

# The Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition 2020

## **Blitzkrieg**

**By Patrice de la Boite**

I had never felt with such urgency, with such surety, that a person was meant to be in my life.

It made me sick.

Physically ill.

It made me want to sit up in bed and vomit.

And when I was done vomiting, I'd dry wretch until you called.

Or texted.

Anything.

But I wasn't in bed.

I was with you.

And we were standing on a bridge, looking down at the Volga River.

Stalingrad.

Russia.

Though now it's called Volgograd.

That's what you kept saying.

It's not Stalingrad, it's Volgograd.

Like I cared about anything except what you thought of me.

Like I cared about the war.

Or the bodies.

Or the destruction.

Of homes.

Of families.

Of futures.

Like I cared about anything except what you thought of me.

And I knew that no massacre, no bloody battle, could hurt as much as you not wanting to see me.

Okay, sure.

A touch dramatic.

I realise that.

But man, the thing you did with your nose.

The thing that meant that you were thinking.

You'd push your nose flat against your face and let it bounce back.

Then you'd push it flat and let it bounce back again.

Thinking, thinking.

Push, bounce.

Always thinking.

Push, bounce.

I never knew what about.

I never wanted you to stop.

But then, I wanted you to stop.

I wanted you to stop and say something.

To say anything.

Just so I'd know that you weren't thinking about how you were going to say goodbye.

Sweating in the summer heat.

Stalingrad.

Fuck.

Volgograd.

We met at the bridge every day.

I told myself that it was fate.

That here, where the souls of a million screaming soldiers swirled, ours entwined.

Victims of Blitzkrieg, a Lightning War.

Struck before we realised what was even happening.

Fate, in the sense that I had seen you once and came back the next day at the same time.

Fate, in the sense that you had done the same.

I called it fate – you called it routine – but there we were.

Both of us.

Same time, same place.

On a bridge, looking down at the Volga River.

Its waters flowing lazily south, out to the Caspian Sea.

Russian men stripping off their clothes and jumping in.

Hairy chests; pot bellies; gold chains; Speedos and slides.

Every stereotype.

Every cliché.

Like me, staring at you, on a bridge lit up by summer sun.

Like me, staring at you, wondering how I ever survived a day without hearing your laugh.

Like me, staring at you, wondering how it could be possible that I'd only known you for a week.

Christ.

This had never happened before.

Stomach churning.

You were talking, and I was watching your mouth move, but I couldn't hear a thing.

Just churning, always churning.

Huh? What did you say?

That's a real man, you said.

Pointing towards one of the Russians on the beach below.

He had a beard.

Big arms knotted with muscles.

Tattoos.

A liver that could process paint thinner.

He waded up to his gigantic Russian balls then dived in headfirst.

I waited for him to emerge, imagined him with a fresh salmon between his teeth.

I imagined you looking at me.

With disdain, like a piece of spinach between your teeth.

Looking at my patchy beard.

At my leather boots bought in London.

Made from the skin of an animal I didn't kill myself.

My soft hands.

My small, soft hands.

Yet to pound anything but the keys of a laptop.

A real man, yeah.

We walked along the bridge and down to the beach.

The men looked at you as we passed.

Men were always doing that.

Hoping to catch your attention.

Just like I was trying to do.

You never noticed.

Or if you did, you never mentioned it.

Of course you noticed.

You'd noticed it all your life.

I picked up a rock and skipped it along the river's surface.  
Turned to you and asked if you skipped rocks growing up.  
No, you said.  
You were too busy working.  
I wanted to know everything about your childhood.  
Wanted to know about your parents.  
Your brother in London, your sister in Moscow.  
Whether you cried on your first day of school.  
Whether you cried on your last day of school.  
You told me that you cried every day.  
That you didn't get to finish school.  
Then you pulled a rock from your pocket.  
It was the perfect shape for skipping and I held my hand out.  
You placed it in my palm.  
I carry this everywhere, you said.  
I asked what it was.  
You told me that it was a rock from Auschwitz.  
Is there a gift shop at Auschwitz?  
No, you laughed.  
Then you said that you picked it up off the ground when you visited.  
I asked why and you said, a grim reminder to never take this life for granted.  
I placed the rock back in your hand.  
Folded your fingers around it.  
Wondering if I could ever love you more than I did in that moment.

\* \* \*

I could.

\* \* \*

You told me that you were in Amsterdam with friends.

23 years old.

Just after your trip to Auschwitz.

Yeah, you were there to have fun.

To do the Amsterdam thing.

But you also wanted to go to Anne Frank's house.

All your life, you had wanted to go to Anne Frank's house.

It had been a big night of partying.

In the morning, you and your friends went to a coffee shop.

Hungover.

Heinous.

Someone bought hash brownies and passed them around.

You ate one.

It felt good, you said.

Weird, but good.

Then one of your friends said that it was time to get going and you didn't know where.

You were high.

Giggling.

And they dragged you, giggling, stoned out of your mind, to Anne Frank's house.

You didn't understand why.

You asked them, aren't we coming here tomorrow?

And they told you no.

They told you that the tickets were for that afternoon.

And there you were.

Where you always wanted to be.

In Anne Frank's house.

High as fuck.

No longer giggling.

Crying, sobbing.

Whispering to the ghosts that you were sorry.

\* \* \*

I couldn't stop laughing.  
It was a funny story but you didn't think so.  
You said that you'd disrespected Anne's memory.  
That it still upset you seven years later.  
She probably could've used a laugh, I said.  
And besides, she was 13.  
She probably loved getting stoned.  
Stop it, you said.  
You weren't laughing anymore.  
So yeah, I stopped.  
And we kept walking along the river.  
The rock from Auschwitz in one of your hands, my heart laid bare in the other.  
You gripped them both tightly.

\* \* \*

It's not like I just saw you and fell in love.  
I'm not that, like, hopeless?  
A hopeless romantic.  
Why is it called hopeless anyway?  
When hope exists in every single movement that you make.  
In every word that leaves your lips.  
It's not like I just saw you and fell in love.  
It was one thing after another.  
All these little bits of information.  
Falling on me like drops of rain.  
Pitter patter, pitter patter.  
Little droplets falling from the heavens.  
My heart a tin roof.  
Amplifying every drop.

A rain of recognition.

Leaving me utterly drenched, standing smiling in the storm.

\* \* \*

It was morning rush hour but I had never seen the bridge look so empty.

It was the first morning that you didn't come.

It's not like we had plans to meet.

But you'd been there every morning for eight days.

I stood against the railing, hands in my pockets.

Watched as the traffic backed up.

Considered stepping into the flow before it stopped completely.

No point.

Every lane was already blocked.

So many ways to hurt oneself, so few ways to get someone's attention.

Besides, it wasn't the weather for causing a minor traffic accident.

Not really.

Clear blue skies.

Clouds: fluffy.

The kind of day when anything could happen.

Anything except a minor traffic accident.

Just my luck.

So yeah, I kept walking.

The same route we always took.

Over the bridge down to the beach by the river.

The Russian men were there.

The same ones every morning.

They nodded as I passed; no doubt wondering where you were.

I smiled and sat down on the bank.

And the big one – the real man, you called him – walked up to me.



English? He asked.

Sure, I said.

You are lonely today?

I laughed.

I'm lonely every day, I replied.

But today, he said.

Today, no girl?

I shook my head and he started laughing.

Slapped me on the back with his big paw.

Come, he said.

Is time for swim.

\* \* \*

Yuri, I discovered, had never caught a salmon between his teeth.

Far from it.

He was actually vegetarian.

His mother – an artist – had told him that he could eat meat when he caught and killed it himself.

He was eight, living in a commune outside of Moscow.

He spent three days trying to catch a rabbit.

On the fourth, he finally cornered one.

Held it up by the ears.

Knife in his hand.

His mother watching.

Saying nothing.

Her lips pursed.

He turned to her, tears streaming down his face.

Mama?

Kill it, she said.

But he put it on the ground instead.

Watched it run out of the yard and into the forest.  
Then his mother kissed him on the forehead.  
Gently took the knife from his shaking hands.  
Time for bed, Yuri.  
And they went inside together.  
When he was older, he moved in with his father.  
To a small town with an unpronounceable name.  
There wasn't much to do, he said.  
But he told me that one day, when he was 15, a bear cub walked into town.  
He and his friends were hanging out on the street and there it was.  
So yeah, they became friends with it.  
Wait, I said.  
You befriended...a bear?  
Yuri nodded.  
Bobo, he said, smiling.  
They fed it.  
Gave it water.  
Then, one afternoon, they locked Bobo in an internet café.  
You should have seen the nerds, said Yuri.  
He was shaking with laughter.  
They were so scared, he said.  
He told me that Bobo was clawing at the door and growling.  
He wanted to get out.  
All the nerds were playing on the computers, he said.  
I asked what happened when they saw Bobo.  
They do big shit, laughed Yuri.  
Holding his nose for dramatic effect.  
His hard belly quivering with delight.

\* \* \*

Two more mornings passed and still, you didn't come.  
Then you sent me a text.  
You said that you wanted to keep things relaxed.  
I said that I could do relaxed; I couldn't do non-existent.  
It was like talking to a completely different person.  
I didn't know what had changed.  
Like yeah, it's probably self-centred to think that it must've been something I'd done.  
But I wondered how it could be anything else.  
How could things have changed so quickly?  
Tell me, I said.  
Tell me what you want me to do.  
The nights were spent in fits of anxiety.  
Waking up before I'd fallen asleep.  
Padding over to my phone.  
Checking it.  
Walking back to bed.  
Stomach churning.  
A different churn to when I was with you.  
This wasn't relaxed.  
I was not relaxed.  
I didn't know how to be relaxed when your eyes had scorched my soul.  
A week.  
That's all it took.  
Seven sunny days in June.  
The name of a Jamiroquai song.  
Or was that Seven Days in Sunny June?  
I couldn't sleep.  
I had to check.  
Walked back to my phone.  
Checked it.  
Nothing.  
Then I Googled: seven sunny days in June Jamiroquai.

It was Seven Days in Sunny June.  
Good to have figured that out, I thought.  
Walked back to bed.  
Dawn breaking outside.  
The first rays of light warming the cold cement.

\* \* \*

Yuri told me not to worry.  
Told me that you were probably just busy.  
Maybe hates you, he said.  
But no, probably she is busy.  
I'd started swimming with him in the morning instead of waiting on the bridge.  
I could still see people on the bridge, but I couldn't make out who they were.  
Some days, I imagined that you were standing up there waiting for me.  
I imagined that you were looking down at me and saying, that's a real man.  
I couldn't work out if I was pathetic or right or both.  
But nah.  
Yuri had taken to hitting me every time I looked at the bridge.  
Like, properly punched me.  
Fuck it hurt.  
Twice in the stomach.  
Then a backhand across the face.  
This one time he caught me while we were swimming and he held me under.  
He let me surface for air then pushed me under again.  
I was about to pass out when he finally let go.  
I said, Yuri what the fuck?  
I am done watching you do this, he said.  
From now, you are no longer sad man.  
From now, you are happy man, yes?

Yeah sure man, fucking whatever, I said.

And he swam away – a stately breaststroke with his head held high above the water line.

Turning around just once to call out and say, this pleases me.

\*

This is what I don't get: timing.

Like, when someone mentions good timing, it's never something important.

It's: we arrived at a café at the same time.

Such good timing.

But then bad timing, bad timing is always terrible.

It's: he walked under the window a moment after the piano fell.

Such bad timing.

So yeah, maybe it's the same when someone walks into your life.

Nobody ever says that it's good timing.

It just...is.

But you told me that it was bad timing.

That if it had been a different time, a different place, things would've been different.

That we'd be playing a duet on the piano instead of watching it fall.

And I told you that yeah, that's the definition of different.

And it would've been different because it wouldn't have happened.

I wouldn't have been in Stalingrad.

I wouldn't have been in Volgograd either.

You wouldn't have been walking down the bridge and you wouldn't be texting me now.

I told you that this was the moment.

We're in the moment, I said.

But you said that you were in a different one.

And you said that you had to get on the right path first.

And I wondered how you could be on the wrong path when it had already crossed with mine.

\* \* \*

I told Yuri what happened the next morning.

Yuri said, you want to know good timing?

Yeah, go on.

Okay, listen, he said.

If my father is walking into bar ten minutes later, then my mother is gone. Ten more minutes, no Yuri – this is good timing.

I told him yeah, that is good timing.

Then Yuri asked, you want to know bad timing?

Okay.

He said, ‘my father walks into bar and my mother is still there – this is bad timing.

Good timing for Yuri, yes.

Ten more minutes, no Yuri.

But if my mother leaves then maybe next day she meet someone who is not my father.

She meet someone who actually make her happy.

So maybe, this bad timing for Yuri, is good timing for my mother, no?’

I picked up a rock from the beach.

Turned it over in my hand, turned things over in my head.

Then Yuri said, ‘time is little matter for us anyway.

Either way, my mother die in nine years.

My mother stuck with cancer, my father stuck with vegetarian son.

I don’t know who is more unlucky.

My father, now he pray for piano to fall.’

Yuri started laughing and I told him that yeah, okay, maybe he was right.

But only maybe.

Come, Yuri said.

Is time for swimming.

I glanced back at the bridge and skimmed the rock towards it.

Took two steps and sank into the milky water.