A Partial History of Lost Causes

**A NOVEL EXCERPT**

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**Aleksandr**

*Leningrad, USSR, 1979*

**When Aleksandr finally** arrived in Leningrad, he was stunned by the great gray span of the Neva. The river was a churning organ in the city’s center—not its heart, surely; [[Text

Description automatically generated with medium confidence](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/node/280)](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/node/280)something more practical and less sentimental but just as necessary. The amygdala, maybe, or both kidneys. It had been six days from Okha—on a boat and then a train—and out the window he’d seen the entire country: first the teetering spires of Sakhalin’s drilling rigs, as familiar to Aleksandr as his own dreams; then the abandoned green train at the port, melting into the sand ever since the war with the Japanese; then the ten thousand salmon rotting in the sun on the eastern shore, waiting for Moscow to telegram permission for their loading; then the curling stems of smoke above the villages that were impossibly far apart (he never knew he’d been living in a country this enormous all along).

He saw deconsecrated cathedrals, miners with faces black and hard as their coal, great shoals of stunted grass and bleached sky. By the time he arrived at Moskovsky Vokzal, he thought he’d just about seen enough. He knew he should be grateful. The trip to Leningrad had required months of bureaucratic maneuvering, papers acquired and signed and lost, attempts and reattempts and bribes from Andronov, the man who would be Aleksandr’s trainer at the academy. Finally, one day, Aleksandr’s entry visa had arrived—with all the randomness of a June snowstorm or a plague of falling frogs—and that was the bottom line, he often thought: not that you could be sure that nothing would work, but that you could be sure you would never, never know what would.

And on the tracks—amid the screeches of braking trains and departing lovers, and the coiling smells of grease and cigarettes and cooking oil and acrid cologne—he almost lost his nerve. He almost wanted to drop his luggage on the track and ride the train all the way back to the Pacific, although his only chess set was in his rucksack and he was nearly out of bribe money. As the train had pulled into the station, the man next to him announced to the entire car that today was Stalin’s centenary. Everybody around looked quickly away. But here was the evidence: Sinopskaya Naberezhnaya was overrun with police, their uniforms striking red and gold against the horrible white sun. They were there to make sure nobody got too mouthy or too festive.

“Papers?” A policeman was behind him; his tone suggested that Aleksandr had already ruined his day. Aleksandr drew his hand against his eyes, and delicate grains of soot fell from his eyebrows. Just over one of the policeman’s gargantuan shoulders, Aleksandr caught snatches of the green-gray Neva. Its stark and sturdy arm put the city in a headlock, he thought, or held it up, like an osteoporotic backbone.

“Papers?” the policeman said again. His chin strap was digging into his prodigious neck, and his gilt cockade flashed in the sun. Aleksandr rifled in his rucksack. When he produced his papers, the policeman appraised them with a sour look and tapped his nightstick against his thigh.

“Sakhalin?” he said. “Did you take the wrong train?”

And Aleksandr thought: It’s a real possibility.

“No? Do you talk? Never mind. I don’t care. Go on. I’m sure you know what day it is.”

Aleksandr did know. And he was starting to decide about the Neva too: Really, it was the brain. Not the part of the brain that thinks up sonnets or show-offy chess moves; not the part that sighs sorrowfully in corners and reads Solzhenitsyn and wonders what it all can mean. It was the part that tells you to fuck, to run from things, to live, even when your better nature tells you not to.

**Years later, after** Aleksandr stopped playing chess and started playing politics, the city would become something altogether different. Bored women with absent eyebrows in Turkish silk bobbed in the lines outside nightclubs, pouring vodka of insane expense into the snow and laughing. Enormous billboards and neon signs made stamps of light against the sky, advertising dreams and attitudes and lifestyles of varying degrees of attainability. Leningrad became St. Petersburg, and St. Petersburg became a place to make and blow loads of cash—there were businesses and ladies enough for industrious men to conquer. Eventually, chess became something different also—once Aleksandr became the world champion and his brilliance was remarked upon so often that it became tedious. This was how somebody with some kind of unusual beauty—enchanting mismatched eyes, impossibly red hair—must feel: after a while, receiving extra credit for something so arbitrary becomes a burden. Chess was a part of him, no different from his poor posture or homely face. And chess became a humiliation and an indictment in the end—after he’d lost the title and his better moments were forgotten but his one best moment, that one best game, still hung over him, preceded him always, like a leper’s bell. He was very good for a while, and then something else was better.

But when he was young, he’d had a whole life to imagine.

**Stumbling out into** the day from the train station felt like emerging from imprisonment only to be lined up against the wall and shot. Aleksandr made his way to his kommunalka first, picking through throngs of stern-looking people, and several small children tried to steal from him before he even made it out onto the street. He followed his careful directions to himself and kept a dumb, hyperfocused attention on his papers. The number of people here was staggering, and more people than lived in the entirety of Okha stepped on Aleksandr’s feet before he made it to his new building.

The building was three stories tall and looked, from a distance, like a pile of cinders. In the packed brown snow of the front yard, a very young man stood next to an overturned trunk. The trunk’s lid was unhinged like a half-open jaw, and its contents were splattered across the yard; clearly, it had recently been thrown down the blocky staircase. On the stoop stood a gray-curled old lady in a red housecoat. From the way she was shaking her fist at the young man, Aleksandr figured she was the steward. Up close, he could see that the front door—formerly red, he thought—was splintering. The windows above it were welded shut.

“Excuse me,” said Aleksandr. “I’m moving in today.”

The steward ignored him. “Go away,” she said to the young man with the trunk. “Go away and never come back.”

And Aleksandr thought: Maybe it’s not too late.

The steward handed Aleksandr his keys. In the kitchen, the rusty communal sink smelled of urine. An older woman in a bathrobe, her hair piled implausibly into a small towel, was making toast underneath the exposed piping. On the other side of the kitchen hung decadent skeins of ladies’ panty hose. On the bathroom shower curtain, bright-green frogs frolicked between patches of black mold. In the hallway, a sign admonished the tenants not to hang up their underwear outside.

Aleksandr’s room contained a bed bolted to the floor, a chitinous desk, and an urn-shaped samovar, presumably left over from the previous tenant. Near the ceiling, the laths were showing through the plaster. Raggedy strips of light filtered through the tiny fortochka above the bed, and Aleksandr went to lie in them. The exposed mattress was vaguely moist against his skin. He stretched out his legs. In Okha, he’d shared a bed with his two kicking little sisters, and they’d thrashed all night like dying fish.

He stared at the crescent-shaped fungal smear on the wall; he gazed through the latticework of frost on the windowpane. He tried to sleep. By the end of the week on the train, he’d been so desperate for sleep that he’d tried briefly to sleep in the bathroom—balanced precariously above the hole that emptied onto the tracks—until someone had yelled at him to get the fuck out, idiot. But in bed now, he found that he missed the oceanic rumble of the train. He found that he was restless with the energy of being somewhere new, when his whole life he’d only ever been somewhere old. He found he didn’t feel like taking off his shoes yet.

He thought of the policemen down at the train station. He wondered if, out in the city somewhere, anybody was dumb enough to be celebrating. He wrestled his map from his pocket, picked up his rucksack, and headed down the stairs. In the kitchen, he passed a woman who was using a filthy spatula to scrape the remains of an egg off a pan. She looked at Aleksandr darkly and did not speak. Outside, the cold was settling into itself—announcing its scope, the way pain does after a moment or two—and the cold, along with the accumulated fatigue of six days on a train (two of them spent standing up), was making Aleksandr dizzy. All around him, buildings were painted blue only up to head level, and Aleksandr felt as though he were trapped in the mural of a child who had grown bored and wandered away. The wind kicked up.

Nevsky Prospekt was beautiful: the friezes and columns looked like ancient Rome, and the half-buried stores and bright orange signs and illuminated cinemas looked like the center of the very modern universe. Aleksandr recognized the rally by a beaming poster of Stalin, held high above the crowd like a grandfatherly, mustached god. The crowd was small—desultory and damp, ringed by nervous-looking police. As he approached, Aleksandr saw that the Stalins were everywhere: out of one photo, Stalin glowered menacingly; out of another, Stalin stared with an expression of stern benevolence. Into a microphone, a man droned dully about the Battle of Stalingrad. At the edge of the crowd lurked a small group of men with skunk-striped Mohawks and plaid shirts. Aleksandr leaned against a telephone pole and tried to listen. He was exhausted, he realized, and here—in this last pocket of stingy sun, with the wind breaking at the buildings behind him and the monotone buzz of military accomplishment in his ears—he thought he could probably fall asleep standing up. He pulled his cap tighter over his head. His gaze faltered. His head started to fall forward.

“Enjoying the show?” A man was talking to him. Aleksandr lifted his earflaps and looked. The man was tall and thin; when he moved, it looked like his joints were locking and unlocking and painfully rearranging themselves. He was holding a glass bottle of Pepsi and wearing no gloves. Next to him stood two other men. One was notably pale, even for here, and had eyes the color of kopecks. The other was short, scarred, and writing furiously in a notebook. His mouth moved as if he were chewing something, even though Aleksandr somehow felt sure that he was not. All three of them were dressed in striped sailor shirts and quilted jackets and sodden flapped hats. The tall one wore a small silver medallion around his neck.

“Indeed,” said Aleksandr. “Quite a sight.”

“To think Koba would be one hundred,” said the tall man. His voice was flatter than irony. “What a pity he is not here to enjoy the party.”

“True,” said Aleksandr. “It’s evidently true.”

“His reforms were truly adequate to the task of modernization, am I right?”

“Very adequate. More than adequate.”

“And that mustache,” said the pale one. “That mustache was quite an achievement, yes? Koba had more hair in that mustache than some men have on their entire heads.”

Aleksandr turned to look at him. There was something about this one’s face that made Aleksandr not want to look at it straight on: a haggardness underneath the eyes that raised uncomfortable questions about life in Leningrad. “Yes,” said Aleksandr, staring balefully at the ground. “An impressive feat.”

The tall man looked at Aleksandr with some amusement then. When he leaned in, his voice was lower. “Did you know he was five feet four?” he said. “He was. He was five feet four and had a bad arm. They never showed it in pictures. They never showed him standing next to anybody. He’s sitting in all the pictures with other dignitaries.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Aleksandr carefully. “I was given to believe that Comrade Stalin was a man of some stature.”

Aleksandr did not understand how things had gone so wrong so fast, so he turned to the short man, whose scars looked as if they might have just as easily been from fights as from some debilitating skin disease, and stuck out his hand. “Hello,” he said. “I’m Aleksandr Kimovich Bezetov. I just moved here.” He cast a bright smile because in Okha, old women had always responded well to his smile. The men shot glances at one another and seemed to experience some collective facial twitching. It wasn’t eyerolling, precisely, but Aleksandr was seized by a frozen feeling that it meant something similar. He looked at the men and squinted. He tried to see in them signs of trouble, but they just looked like everyone else he’d seen on his way from the train station—underslept and vaguely hostile. The tall one was thin, but the other two looked simultaneously chubby and wanly malnourished, as though they’d had enough to eat of only one kind of food. The shortest one crouched down to the ground, revealing the haunches of a mustelid.

“I’m Ivan Dmietrivich Bobrikov,” said the thin one. “This is Nikolai Sergeyevich Chernov.”

“A pleasure,” said Nikolai from the ground.

“The sovok here is Mikhail Andreyevich Solovyov,” said Ivan.

“Where are you from?”

“Okha,” said Aleksandr. “In the east.”

“We know where Okha is,” said Nikolai. “We’re students of geography.”

“Geography?” said Aleksandr politely.

“Well, history,” said Ivan. He cracked his knuckles.

“Real history,” said Mikhail.

“Shut up, Misha,” said Ivan. He winked at Aleksandr as though they were adults looking at each other over the head of a child. Aleksandr didn’t know what would be communicated by winking back, so he didn’t.

“And why are you here, tovarish?” said Ivan.

In the center of the crowd, a man was offering a tender eulogy for Stalin. His voice buckled and his nose turned bright red with emotion.

“To play chess,” said Aleksandr. “I have a place at the academy. I’m working with Andronov.”

“Oh yes? And what is a boy from Okha doing at the academy with Andronov?”

Aleksandr scratched his nose. “I was in his correspondence course first.”

“I see,” said Ivan. “You have a favorite player, then? You like Spassky?”

“He’s all right. He let himself be psychologically outmaneuvered by Fischer though, in ’72. All the nonsense with the money and the late arrival.”

“That match was rigged by the Americans, though, am I right? They were controlling Spassky via chemical and electronic devices, yes?”

Aleksandr stared at Ivan. He had no idea what he was supposed to say to this. “No,” he said slowly. “No, I don’t think so.”

“And Rusayev? You’re an admirer, surely, of Rusayev?”

“He’s a bore.”

“A bore!”

“He would’ve lost to Fischer too, if Fischer hadn’t gone crazy.”

“The Americans should still have the World Championship, you’re saying?”

“Well, I don’t know about *should.* I’m just saying they would.”

“Hm,” said Ivan. “Interesting ideas you have. Is that all you brought with you?” He eyed Aleksandr’s bag. “Meager possessions. The sign of a strong commitment to the Party.”

Aleksandr didn’t like that Nikolai was still crouching; it made him look as if he were about to pounce.

“I have some other things in my building,” said Aleksandr. “But I’m committed to the Party.” It was nice to say a familiar phrase in a strange city.

“I’ll bet,” said Ivan, producing a piece of paper and a pen from somewhere inside his enormous black coat. He held the pen’s cap between his teeth and wrote something down. “Here.” He handed Aleksandr the paper, and Aleksandr squinted at it. “Café Saigon,” said Ivan. “Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

“No,” said Aleksandr apologetically. He was forever having to confess to not having heard of things, not having known things, not having done things. It was tiresome.

“It’s on the corner of Nevsky and Vladimirsky. It’s the building that always looks like it’s under construction. We’re pretty much always there, since our flat really doesn’t have heat. Stop by sometime, if you like. Everyone else there is always talking about music, but we can talk geography.”

Aleksandr stared at him. “Isn’t geography sort of a settled field?”

“Less than you might think, turns out.”

“Well,” said Aleksandr. “All right.” He awkwardly held the paper in one hand and his small backpack in the other. In the square, a tinny recording of the national anthem was starting to play. Aleksandr tried to turn to face it, but Ivan caught him by the shoulder.

“By the way,” said Ivan. “Are you any good? At chess, I mean.”

“Oh. Yes. I’m maybe starting to be.”

“You came to Leningrad to find out?” said Nikolai.

“Yes.” This was embarrassing: something about admitting out loud that he’d moved across the continent to determine his skill level at a game seemed outlandishly childish, as though he’d told them that he’d run away to find something he saw in a dream.

“Good,” Nikolai said. In the waning light, his spotted face looked like some sort of environmental catastrophe. “That’s good. Leningrad is where you find out what you are made of, yes? What you can stand.”

The men laughed. “Yes,” said Misha. “That’s true. Tell me, tovarish, what can you stand?”

Aleksandr twisted the paper in his hands. “I don’t know.” The anthem was reaching its bombastic conclusion now, and lyrics about scarlet banners and deathless ideals went sailing over Aleksandr’s head.

“Don’t worry,” Ivan said, putting his pen back in his pocket. “You’ll find out.”

**And Aleksandr did** find out. He could stand, it turned out, quite a lot: he wasn’t particularly bothered by the communal bathrooms, the thin walls, the lack of privacy. He had nothing to guard: no lovers, no secrets, no deviations from the politically acceptable. In Okha, he’d lived with a mother and little sisters who took no interest in him; here, he sometimes dreamed of having a dark, mysterious question at the center of his life. The kommunalki were designed to collapse families, flatten out intimacies, make everybody the keeper of one another’s secrets until those secrets became shallow and harmless. Soon Aleksandr knew far more about his neighbors than he cared to—if the door handle was turned down, that neighbor was out; if the slippers were gone, he was in for the night; if a man came back to his wife after an absence, it was expected that the neighbors would take the children. Everybody walked around half-dressed—the women with their pale legs slipping in and out of their bathrobes, the men wearing stained undershirts as they boiled potatoes. Everybody stole one another’s food—gelid and anonymous items left on the stove would be quickly, quietly consumed—and during the month without hot water, the women took to setting pots to boil in the kitchen, and bathing right there without closing the door. Aleksandr heard even more than he saw—the crying of infants and drunks and lovers and widows—and sometimes he wanted to make some noise back: make people stop their screaming for a moment and wonder at what was going on in *there.* But his evenings were silent. He drank tea and read his chess books and chopped time into little tolerable increments until he thought he might be able to sleep.

Days were not much better. He registered at the chess academy and started work with Andronov, the instructor who’d heard of Aleksandr from his eastern scouts and summoned him across the continent, making the trip possible through contacts and bribes and veiled threats. In the months before his departure, Aleksandr and his family had taken to regarding Andronov as a terrible destroying angel who’d capriciously chosen Aleksandr for an awesome, elevating, all-consuming challenge. So it was nearly heretical to admit that Andronov was a disappointment: he was a short man with a thick neck, as it turned out, and he spat involuntarily when he spoke. At registration, Andronov took a perfunctory glance at Aleksandr, a slightly longer look at his papers, and said, “You may go. You will play number eleven.” Aleksandr took his damp papers and went where Andronov pointed. Number eleven was a surly, pimply-faced youth from Irkutsk. Number eleven’s pimples encouraged Aleksandr to think that he might also need a friend, but that was a mistake. Aleksandr’s questions after their first match were met with withering thirty-second silences followed by monosyllabic answers. Aleksandr found he did not need friends so badly.

A few weeks into the term, Andronov stopped by to watch Aleksandr play. Aleksandr beat his opponent that day—in fact, he’d beaten everybody he’d played so far, and he would beat all of his opponents at the academy during his time there, and Andronov himself, eventually—but Andronov only sniffed and said, “Not bad, considering.”

Aleksandr’s days, then, were spent in chilly high-ceilinged rooms, at tables across from men and boys who seemed dreadfully unhappy to be there. At first they treated him with indifference; then, as his winning streak grew noticeable, they treated him with a simmering resentment so understated that it amounted, basically, to more indifference. After a while Andronov started treating Aleksandr a bit differently—never warmly, though he watched his matches with more interest and gave him extra gruff attention and advice. He seemed to regard Aleksandr as a prize horse who merited careful monitoring but would be shot like the others if his leg were broken.

Still, Aleksandr’s days were bearable. The breaks were interminable and awkward, but the matches seemed to exist outside of time—he fell into them as though he’d been knocked unconscious, and he never grew accustomed to the strange feeling of coming out of them and realizing that hours had passed without him.

Nights were worse. His mother phoned him occasionally, and he would tramp down the hall in his slippers, trying to avoid the gray stains on the floor. His mother would warble about his sisters and their schooling and ask him when he might be able to send money. Other people would need the phone for more pressing concerns: illnesses, money transfers, semisecret arrangements and negotiations. They would crowd Aleksandr off the phone with their scrutiny, their calculated proximity. “No, Mamenchka,” he’d say. “I can’t send any money yet.” Then he would tramp back down the hall to his dark room, light a candle, turn on the samovar for tea, and close his eyes until he could almost hear his former Pacific Ocean out the window.

**There weren’t friends,** exactly, at the kommunalka, but he did come to know the characters there with as much depth as he probably knew anyone. On one side of him lived a small family—a couple and their toddling, very dirty baby—and he began to understand that the man beat the woman, and that the woman pinched the baby, and that the baby had a different cry depending on who was being beaten or pinched. On another side was an old muttering woman who was in constant conversation with nobody, as far as Aleksandr could tell. There was a long-haired elfin man who brought home other men; he had a post at the university, and halfway through the year he was found out and fired and had to leave the city. Everybody watched while he left, picking up his matted fuzzy slippers and carefully banging them against the doorframe while the steward held his keys. There was a drunk who would drink your cologne or dandruff shampoo if you left any in the bathroom. There was a pair of young girls who slept days and took calls during the night and disappeared. The rustlings and comings and goings of everybody around him made Aleksandr feel as though he lived at the center of a panting organism—an organism without an inner monologue, that ran through the forest in syncopated, unknowing movements, looking for something.

At night Aleksandr lay in bed and pressed his eyes closed so hard that he saw stark designs against his eyelids, and imagined the lives of the people around him. He saw the night girls, Elizabeta and Sonya, reclining across their beds, legs tangled together with the unnatural ease women seemed to have with one another’s bodies. Their room would have the faint smell of lilac, cold and mild. They would have a parakeet, and they would devote a tragic amount of attention to it. They would come home on winter nights and turn on the samovar, wipe off their eye makeup carefully, and laugh about the bodies and idiosyncrasies and preferences of their men. They were, as Aleksandr imagined them, not entirely unhappy.

The old woman, Aleksandr decided, was talking to her dead husband. In early versions, he imagined for them a love story so beautiful that he’d have to stop thinking about the old woman sometimes—when the wind sliced through the side of the building like razor through cotton, and the enormous coldness of his solitude made him somehow afraid, as though he’d been cast into outer space—and he’d have to go to his chess books to recover. The old woman and her husband had been the unusual kind of people who wanted more than anything to love somebody, and they’d been lucky enough to find each other, and once they did, they were happy together—not grudgingly so, not with resigned, resentful contentment, but really, really happy—forever. The husband was arrested for anti-Soviet activities and sent to the gulag for ten years, and when amnesty came, the old woman waited and waited and worked to find him but couldn’t. So she sat nights, looking out the north-facing window, talking to him, trying to lead him back to her, muttering to him her secrets and stories and permanent love.

This early version was too maudlin, thought Aleksandr—especially as the frost of October hardened into the deep ice of November, and the summer and Okha became a long time ago, and the chess institute yielded illumination and high praise and absolutely no friends—so he amended it: the old woman had hated her husband, who’d been a fat Party official with soft hands and pampered tastes and no loyalties to anybody. He’d sold out friends for almost nothing; he was motivated not by a genuine commitment to perfect social equity but by a shallow desire to be stroked and rewarded by superiors. She’d run away from him because the bitter indifference of the lonesome city was preferable to his petty attentions and cruelties. She cursed him all day long, every day, warding him off with her churning, self-sustaining hate. The hate rose from their building like steam and hardened into a charm that kept her safe—and she could never stop her muttering, no matter how crazy it made her look, no matter how the young people avoided her in the hallways.

**Looking back, Aleksandr** was embarrassed to admit, it wasn’t the humiliations and the moral compromises and the general undermining of humanity that most bothered him. In those days, he followed the papers only as much as the papers followed chess—which was some—so big, important lapses on other subjects did not concern him, though it was true that incompetence in running a city turned out to be several degrees worse than incompetence in running a village. The trash piled up in Leningrad as in Okha, but Leningrad produced more trash. In Okha the roads turned to lakes of mud that stuck so savagely that some trucks, every year, had to be left until things dried out in July; and the ice went unattended everywhere, but in Leningrad there was so much ice that the streets were impossible even for walking, forget driving, and Aleksandr quickly bent an ankle, which turned black before it got better. But it was not terrible. He had a roof, at least, and there was always some kind of food at the market, even if it wasn’t the kind you were looking for. He didn’t care for the billboards and didn’t believe in the slogans, but nobody else did, either. He regarded Communism as a kind of collective benign lie, like the universal agreement among human beings to rarely discuss the fact that everybody would one day die.

What bothered him most, actually, was the cold. The cold seeped into his bones in October and stayed there. His fingers and toes took on a deep reptilian blue that was difficult to shake, no matter how much he pinched them or stood under the lukewarm communal shower. It had been nearly this cold in Okha, he figured, but cold was different when you lived alone. His arms and neck ached from the tension of constant low-grade shivering; he slept fitfully, curling into himself and breathing into his pillow to catch snatches of warmth that soon turned moist and chilled. By January he almost could not remember what it felt like to be warm, to let his shoulders and jaw slacken, to take a breath of fresh air that didn’t nearly choke him with cold. This, he thought, this could drive a man crazy—it was like constant semistarvation, or sleep deprivation, or whatever else they did to people in Siberia. If he had any secrets to reveal, he would confess them all to have an hour by the summer sea, asleep in a ray of sun. He dreamed about warmth, he later thought, the way incarcerated men must dream about women.

And so it was not principle that finally drove him to the café on Nevsky and Vladimirsky. Later, journalists would want to know what impelled him to first start meeting with the other unsatisfied youth in Leningrad; what moral outrage finally pushed him over the edge and into the waiting arms of the dissident movement. And for a while he would tell them lies—about the constraints to his free and far-ranging ideas, to his literary appetites, to his pride—and they would nod appreciatively and respect him all the more. Until one day, long after his career in chess had peaked—he would always recall it was the year when he first lost to a computer, a much-noted event that prompted worldwide speculation about the triumph of technology and the obsolescence of human beings, generally—he leaned in and told a writer from a small Azerbaijani newspaper the truth: that he’d started going to the cafés, at first, because they were the only place in that first forbidding winter where he could, for a moment, get warm. That was why he went the first time.

And for other reasons, he kept going