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In which the murder takes place

MGM presents
Greta Garbo
in
Ninotchka
an Ernst Lubitsch production
1939

“This picture takes place in Paris in those wonderful days when a siren was a brunette and not an alarm—and if a Frenchman turned out the light it was not on account of an air raid!”

The lobby of the Grand Hotel with its gilded chandelier, spring slush on the marble staircase, and someone’s back in a gray trenchcoat leaning against a column. At first you hesitate to enter, you press your face against the window, breathe on the squeaky clean glass. Maybe it’s the wrong address after all, it just doesn’t look right. But then you find yourself caught up in the revolving door. Somebody must have pushed you from behind. Go ahead, comrade, it’s your turn. It is too late to slow down now. There is no way back, no escape.

“It’s not my kind of movie,” whispered Nina to Lionel. She moved closer to him, but not too close. She kept some distance, letting their clothes, but not their bodies, touch. Meanwhile three comrades, Bolsheviks, already made their way through the Grand Hotel lobby and were now entering the Royal Suite. They were in Paris on a secret mission: to sell the crown jewels and to save Soviet agriculture. Paris bewitched the comrades. Before they knew

it, women in expensive hats started to roll their Rs and bare their shoulders. Men arranged their pomaded hair preparing to kill time. Cigarette girls in skimpy skirts appeared from nowhere ready for anything: “You don’t smoke, Messieurs Bolsheviks? Too bad . . .”

“So that’s what life is like in the West, comrades. I see.”

“Well, we were warned back home, right? One night here would cost our country seven cows . . . Seven cows, comrades. Did you know that? Well, I think you should”

At that moment the audience must have laughed. Or rather some people just uttered their polite *ha*, others cleared their throats with a barbaric *ha-ha-ha* and still others chuckled mutely. Nina didn’t get the joke. It was in a foreign language, after all. For a Russian immigrant, she didn’t have a heavy accent. She mastered the grammar, recognized the roots of the words, but the derivatives often escaped her. Also, it was hard for her to make sense of those teasing prepositions—ons and offs, ups and downs—that put the natives at ease. Let them laugh, then. She can always try one of Lionel’s candies and rustle the purple foil.

Please don’t get me wrong; Nina loved the movies, although she found the talkies much too garrulous for her taste. She felt at home in the darkness of the movie theater, watching flickering shadows on the screen in a room filled with whispering strangers. This just wasn’t her day. She hadn’t eaten since that morning. That cheap *croque monsieur* she had for breakfast had been stale and cold. Wasn’t it supposed to have a piece of ham inside? You’d think so. There was a hint of something there, a smell, perhaps a lingering memory of ham that had been there before. And she was coming down with a cold. Her throat was dry and swollen. She didn’t feel like getting out of bed.

But then she remembered that that nice American fellow Lionel had invited her to a special screening. “A Soviet Commissar falls in love in Paris,” read the blurb on the invitation. “Greta Garbo laughs on the big screen.” “Why not,” thought Nina. And here she was next to him, leaning backwards on the uncomfortable chair shaped by the bodies of hundreds of fidgety moviegoers. Five perfectly sharpened pencils stuck proudly out of the pocket of his white suit. There was no doubt, Lionel wanted to be a writer. He wasn’t an émigré like Nina; he was in Paris on a long vacation.

“Do you ever think of going back to Russia?” Lionel whispered in Nina’s ear. He never quite knew how to make conversations with her.

“No, not really.”

“But you do miss home, don’t you?” He was ready to be understanding, to comfort her, to take her little hand into his. She didn’t budge.

“Maybe. But it’s not what you think.”

In five minutes all the hustle and bustle of the movie theater was drowned out by the clamor of the train engine. A special commissar was sent from Moscow to supervise three misbehaving comrades, Bolsheviks who began to care more about the cigarette girls than about Soviet agriculture. Comrade Nina Yakushova (such was the name of the special envoy) was standing tall on the platform, shrugging her broad shoulders. Her suit was tightly buttoned up, her hat poised to the left, her unsmiling eyes the color of steel. Just as Comrade Yakushova was about to walk out of the revolving hotel door into the busy Parisian street, Lionel pressed Nina’s hand. It was as if he tried to distract her from what was to come.

“Is she a spy or something?” whispered a woman on the row behind them.

“Who? Greta Garbo?” asked her companion.

“Who else!”

“Stop talking down there!”

“And look who’s talking now!”

Shhh . . . for God’s sake!

Comrade Yakushova was now on her way to the Eiffel Tower to inspect the inner workings of capitalist technology. There on a dangerous streetcrossing she encounters the counterrevolutionary count, Leon (the one who sent cigarette girls to the trusting comrades Bolsheviks) She told him that his species would soon be extinct. He found that absolutely charming.

Half and hour later, they were in love. And Greta Garbo did burst into laughter, just as the ad promised. She laughed compulsively and desperately, unable to restrain herself. The jewels of the counterrevolutionary princess, the misbehaving Bolsheviks and the ailing Soviet agriculture were all but forgotten. Comrade Yakushova bared her stately shoulders, becoming a lovable, bubbling Ninotchka, and Count Leon began reading Marx. Meanwhile the counterrevolutionary émigrés and the Soviet bosses struck back at them. Comrade Yakushova was summoned to return to the Soviet Union immediately and leave her love behind.

“Oh,” sighed the woman in the back row. “Will she really go back to Russia? That’s so cruel, isn’t it, dear?”

Lionel wanted to tell Nina something witty and make a strategic move to touch her fingers casually, bring them to his lips for a lingering kiss or, even better, press his knee against hers, but not too forcefully. What lovely silk stockings she wore even with one unfortunate run on her left ankle. As Lionel turned towards Nina, he suddenly realized that she was napping. Once again, Nina had slipped away from him. She was travelling back East on the invisible train of her dream.

It is too late now for last-minute farewells. There is a man running on the platform, desperately unwilling to face the fact that he missed the train. He isn’t the young man he once was. He’s going to trip any minute now, he’s going to hurt himself, and he doesn’t know it. The woman in the train window, thirty-something, wears a gray hat that seems too small for her. No, she isn’t traveling light. She wishes she were. Are there tears in her eyes or just the drops of the drizzling rain on the glass? She’s going back to her hometown. They say there’s no place like home; that’s where you belong. Why then did she procrastinate for years, leave everything to the last minute and linger on the platform for as long as she could, breathing the polluted air of exile? It’s hard to say. It’s better to keep a distance from immigrants and grieving lovers. Watch the clouds. There is a large one passing by, a foreign-looking cloud, detached and very photogenic.

As the train leaves the station, the Parisian outskirts disappear in the dusk with their smoky chimneys and rows of cypresses. It's dinnertime now, and in each of those lighted windows there might be two or more gesticulating shadows caught in their pleasant or unbearable everydayness, accustomed to the siren of the train. In the breeze of the moving train imaginations run wild. A nice French family over there is setting down for a family dinner. A man is reading the daily news in the corner, frowning. It is not too promising, the news. The "war in Europe" is in every second headline. Oh, but what do they really know, those doomsayers! No, dear, nothing to worry about. So, what's cooking today? This very second the man's wife is pouring extra-virgin oil on the sizzling skillet and then a drop of red wine. Oof—it all goes up in flames. The meat will be soft and pink now, juicy and rare.

Then the train runs through dusty provincial towns with unpronounceable names of too many consonants. Is it going in the right direction? Are we in the right car? Passport control officers don't smile here and don't wish you a casual *bon voyage*. "Your visa, miss. Is that you in the picture? Please take off your glasses and follow us." Occasionally, women in white scarves with tiny black polka dots appear at the station, their wrinkled faces burned by the northern sun. They carry baskets covered with cloth with halos of warm steam. The litany of their whispers takes over the station. "Potatoes, potatoes, potatoes, *kartoshka, kartoshka, kartoshka* . . . *Goriachaia kartoshka, berite, ne pozhaletete* . . . Dear daughter, you should get some of my warm potatoes, your journey will be long and hungry, believe me you will need them. And here are some of my baby pickles, just for you, free of charge." They really are delicious, those young potatoes with pickles and dill, you eat them from an old newspaper spread on the folding table. Yes, it's stained with margarine and has a bit of a smell. So what? Just pick it up with your hands, will you? We've left our paper towels behind, in another life, there is no use for them anymore. And don't ask too many questions here. Where you are going is none of our business. But we share a hearty meal. One fellow pulls herring and vodka out of a brown bag. The other tells a joke about Ivan the Fool who goes to the Eurasian steppes and meets Rabinovich at the crossroads. "Hey, Rabinovich," says Ivan the Fool. "Fix me a cup of coffee." "How do you like your

coffee?” asks Rabinovich. “Without milk,” shouts Ivan the Fool, “and hurry up!” “Can it be without cream,” pleads Rabinovich, trembling.

“I’ve been here a long time and I ran out of milk.”

The potatoes and good company warm you up and calm you down. You doze off quietly and pleasantly, lulled by the rhythm of the train. It goes on like that for days. You and your fellow passengers are a family now. You laugh at each other’s jokes long before the punch line. Remember Anka the machine gunner? You know how it goes. You get used to each other, you quarrel over trifles, play cards, bet and make amends. Until one day the train comes to an abrupt stop in a dark pine forest. Here the railway tracks become the roots of the trees. They tie you to the soil and keep you in place. There is no signpost here, no clearing, only the contorting roots in the dry earth. This is the border you can’t cross.

“Did you know that Greta Garbo worked for the Secret Police?” said a man in front of Nina.

“Fucking émigrés!” hissed someone at the back. “They’re everywhere. Even in the movie theaters . . .”

“Only an agent can cross the Soviet border so easily. After all her love troubles . . .”

Shh, Monsieur, really . . .”

“You know,” Nina turned to Lionel, rubbing her sleepy eyes. “That’s not entirely impossible.”

“Oh, come on, Nina,” said Lionel. “You’ve slept through it all. It’s only a comedy.”

Indeed, it was a comedy. First, Comrade Yakushova felt lonely in the Soviet Union, cried over Leon’s censored letters and gave away her silk lingerie to her friendly communal apartment neighbor. Yet she dutifully went to all the parades and ate omelettes with comrade Bolsheviks. Then the Secret Service decided to reward her for her excellent work and send her back to the West or rather to the Eurasian city of Constantinople where Count Leon was waiting for her. The lovers were reunited again. They dined in the Russian restaurant recently opened by the enterprising ex-

Bolsheviks, and lived happily ever after or at least for the last minutes of the film.

It's too bad that happy endings don't last long. This time too, the lights must have been turned on a little too soon.

The drowsy and teary moviegoers could no longer hide. Now they had to talk, return back to their lives, act as if nothing had happened. Nina lingered a bit longer in the shadowy movie theater, as if she felt someone's intense gaze on her back and wanted to return it, to catch her follower unawares. Was it that man in a raincoat who had whispered something about the émigrés in a coarse Slavic accent, or that couple in the corner who didn't bother to move when the words "The End" appeared on the screen?

"Stop imagining things, Nina. Let's get out into the light, eh?" Lionel pulled her impatiently by the arm. "I'll cheer you up, you'll see." They went out of the movie theater and for a while wandered aimlessly around Paris, unable to decide what should they do. Nina had a sore throat, and Lionel did most of the talking. It began to drizzle as they walked along the Seine. The vendors covered their vintage magazines and postcards with black cloth. The little park on Île St. Louis looked like a cemetery of dead umbrellas. Lionel put his arms around Nina. "Listen," he said, "may I offer you a drink, or would you like something to eat? What do you think? Or, I have another idea. Let's forget the food and go straight to your place."

Lionel thought that Nina liked his American straightforwardness, so he was trying very hard. Nina's cough was getting worse. She was, in fact, hungry and not really in the mood, but it was one of those situations when it's easier to just play along than to explain why not. It wasn't that she didn't like him. There was something youthful, healthy, clean-cut about him; he seemed to know where he was going and where he came from. A rare breed among people she knew.



In her tiny crammed room, he took out a gramophone record.

"I'll show you my new acquisition—your compatriot, Kachalsky. I must confess . . . I prefer jazz."

"So do I," said Nina. But Lionel did not hear her. He was playing out his fantasy:

Svetlana Boyin

*I am a princess
without a sou
and I elope
with my little Jou Su
Malaysian ba-ron
o-o- my baby Jou Su.
Malaysian ba-ron . . .*

“I’ve heard there is no word for foreplay in Russian,” whispered Lionel, kissing Nina’s ear. “What a practical language, indeed . . .”

The song went on and on, but they no longer listened. He was rather gentle and quick. Theoretically, he believed in “a virile rupture of the female.” He read somewhere about it, and the phrase stuck in his mind. But he had a sweet side too. He brought her tea with lemon in an old porcelain cup with blue nightingales or sparrows—it was hard to tell. The room was rather dim. She drank the tea and her throat felt much better. She looked at the cockroach moving slowly on the bas-relief on the wall. It was a friendly, inoffensive kind of cockroach, just seeking a way out. She wanted to pretend that she hadn’t seen it. OK, there it goes. Lionel was talking passionately about something else not related to her. Yes, of course, the movies. “Cinema will be the universal language of mankind . . .”

“Sure,” said Nina conciliatorily, “especially if they get rid of the words.”

In the morning he went to the neighborhood pâtisserie to pick up fresh croissants and jam. He must have run into friends and chattered longer than usual. He wanted to end the conversation but one of his friends kept rambling about some continent-ocean and utopia achieved, while the other was nodding skeptically. When Lionel came back, Nina was no more.



This is what was written in the report: “Nina B. was found dead on 55, rue de Saussure. Death was caused by a gunshot wound. No sign of forced entry. Ten francs remained in her purse. There were immigrant workers doing repairs on the fourth floor. All cleared.”

Lionel was arrested but quickly released. The owner of the pâtisserie, Monsieur Bonacieu, testified that he purchased two *pains*

au chocolat and one almond croissant at exactly 9:30, the time of Nina's alleged murder. Then Lionel met two men Bonacieu described as "definitely not French, possibly East European refugees. Paris is no longer what it used to be, not like in the old days. There are hardly any French people left here, you know. . . . But then again, those foreigners like my croissants, too. Sometimes they even pay for them. So maybe it's good for business."

Dear reader, of course I wasn't there. It was not I who eavesdropped on Nina in the darkness of the movie theater. I did not overhear the chitchat of the good-natured Mr. Bonacieu. And yes, I cannot prove without a reasonable doubt that he said just that. It's too late to ask him. He is dead now. He died peacefully in his sleep surrounded by his loving Madame Bonacieu and two sweet-looking daughters, Yvette and Lisette. I just tried to imagine and reconstruct Nina's last evening at the movies as precisely as I could, to pay her my last respects. It happened more than fifty years ago, and the murder remained unresolved.

According to Nina's file in the local commissariat of police that I was able to peruse, two used movie tickets for the opening of the American film *Ninotchka* and a newspaper review of the "great masterpiece of Ernst Lubitsch" were found lying near Nina on the bed. Her crêpe-de-chine purse contained red lipstick, a pair of silk stockings, colored candy wrappers possibly from Belgian chocolates, dried yellow flowers, embroidery kits, an address book, and a strange pamphlet in Russian entitled *Eurasian Supremacy*. An anonymous Russian translator was invited to give a brief summary of the pamphlet. This is what he typed up in his imperfect French with lots of misplaced accents: "The pamphlet describes the destiny of Russia-Eurasia, the land of great empires, from Byzantium to Genghis Khan, from Russia to Turkey, and its mission in the world. It presents a case of international conspiracy against Eurasianists by the people of the West and their agents on the Russian soil and argues for a new constructive relationship between Eurasian patriots and the Soviet Union and the subsequent return of the Eurasian leaders to the native soil. 'Some borders must be crossed, some blood might be spilled.' The authors believe that a strong Party of Eurasia is destined to provide a peaceful transition from Bolshevik to Eurasian ideology and build a theocratic state on Eurasian territory." In the margins somebody had scribbled in purple ink, "troublesome but deep."

There were two other items confiscated from Nina's room at the time of the murder and marked "possibly relevant." One was an unfinished letter to the Professor of Eurasian Linguistics, Dr. Boris Krestovsky, which read as follows:

Dear Boris Vladimirovich,

Forgive me, I am going to drop "Herr Professor" this time. You have strictly prohibited me from writing to you on this matter. But why, why don't you want me to come to the Congress of Eurasianists and meet our "Soviet colleagues." Did I offend you the other day when we ran into one another near that crumbling movie theater (the name escapes me now). You, of all people . . .

The second item was a note and a poem scribbled on a napkin by a friend of Lionel, a poet named Yuri Poltavsky-Rizhsky. He was rumored to have disappeared around the time of Nina's murder and was unavailable for questions.

To the unsmiling princess of the Nin Dynasty:

*The bullets in my brain
The vermouth in my blood
washed out in the flood
of drizzling Baltic rain*

to be continued.

*I am dying to see you, yours, comme toujours,
J. P-R.*

The summary of Nina's case was remarkably brief. Deceased: Belskaya, Nina; stateless; 34-years-old; relatives: none. Body identified by Natalie Chernoff, downstairs neighbor, age 16. My eyes linger on the first line of the report: "Surname, given name, date of birth." There was an error there, the correction of a typo perhaps. One letter of the last name was added later, not even a letter, only an apostrophe, frequently used for the Russian soft sign—Nina Bel'skaya—and then it seemed that the soft sign was erased again. The jumping letters of the old typewriter were unusually shaky. "Crime of passion suspected but hypothesis declined due to lack of evidence."