We decided to go to Tbilisi and then get a flight to Moscow. We left the rest open so that we could decide whether to have one more full day in Moscow. As destiny would have it, we found an internet café, and on impulse I decided to check my emails. When I say 'internet café' it was more like two ancient computers, grubby with use, in the corner of a tea room. I had an email from Yekaterina, my guide on a previous visit to Moscow University. She was just asking about my well-being and was being a bit apologetic for missing me when Wendy and I had dropped in at the University a few days ago. I told her that I was in Georgia, returning to Moscow the next day. In the morning, before leaving Gori, I returned to the internet café and found a reply from her. I had suggested we meet up in Moscow and she had agreed. I told Wendy all about her and reminded her of the poetry collection I had written called 'Ekaterina- The Colours of Mockba'. Wendy remembered reading it but not much of the poems themselves. I must admit, I was quite excited at the prospect of meeting Yekaterina again and having something

definite planned for our last day in Moscow. And true to my dramatic sense of the occasion, we had agreed to meet at the Tsar's Cannon in the Kremlin area of the city. It is the biggest cannon in the world, made during the reign of the son of Ivan the Terrible, Fyodor.

Part Ten

I am always amazed by the direction that fate has taken me, and the meeting with Yekaterina, although marvellous and very cheerful, paled into insignificance once she told me of some plans she had made with friends to visit the Caucasus in some months time, in Spring. She had got on famously with Wendy, and after a lovely lunch, she had invited both of us to join her and her friends on the adventure. For me it wasn't a decision that needed any consideration, although I tried to keep calm and collected so that when Wendy came to the same decision as me, I could pretend that she had convinced me as well. In any case it would seem like a mutual decision.

I should say that the Caucasus are largely in Georgia, the very country we had just travelled from, but also overlap into Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. At the time of the meeting up with Yekaterina, I didn't know the exact bits she wanted to visit but since then, and after a bit of research, here is a map with the broad outline of the area.

The trip would start at Telavi, following a drive from Tbilisi. From Zemo-Alvani onwards, the terrain is very hilly, becoming mountainous the further north-east we were to travel. I was very glad that Yekaterina and her friends were city dwellers, because they would certainly travel the whole distance by mini-bus, and although I am a keen walker, this area is more than the hiking country we have in the UK. The other thing I liked was that the visit was within the Georgian nation, so Wendy and I wouldn't

have to get reams of visas and permissions, especially since the Chechen region in Russia was often in a state of military control.

In a true fair play manner, I agreed solemnly with Wendy that the offer was very generous but we would have to think about it and then we would let Yekaterina know. Slyly, I was already calculating how to convince Wendy, and briefly fantasised about underhand secret service style mind bending drugs, before returning to the reality of a sunny Moscow afternoon. The rest of the Moscow day was lost to me as I was bathing in the dreams of mountain ranges and followed the girls around like an automaton. We had an evening meal together with Yekaterina but I have no distinct memories of what we ate, said or did.

Part Eleven

There were three things playing on my mind. The first one was fairly immediate; whether the Mumbai Indians would thrash the Delhi Daredevils in the Indian Premier League cricket match I was watching on television. The second concerned Wendy. She had been decidedly lukewarm about the journey to explore the Caucasus and had told me that a holiday for her should include sand, sea, and other things that resembled a holiday in a Spanish resort. She didn't say 'Spanish', but all the images that sprang up in my head when I thought about her ideas suggested that sort of place; brash, touristy, and Blackpool in Spain sort of thing. The third thing that kept raising its head was that Yekaterina's emails to me in the last few weeks were rambling, lacked any real information and didn't seem to auger well for a trip to Georgia. I had thought of her as super organised, and she had been as my guide in Moscow. I realised that it might be because she was good at her job but was just ordinary when it came to new things. Added to that, I suppose it was difficult to organise a trip that involved four or five of her colleagues and friends and Wendy and me; too many cooks and all that....

I had a few choices to make. I could leave Wendy here in the UK and go alone, meeting up with Yekaterina and her chums in Moscow. Or I could get Wendy to go and simply go it alone without Yekaterina and her chums if they found it difficult to organise. Or even organise the whole thing myself and invite Wendy and Yekaterina to join in if they wanted. All in all, the whole trip was beginning to sound a bit dodgy and might not ever happen. One thing did go right though; the Mumbai Indians won the Twenty-20 match on television and left me with not three things on my mind, but only two.

Why can't we go to Portugal or Spain? Inwardly, I felt a slowly turning stomach of despair as Wendy started on her 'vision' of the perfect holiday.

Well, I know that it was me who decided the first trip, to Moscow, Georgia and all that, I began, and I had to concede that if we were to be fair, it was her turn to choose. But I had also made decisions in the past that I would never do things that I didn't enjoy. It had been part of my rehabilitation into life after my divorce and depression and stuff. I was a pretty selfish person now, not through my natural instincts, but in order to protect myself from the world and avoid falling back into the fragility of depression. I was determined that I would not go to Portugal or Spain, at least not right now, but also didn't want to alienate Wendy, who I was beginning to get more attached to.

She noticed my silence and let the moment elongate until the pressure began to subside. I felt that the answer might be not to go anywhere at all. We could just stay here, I said.

We could, she simply agreed. After all we aren't rich in any case. We should be more realistic about our finances and our future.

Future? I quizzed.

Yes, she answered simply and as neutrally as possible. Then after another longer pause; well, we should start thinking about the next step or whatever you want to call it.

Let's go for a walk, I suggested, to lighten the impending downward spiral into misery that I was feeling. What we really need, I added, is a pork pie hit. The fat and endearing qualities of preservatives and artificial colouring will give us a lift.

We walked to the specialist butchers, just past the park, and then returned to sit on a bench and watch people pass by with their dogs as we sank into the mutual pleasure of pork pie eating.

I know how to solve the problem! The pork pie hit had bounced me into a bout of creative thinking. You know how we decided on all the things we have done so far? It's all been about games, hasn't it? Well, we should play another game to solve this problem.

Wendy smiled a smile that you might expect from a nurse attending a patient who wasn't all there. But she didn't say anything. I continued; we can walk down to town, to a travel agent and pick a destination from the offers in the window. You can pick which travel agent, to guarantee no cheating on my part, and I will give the coordinates before we leave the park.

What do you mean? She was easily confused, or was it that I could easily jump past several stages of explanation expecting her to follow me without difficulty.

Well, in the windows there are cards, aren't there? I will choose the coordinates; for example three across and two down from the top left. Whatever that destination is, will be the one we go to. Agreed?

Well, we can try it. Wendy obviously hadn't been hit by her pork pie high like I had been but I didn't say anything. I suppose some

people get their surge quicker than others. It wouldn't be long before she got her buzz, pounding through her delicate veins and arteries.

The coordinates and the game disappointed us both. Three across and two down in the travel agent's window led to weekend in the rolling hills and wine producing areas of Burgundy. In a second travel agent's window the choice came out as a week in Scarborough.

Shall we try one more time, in another window? I suggested. I'm getting tired of this, she said but reluctantly dragged herself after me to a shop window three shops down the street. Three across and two down turned out to be an advertisement for foreign exchange rates. So we went home and curled up in front of the television and watched some crappy black and white film for the rest of the afternoon.

Part Twelve

After a few weeks, I knew I was going to have to travel to the Caucasus, to follow up the dream I had of the place but I knew as well that it wouldn't be with Wendy or Yekaterina. Another thing I realised after I had been was that I couldn't really write it up as a travelogue because the people I travelled and stayed with were more than ordinary people and told stories that were more supernatural than anything else. Also, I didn't want to simply repeat details of journeys, airports, taxis and hotels. So I decided to recall the experiences in poetry because it gave me a sense of freedom, more than a simple record, to capture the magic of that adventure.

Wendy was great in a straightjacket kind of way; she was comfortable and safe, but very restrictive and limited. Sometimes, an adventure can be spoiled because the people you travel with are not interested in the things you want to

experience or else they have expectations that are simply inventions of their own imaginations that lead to discord and disappointment. Similarly, Yekaterina was a very good friend but was from a different generation. One example of this is the use of technology; I want to get away from it all and perhaps carry a mobile phone, turned off mostly, for a 'just in case' purpose. Yekaterina and her friends, I suspect, would carry phones, laptops, personal organisers and other such stuff, and expect to use them incessantly, and spend most of the time working out when to stop and where to stay based on battery life and recharging.

So I returned to the simplicity I am familiar with and packed a small rucksack and set off on my own to Moscow with a view to meeting up with a friend of mine from the University where I had briefly worked. He was called Pavel and was about the same age as me. We had exchanged several emails about the trip, and he was due a holiday. He was originally from St Petersburg but had previously travelled in Georgia. One of his hobbies was geology and rock collecting; something I knew nothing about and really didn't care about either. We had agreed a flight to Tbilisi and then ten days out from there, broadly following the route proposed originally by Yekaterina. We were going to travel in a four by four, and it came with a driver so we didn't have to worry about that either. Pavel told me that there was one specific place he had to go to, but otherwise was relaxed about the itinerary. I told him that I had no specific places identified and so it was generally a very free-flowing and unrestricted experience.

The Caucasus Mountain ranges are very large, a bit like the Indian Himalayas I have previously travelled in. It is really not hiking country because of the size, and should be seen as a collection of small hiking destinations, connected by car travel. In the UK it is possible to set off and just get on with it because there is always some kind of human habitation within a few miles, if required. There has to be much more planning in the larger

wilderness areas like the Caucasus, because you can travel for hours and not see any sign of life, in the more remote parts.

Our daily routine was fairly regular; we always set off early and usually travelled for a few hours before a stop. We would explore perhaps two or three different places each day. Exploring could be anything from simply sitting on a rock and enjoying our lunch as well as the scenery, or up to a two hour or so walk, off the beaten path. Our driver was very experienced and often advised us of the route and sometimes planned it so that we could meet up with him further along and so we didn't have to stick to 'circular' walks. When we got into the late afternoon, we would tell him when we wanted to stop for the day, and he always managed to get us to a small town or a village for the night. Many of these didn't have hotels and so he negotiated with householders who welcomed us into their homes. And it was in these places that I heard the most interesting stories, translated for me by Pavel, which were supernatural, historical, and mythological and always required a real stretch of the imagination, as we sat around in candlelight and let ourselves float off in fantasy. I suppose some of the stories were real for the people who told them, and were passed down from generation to generation, but the way our adventures unfolded led me to let my imagination go completely freely, until I saw nearly everything in a supernatural way. It was fun for me and also gave me poetic licence to let my creativity flourish.

And so, I recall not the holiday in prose, but poetry.