

Vasily's Choice (Winner, Erewash Writers Flash Fiction, January 2015)

His thoughts chase each other inconclusively around his head. Today he leaves the city, but in which direction?

He pushes his hands deep into the pockets of his greatcoat and stamps his feet. The April sunshine melts the last vestiges of snow, but the pavement still holds the winter chill, seeping through the soles of his boots.

When he opened his eyes that first morning, gentle fingers sponged dried blood from his face. The early-morning light formed a halo around her head and he wondered if he'd died on the train journey from the Eastern Front.

'Welcome back, Captain,' she said, 'my name is Sveta.' She stayed with him until his disorientation faded and, although she didn't always work on his ward, came to visit to him whenever she was on duty. Their love started slowly, before springing forth fully formed, like the chestnut blossoms in the Petrograd parks when the winter ice disappears overnight.

His old school-friend Igor arrived at the hospital weeks later. With his bandaged eyes, he sat on Vasily's bed for hours every day.

'It's our time,' he said repeatedly. 'Remember we used to talk at school about the cruelty of the Tsar and how we would change things when we grew up?' Vasily did remember—and his heart sang at the changes in great Mother Russia.

One week before he was discharged, he had two visits within an hour. Sveta came first, trembling and blushing as she took his hand.

'I'm leaving Russia,' she said. 'Without the Tsar, life will be terrible. My parents are already in Finland, and begged me to join them—but then I met you. Now my grandfather is leaving and I must accompany him. Come with me, my love. We can start a new life together in safety.' Vasily was saddened she didn't welcome the new regime as he did. 'Meet me at the station next Wednesday at 3pm,' were Sveta's final words as she left his bedside for the last time.

Igor arrived soon afterwards. His sight was recovered and he was being discharged.

'Vasily, I'm going to Moscow,' he shouted as soon as he came into view. 'Vladimir Ilyich needs comrades like us.' Vasily's head reeled as his friend urged him to go too. 'Meet me at the station next Wednesday at 3pm,' were Igor's final words.

Now, as the hands on the clock crawl around to 3pm, Vasily ponders his choices one final time: due west to Moscow with Igor for excitement, adventure and the fulfilment of their boyhood dreams as a new era dawns in the history of this great nation; or north-west with Sveta to safety and a loving family, but exiled, possibly forever, from the land of his birth.

Finally he decides. He will let fate choose. He will accompany whoever arrives first—and live with the consequences.

Vasily hears a voice call his name and watches as a familiar figure walks down the street towards him. His decision is made. His journey begins.