

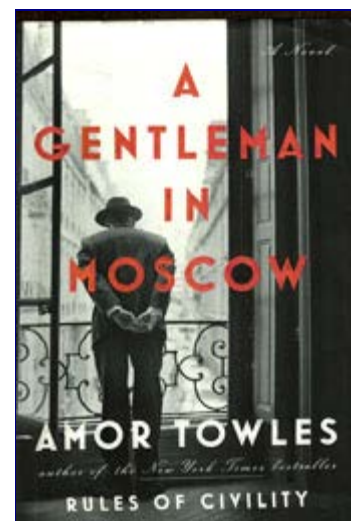
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A READER'S JOURNAL

A Gentleman in Moscow
A Novel
by
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*Always to shine,
to shine everywhere,
to the very depths of the last days . . .*
Mishka, (page 183)

Count Rostov was not a poet, but a poem spared him from being summarily shot through the head, relegating him to a slow death in exile. He had accepted credit for the poem to protect his poet friend Mishka when revolutionaries in Russia were killing artists and aristocrats everywhere. And now that same poem was protecting him. And where was the Count to be exiled? If he had a chance as Br'er Rabbit did, he would have said, "Don't throw me into that Briar Patch!" — a place his predators detested, but one full of tunnels and hide-y-holes where any rabbit could make himself a comfy home, safe from enemies, with plenty to eat, and lots of fun things to do. For Alexander Rostov, Sasha, his briar patch of choice would have been the Metropol Hotel where he had lived for four years since returning to Moscow. "Why did you return?" the inquisitor commissars wanted to know. "For the climate," he replied, and they laughed, before emphasizing the Count would be shot if he ever stepped out the door of the Metropol Hotel.

Who was the eponymous *Gentleman in Moscow*, you may be thinking? It was Count Alexander Rostov, a man, a gentle man, whose goal was *always to shine, to shine everywhere, to the very depths of the last days*. He never once complained of his imprisonment in a cubby hole about 100 square feet in a belfry at the top of the hotel, six flights up. He only insisted that "a gentleman fortifies himself with a desk", and they moved his heavy desk into his tiny room. He graciously accepted his sparse new quarters, but what about us, readers of his tale? Will we want to read a 450-page novel when, after 10 pages, we find that the main character is to be locked into a hotel for the rest of his life? Can we accept our fate with the same equanimity shown by the Count? Thereupon lies the tale.

The Count knows only the public rooms of the Metropol's barber, its bar, and its elegant restaurant, so he will not lack for grooming, for drinks, and for dining, as any gentleman requires. Occasionally an inadvertent tear in his trousers would require the service of the seamstress Marina. What of entertainment in his small room? He was allowed to take only one book of his from his elegant and spacious previous quarters, so he wisely chose a large book that he had been promising himself to read one day, now that he had an endless supply of days at his command, the *Essays of Montaigne*. I remember Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled how as a teenager he opened his father's copy of those essays and found nothing of

interest to him; then, later, as a college student, he opened them again to find unending passages of wisdom.

When the Count was escorted by Kremlin guards back to the Metropol, three of its staff, good friends of the Count, awaited an explanation, having never expected to see the Count again. Always truthful, as befitted a gentleman, he explained elegantly.

[page 16] "My dear friends," said the Count, "no doubt you are curious as to the day's events. As you may know, I was invited to the Kremlin for a *tête-à-tête*. There, several goateed officers of the current regime determined that for the crime of being born an aristocrat, I should be sentenced to spend the rest of my days . . . in this hotel."

Count Rostov had indeed fortified himself with the heavy desk, as we discover when alone in his tiny room, he releases a catch to reveal a velvet-lined cache of gold coins in each of its four legs. These were only for emergency expenditures as the appearance of one of them would likely cause the rest to be confiscated by the tight fists of the State. His next treasure was Montaigne which he read at his uninterrupted leisure. He opened Book I to find this useful advice, which he took to heart in his novel situation of being both a hotel guest and a prisoner of the State: "When someone is exerting vengeance on you, the best thing to is obey them fully, which may move them to have mercy on you or to hold your ground in firm resolve which may have the same effect on them." Montaigne gives an example of the Duke of Bavaria being under siege by the Emperor, who, in deference to the women, allowed them to leave the town, on foot, with only whatever they could carry. The women managed to leave carrying their husbands, children, and the Duke himself! What wonders one can perform if one constructively follows the coercive orders of the State.

A gentleman need not be awakened by a clock in the morning. If he has an appointment, it will likely be at a decent hour, like noon. And, a late night for a gentleman usually ends by midnight, so his father had Sasha's clock designed to ring only twice a day, at noon and midnight. Reading Montaigne's essays, Sasha waited impatiently for the clock to toll his weekly noon-time appointment with the barber of the Metropol.

[page 32] On past the sixteenth essay.

Until, suddenly, that long-strided watchman of the minutes caught up with his bowlegged brother at the top of the dial. As the two embraced, the spring within the clock's casing loosened, the wheels spun, and the miniature hammer fell, setting off the first of those dulcet tones that signaled the arrival of noon.

Sasha's life was going to change dramatically before his standing appointment with Yaroslav the barber was over. An ungentlemanly man insisted he had been waiting before the Count showed up and expressed his displeasure by lopping off one of Sasha's elegant moustaches. When Yaroslav asked for his pleasure after finishing with the indignant customer, Sasha asked for a clean shave, which removed his moustaches completely. Some unexpected twists of fate offer amazing surprises; this one was a nine-year-old girl named Nina with a liking for yellow who had been watching him from across the lobby. Sasha was enjoying his soup in the restaurant with his eyes closed and had a surprise waiting when he opened them.

[page 40] Turning his attention to his okroshka, the Count could tell at a glance that it was a commendable execution — a bowl of soup that any Russian in the room might have been served by his grandmother. Closing his eyes in order to give the first spoonful its due consideration, the Count noted a suitably chilled temperature, a tad too much salt, a tad too little kvass, but a perfect expression of dill — that harbinger of summer which brings to mind the songs of crickets and the setting of one's soul at ease.

But when the Count opened his eyes, he nearly dropped his spoon. For standing at the edge of his table was the young girl with the penchant for yellow — studying him with that unapologetic interest peculiar to children and dogs. Adding to the shock of her sudden appearance was the fact that her dress today was in the shade of a lemon.

"Where did they go?" she asked, without a word of introduction.

"I beg your pardon. Where did who go?"

She tilted her head to take a closer look at his face.

"Why, your moustaches."

The Count had not much cause to interact with children, but he had been raised well enough to know that a child should not idly approach a stranger, should not interrupt him in the middle of a meal, and certainly should not ask him questions about his personal appearance. Was the minding of one's own business no longer a subject taught in schools?

"Like swallows," the Count answered, "they traveled elsewhere for the summer."

Then he fluttered a hand from the table into the air in order to both mimic the flight of the swallows and suggest how a child might follow suit.

She nodded to express her satisfaction with his response.

"I too will be traveling elsewhere for part of the summer."

The Count inclined his head to indicate his congratulations.

"To the Black Sea," she added.

He invited her to sit at his table, and she wanted to confirm he was a count so she could ask him about princesses. Thus began his friendship with Nina, who was to be a constant source of surprise and delight in his life, even after she disappeared into the far reaches of Siberia. She asked if the Count had ever been to a Ball and did he dance. "I have been known to scuff the parquet," he replied.

Theseus had his Ariadne, Odysseus his Tiresias, Dante his Virgil, but Count Rostov was alone in this cavernous Metropol Hotel and only knew a few public spaces. Where was his guide? She came in the form of a nine-year-old girl, Nina Kulikova, who knew all the secret places and passages and became his guide. With a tiny key hung around her neck, she could open any door in the Metropol. Did Nina have a governess while her father was frequently traveling around the world? Yes, but as long as Nina stayed in the Hotel, she was left alone to do what she wanted, and now she wanted to share the Hotel with the Count. "How else do you spend your time," Nina asked him when he balked at accompanying Nina on her daily rounds, in, out, and about the Hotel. He had been in Fatima's flower arranging room, but had he been there since it's been closed by the revolution?

[page 56] And yes, he had visited Fatima's in the days when it was open, but had he been inside the cutting room? Through a narrow door at the back of her shop was that niche with a light green counter where stems had been snipped and roses dehorned, where even now one could find scattered across the floor the dried petals of ten perennials essential to the making of potions.

Nothing is more interesting than a large hotel which survives a revolution — no one person knows all its secret places. Rostov began to think of the Metropol Hotel as a large cruise ship at sea. One could shoot clay pigeons off the topside of the ship, dress to dine with the Captain, win money in the casino, and say that one had tasted everything on the ship. Not Nina!

[page 57] Nina had not contented herself with the views from the upper decks. She had gone below. Behind. Around. About. In the time that Nina had been in the hotel, the walls had not grown inward, they had grown outward, expanding in scope and intricacy. In the first weeks, the building had grown to encompass the life of two city blocks. In her first months, it had grow to encompass half of Moscow. If she lived in the hotel long enough, it would encompass all of Russia.

Nina took the Count to the second floor of an assembly so that out of sight they could hear the proceedings. There was an argument about the use of words. A Russian bureaucrat insisted on using only one word, *facilitate*, saying, "Poetic concision demands the avoidance of a pair of words when a single word will suffice." As a poet, my claim is that there is no *art* in poetic concision, only in poetic

elaboration and expansion. In the committee meeting, a burly fellow spoke out to the assembly, "With all due respect to *poetic concision*, the male of the species was endowed with a pair when a single might have sufficed." He received a thunderous applause! There was a man with a pair of balls! (Page 69)

In this next passage, the author explains that there may be three ways to ask a question. The question is simply, "What is to become of you, Alexander?" But there are three ways to enunciate the question, each evoking a different meaning.

[page 83] They all asked that question of the Count. Helena, the Countess, the Grand Duke. *What is to become of you, Alexander?* But they asked it in three different ways.

For the Grand Duke the question was, of course, rhetorical. Confronted with a report of a failed semester or an unpaid bill, the Grand Duke would summon his godson to his library, read the letter aloud, drop it on his desk, and ask the question without expectation of a response, knowing full well that the answer was imprisonment, bankruptcy, or both.

For his grandmother, who tended to ask the question when the Count had said something particularly scandalous, *What is to become of you, Alexander?* was an admission to all in earshot that here was her favorite, so you needn't expect *her* to rein in his behavior.

But when Helena asked the question, she did so as if the answer were a genuine mystery. As if, despite her brother's erratic studies and carefree ways, the world had yet to catch a glimpse of the man he was bound to become.

"What is to become of you, Alexander?" Helena would ask.

"That is the question," the Count would agree. And then he would lie back in the grass and gaze thoughtfully at the figure eights of the fireflies as if he too were pondering this essential enigma.

The Count met a famous movie actress, Anna Urbanova, and their first meeting did not go well. But sometime later, the Bellman passed him a note which read (Page 117),

*Please allow me a second chance
at a first impression
in suite 208*

The Count could not have anticipated the reception waiting for him in Suite 208, a sensuous *tour-de-force* which would be repeated throughout the book.

[page 122] Ever since reading her note in the Shalyapin Bar, the Count had felt one step behind Miss Urbanova. The casual reception in her suite, the candlelit dinner for two, the deboning of the fish followed by memories of childhood — he had not anticipated any one of these developments. Certainly he had been caught off guard by the kiss. And now, here she was strolling into her bedroom, unbuttoning her blouse, and letting it slip to the floor with a delicate whoosh.

In 1923, the Count planned his leave-taking of life to be four years after his imprisonment in the Metropol Hotel. He imagined he would be slipping off his mortal coil as easily as Anna Urbanova slipped off her blouse.

[page 147] On the twenty-second of June 1926 — the tenth anniversary of Helena's death — Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov would drink to his sister's memory. Then he would shed his mortal coil, once and for all.

After planning his future demise, the Count got into a discussion about *The Nutcracker* with a Brit and a German, and claimed it captured the best of Christmas cheer on the darkest night of the year, if you celebrate it above the fiftieth parallel in Russia.

[page 158] "Yes, exactly," said the Count to the Brit, "It is commonly said that the English know how to celebrate Advent best. But with all due respect, to witness the essence of winter cheer one must venture farther north than London. One must venture above the fiftieth parallel to where the course of the sun is its most elliptical and the force of the wind its most unforgiving. Dark, cold, and snowbound, Russia has the sort of climate in which the spirit of Christmas burns brightest. And that is why Tchaikovsky seems to have captured the sound of it better than anyone else. I tell you that not only will every European child of the twentieth century know the melodies of *The Nutcracker*, they will imagine their Christmas just as it is depicted in the ballet; and on the Christmas Eves of their dotage, Tchaikovsky's tree will grow from the floor of their memories until they are gazing up in wonder once again."

Just as *The Nutcracker* means Christmas to the Russians, so also *A Christmas Carol* means Christmas to the rest of the Western World. Dickens single-handedly changed the way Christmas was celebrated into a time of looking back at one's life in Christmas-Past, examining the possibilities of Christmas-Yet-To-Come, and enjoying Christmas-Present as a celebration of family and friends in a grand feast. Our greatest celebrations come as gifts to the world by artists such as Tchaikovsky and Dickens.

The Count mused that exile began with primitive tribes sending away its unwanted members, and was prominent in many places in the Bible.

[page 164] After all, exile was the punishment that God meted out to Adam in the very first chapter of the human comedy; and that He meted out to Cain a few pages later. Yes, exile was as old as mankind. But the Russians were the first people to master the notion of sending a man into exile at home.

One could argue that one must have a very large country to make exile at home possible, and Russia's ice-bound Siberia makes an ideal place for exile at home. Count Rostov was in exile at home in a very large hotel, the Metropol, but the four years after which he promised himself to end his exile were coming to a close, and he was ready to go. He toasted his sister Helena on the roof of the Metropol and prepared to end his exile within seconds with a swan dive to the street below. His first exit from the Metropol will be his last. Only a miracle could spare his life.

[page 165] It was now the simplest of matters. Like one who stands on a dock in spring preparing to take the first lunge of the season, all that remained was a leap. Starting just six stories off the ground and falling at the speed of a kopek, a teacup, or a pineapple, the entire journey would only take a matter of seconds; and then the circle would be complete. For as sunrise leads to sunset and dust to dust, as every river returns to the sea, just so a man must return to the embrace of oblivion, from whence —

"Your Excellency!" Abram spoke out loudly and excitedly, in a tone no one could ignore. The man the Count had spent hours drinking tea and talking with on the roof about various things, bees and apple orchards in the Count's home area, urged him, "You must come with me at once!" What had excited Abram so much? His bees that he raised, after having disappeared for weeks, had now returned! But that was not all . . . Abram gave the Count a spoonful.

[page 166] In an instant, there was the familiar sweetness of fresh honey — sunlit, golden, and gay. Given the time of year, the Count was expecting this first impression to be followed by a hint of lilacs from the Alexander Gardens or cherry blossoms from the Garden Ring. But as the elixir dissolved on his tongue, the Count became aware of something else entirely. Rather than the flowering trees of central Moscow, the honey had a hint of a grassy riverbank . . . the trace of a summer breeze . . . a suggestion of a pergola . . . But most of all, there was the unmistakable essence of a thousand apple trees in bloom. . .

"Nizhny Novgorod," he said. . . .

All these years, Abram said, they must have been listening to us — they traveled over a hundred miles to bring back the sweetness of your youth. And with the sacrifice of the bees, the life of Count Rostov was saved for another twenty years.

[page 172] History is the business of identifying momentous events from the comfort of a high-back chair. With the benefit of time, the historian looks back and points to a date in the manner of a gray-haired field marshal pointing to a bend in a river on a map: *There it was, he says. The turning point. The decisive factor. The fateful day that fundamentally altered all that was to follow.*

For Russia the fateful days came in 1927, 1928, and 1929 with the rise of Stalin to absolute power, the first Five-Year Plan, and the drafting of Article 58 of the Criminal Code, a giant Arachnian Net which would ensnare all Russians in its sticky, ever-present web of intrigue and civilian spies and would execute summarily those speaking against Stalin in its omnipotent and deadly jaws. The lucky survivors of their "interview with the commissars" were sent to Siberia. (Page 173)

One evening the Count was ordered to the presence of Osip Ivanovich Glebnikov, a former colonel of the Red Army and an officer of the Party, whose current job is keeping track of certain men of interest, men such as Count Rostov. But Osip did not have an inquisition in mind for Rostov, but rather a position as his tutor in French and English. One night a month the Count would dine with Osip in the Boyarksy restaurant, teaching him the nuances of the two languages so that he may be prepared when Soviet Russia begins relations with foreign governments again. Here was the exchange of their agreement. The Count asked::

[page 212] "How do you propose that I help?"

"Simple. Dine with me once a month in this very room. Speak with me in French and English. Share with me your impressions of Western Societies. And in exchange . . ."

Glebnikov let his sentence trail off, not to imply the paucity of what he could do for the Count, but rather to suggest the abundance."

But the Count raised a hand to stay the talk of exchanges.

"If you are a customer of the Boyarksy, Osip Ivanovich, then I am already at your service."

Three new things appeared in the Metropol in the 1920s. The first was the reappearance of the sounds of jazz being played and enjoyed. The second was the reappearance of foreign correspondents. And the third was the appearance of spies. Not obvious spies, but three beautiful young ladies who moved around the patrons of the Shalyapin Bar who seemed to be interested in listening more than talking, all of which charmed the patrons and loosened their tongues. The foreign correspondents were on to the spies, suspecting that these ladies were memorizing everything they heard and later repeating to a flunky who wrote it all down for the State watchdogs. So they made bets among themselves as to the first one that would get called before the Commissariat of Internal Affairs. A Mr. Lyons won the bet by relating his favorite battle from *War and Peace* in front of the female spies.

The Metropol's assistant manager was dubbed the Bishop because he never approached a subject directly, only on a diagonal like the chess piece named the bishop. Since being promoted, he had perfected his technique by using ellipses as the end of sentences.

What do I mean by that . . . ? Well, since you asked, here's the Count, after having escaped from a barrage of oblique questions by the Bishop and after he had made up an alibi of looking for his pen to explain his presence in an unexpected place.

[page 218, 219] The Count waited until he was out of sigh, then hurried in the opposite

direction, muttering as he went:

"Where is it now . . . ? Perhaps in your blue pagoda . . . Very witty, I'm sure. Coming from a man who couldn't rhyme cow with plow. And what's with all that dot-dot-dotting?"

Ever since the Bishop had been promoted, he had taken to adding an ellipsis at the end of every question. But what was one to infer from it . . . ? That an interrogative sentence should never end . . . ? That even though he is asking a question, he has no need of an answer because he has already formed an opinion. . . ?

Of course.

Nina, years later, showed up at the Metropol, startling the Count. She has grown up, wearing pants, and now married to Leo, the father of her daughter Sofia. Leo has been arrested and sent to Siberia, where Sofia was headed immediately to be near him, asking the Count to take care of her 5-year-old-daughter for a month or two. The Count had little time to recover the multiple shocks before he meets Sofia, a young girl of about the age of Nina when she first appeared equally abruptly in his life. Within fifteen minutes, Nina had said goodbye, leaving Sofia with a small backpack with all her belongings in the hands of Count Rostov.

Talk about adjustments . . . The Count lived in a small one-room apartment in a top floor turret. He had carved out of an unused adjacent area a small room to hold a secret study. Sofia called him Uncle Alexander; Rostov introduced her as his niece. The seamstress Marina helped watch Sofia, as Sasha had turned into Uncle Alexander, knowing his life was going to change drastically.

Meantime Sasha's good friend and poet Mishka had been lured back to Moscow by Stalin in '34 so he could create the poetry of Soviet Realism with three of his friends. "And what has been the fallout of that?" Mishka asked rhetorically.

[page 269, italics added] All but ruined, Bulgakov hadn't written a word in years. Akhmatova had put down her pen. Mandelstam, having already served his sentence, had apparently been arrested again. And Mayakovsky? Oh, Mayakovsky . . .

Mishka pulled at the hairs of his beard.

Back in '22, how boldly he had predicted to Sasha that these four would come together to forge a new poetry for Russia. Improbably, perhaps. But in the end, that is exactly what they had done They had created *the poetry of silence*.

"Yes, silence can be an opinion," said Mishka. "Silence can be a form of protest. It can be a means of survival. But it can also be a school of poetry — one with its own meter, tropes, and conventions. One that needn't be written with pencils or pens; but that can be written in the soul with a revolver to the chest."

What would the poetry of silence look like? . . . I wondered as I read Mishka's poignant words which inspired me to write this poem:

The Poetry of Silence

*Here is the result,
Hear the result of
The poetry of silence
In these four mute lines:*

*They speak eloquently
The meter of emptiness,
Filling a Stanza with blankness
And a Heart with longing.*

~^~

And what was the result of Mishka's non-silence? In 1939 he was marshaled aboard a train to Siberia and the realm of second thoughts. (Page 270)

As Sofia grew up into an accomplished pianist, she was headed to Paris for a concert, but her Uncle Alexander was not allowed to accompany her. What could our dear Sasha do? Sofia was under close watch by Soviet authorities during her concert tour in Paris. Her Uncle Alexander would be shot with a revolver if he walked out the revolving door of the Metropol. Count Rostov's previous plan to escape the Hotel was stopped by a flight of bees, but there will be no stopping this plan. Sofia and he would escape from the authorities at the same time, and once the Count set all the parts of his plan into motion, each part must work like clockwork. There must be a diversion, there must be feints to lead the State in the wrong direction, there must be a reunion with the newly freed Sofia, and, if all works as planned, there will be apple blossom honey and a willowy woman awaiting him in a familiar Inn.

Open this book, begin reading it, and out of a hundred-square-foot room, a new world of love and life will arise before your eyes. . . . A gentleman of Moscow is awaiting the pleasure of your company. . .

