

GLEB TOROPOV

The Way of the Vagabond

or

"The past will always catch up with you especially when it has a faster vehicle"

It moaned mildly disgruntled at me and I stamped my foot down in reply so we developed a sort of hate-hate relationship from the very first turn of the key we were dependant on each other but nothing more and a good thing it was too so there wouldn't be any love lost between the two of us and we can get on with it steadily and without excess emotion be on our way for emotional attachments forge bonds and create bounds and that is something that sickened me to think about having merely days ago broken out from just such a predicament so it was going to serve us well if we didn't get involved although it's hard not to when loneliness is your sole preserve and admittedly it was endearing in an ugly sort of way and I took a shine to it immediately when I saw its bug-eyed front but recovering from first impression I saw its eyes in new light as yellow and dim and sparkless as if the life has been slowly sucked out of it and all it could project was a wilted ember through the murk of its overall dusty complexion through which some rust showed through it's off-white said the glib salesman plainly a euphemism for it not being washed or cared for like its proud parading staple mates all gleaming with real colour not off-reds not off-

yellow but piercing ruby and vivid canary and their hoods and tops shining slick with slippery sleazy wax like a vast congregation of Elvis impersonators in tight sequin covered jumpsuits and their oversized belt-buckles of polished fake gold brass and silver chrome hubcaps screaming for superficial attention into triple toned rock'n'roll horns while in the far flung corner in the shadow of hot-hatches and fastbacks and cabriolets engorged on banality there in the corner starved by gluttonous limousines lies all crumpled and curled up like discarded waste paper a good for nothing alcoholic down'n'out that requires too much fuel to drink and shows signs that it has been much abused for its deficiencies there it stands on half deflated tyres and with utterly deflated spirit looking up from beneath a furrowed corrugated steep brow of a hood glancing up in hope that someone in a worse condition than itself if that was at all possible would come along and take position behind its wheel and steer it away from the blinding Vegas freak show towards God knows where and oh lucky days that man was I it was I who happened to stumble upon the sight of the hapless creature hating it but taking it at the same time not out of pity but because of my own woeful inadequacy shown up in front of the polyester suited salesman who somehow managed to turn the transaction in his favour as they always have a habit of doing as if it was he who was doing me a favour by dislodging that pile of junk off his lot while it was in fact me who was affording him the commission for which he would be able to have yet another night of drinking cheap liquor spilling it over his already sullied suit and after lay another cheap hooker in the backseat of one of the expensive blood red penis extension Elvises that reeked of magic trees from inside only masking the odious odour of the weekend's revelry thus his sarcastic smirk told me all I needed to know about him a shallow septic salesman who presently outstretched his hairy hand towards me dangling the key in front of my very nose and like a mule I

reached out for it and took it because you see it was the only car I could possibly afford short of stealing one of course but I made a blood promise to myself which I was bent upon keeping as it was my sincere intention to enjoy my new-found freedom for as long as it was humanly possible without breaking the laws of the land I found myself temporarily inhabiting and as new life beckoned me away from petty crime and other morally defunct pursuits associated with the way of the vagabond such though I was a rogue of small stature a minor crook of undistinguished felony but who got used to and cared for the dolce vita an attachment that in the past landed me in water of some considerable depth and heat in the cauldron of both authorities and fellow outlaws who were constantly on my tail as it were with their hazard blue lights blazing and sirens wailing or even less conspicuously appeared in the undersized cracked rear view mirror in their plush red Italian cabriolets with emblems of stallions and bulls on the bonnet or it was a German armoured saloon from the silver executive fleet that beamed its headlights so brightly and so ominously that even when they extinguished their binocular shape still lingered on the retina lingered like the past ever-present and impossible to outrun since it always knows the future destination much better than me or you and that has the advantage of foresight coupled usually with a much faster vehicle that always inevitably catches up with you especially if your mode of transport was like mine a modicum of an escargot as modern cars go a snail that I drove away from the oily garage leaving an equally oily trail behind me until the leak was fixed still as the labourers on the chicken farm who temporarily were my colleagues in honest work would call it a tin of sardines on wheels a twin horse powered hence the name Citroën deux-chevaux a title that always struck me as mildly revolutionary as in part the assonance of the syllables echoed the name of the famous guerrilla and university dormitory poster idol signor Che Guevara it reminded

me of him particularly in the che and va aspect of the sounds the mouth makes and indeed in part because the vehicle proved itself to be a hardy little trooper having gathered some considerable mileage under its cam-belt so much so that it even deserved a red star to be engraved on its car-berretta still off we went requiring little more than sleep gasoline and a loaf of bread for sustenance off to the south of France incidentally and more specifically to Marseilles where I believed lay my destiny and my future riches but before they could be rightfully attained there lay a long road ahead of us a path unpredictable at the best of times and down right treacherous at the worst of times with its many ups and downs twists and turns mountain serpentine and low humpback bridges that had to be negotiated armed with only my vehicle and its spare tyre the clothes on my back and a good dose of charm which people frequently said I inherited from my parents along with my blue eyes and fair skin that burnt even when exposed to fluorescent bulbs and to complete the package the blond hair which from stories told was my mother's trait and which lasted only as long as the patent baldness would allow which I can only presume came from the chlorine filled murky deep end of my father's gene pool whom as you might have already guessed I never knew nonetheless his half of the double barreled name was also in my possession but which I had no idea of how to employ despite it being a name of some distinction and lineage originating somewhere in the region of Liechtenstein and designated to a count a marquis an earl a duke or a baron or some other peer of the land which probably no longer existed but alas the title and the instruction manual that came with it was like the land long lost and forgotten and unfortunately was printed in a foreign language which naturally I assumed was French as was my estranged Maman the object of this story's quest and my current pursuit and inspiration it is for her or rather for my mental image of her that I endured the seat accommodating me which was not

terribly uncomfortable though it was rather hard and lumpy and particularly made its presence felt during the longer parts of the journey or those parts which required us to traverse some rough ground usually as a tactical detour or an exercise in avoidance but it was raised high enough to allow me a good vantage point and an adequate reach of all the controls and pedals beneath my well trodden moccasins but for the depressing of pedals as I found out in time was very little use since the brakes barely broke which in itself would traditionally pose a distinct problem but for the lack of speed the machine could amount hardly warranted them at all and consequently the gas pedal was nearly as useless to press and it was much more economical on the feet knees and ankles to simply balance a brick atop of it and as it depressed the tight whining mechanism to the full virtually a whole score of minutes would trickle past before we could achieve the limiting speed of the contraption topping out at a rattling sixty miles an hour and there the needle would stay surprisingly unwavering on a smooth fast road while I could safely turn towards the tattered back seat that has never been witness to any 'action' except for me playing solitaire neatly laid out in nudey cards upon the torn grey upholstery and there my favourite the queen of spades would wink to me dark and sultry true to her suit and nature the pubic hair on her mond de Venus shaved neatly into the shape of the spade she never failed to bring an ecstatic smile to my face ever since I acquired her and the rest of the accompanying harem in a trade with a fellow inmate a man with skin that was more blue than pink because of obscene blurry tattoos stretched with prison food and dumb lifting but who despite the amassed musculature had a sincere weakness that only cigarettes could avail and so we traded a pack for a pack since I was never partial to inhaling smoke and had a much greater craving for the taste the feel the sound the smell and the sight of the opposite sex a yearning which began to express itself in the present by pressing

against the inside of my tight prison denims and so I became uncomfortable shifting in the relatively hard and lumpy seat but the feeling soon subsided as I stopped playing solitaire and concentrated on the road extending in front of me instead which as it diminished with perspective towards the horizon employing what I believe is called foreshortening a Renaissance discovery which allowed the masters to render the world we live in as a close approximation to the way we see it but I wondered as we passed a bill board advertisement what those great men artists of the past would make of the illusion of the real employed in everything we see even upon the deck of cards behind me and this poster with a woman slurping thirstily from a bottle how real would the picture seem to them yet how vulgar it is in reality and how it diminishes their achievements and the bottle is almost empty but half of it evidently poured over the model's lips and trickling down her chin and it reminded me of the waning petrol gauge and soon this empty feeling of vacuous and shallow times we live in started to be accompanied by an ebbing but not entirely unpleasant sensation of the stomach as if my tank was also close to being empty still I persisted on the way trying to put both the hunger for women spurred on once again by the poster and the lust for food out of my mind and transcend the carnal urges in some meditation picturing my thoughts as clouds floating by the sun of enlightenment shining through the gaps until every last one of them disappears leaving a clear blue conscience and beams of eternal wisdom but I quickly became bored and disillusioned and abstract contemplation again started to invade the empty spaces in my life until the landscape was covered by a dense layer of grey worrying cumulus with its uneven moist surface not unlike that of a brain inside a jar and it strikes me that disembodiment of this sort is the only place where meditation can work since what palpable good can it bring anyway if like myself you are not content by being simply poor and happy or you are not satisfied with

abstinence from sex or meat or even violence and ask the question why there is no such person on the face of this earth unless he is a fool and I will answer that it is in part because my civilisation wouldn't allow me to attain nirvana as it lives off me and my body as much as I the so-called parasite subsist on it and its commerce and when it finds that I have no money it banishes me from within its city walls like Plato banishing his poets and his artists and so I live on the fringes biting at the heels of those that come too close to the edge and still find that I have no money and was scheduled to complete another forty miles until dark today when the funny little headlights that look like the eyes of a frightened frog or some other small road-kill crittur in my path wouldn't function and blind to the way ahead we would be forced to halt the journey and settle in a village or a town for the night yet there was still time the outdated map with damp holes in it showed that it was mainly downhill from now on and so gravity was to take care for the most part of the impetus taking the burden of the internal combustion and allowing us to be on target and reach the designated destination a good thing for once there I could rest eat whatever God sends and be on my way again in this pile of miserable junk that I gradually became quite fond of and at the first sight of light and without as much as a tomato and a hunk of dry bread for breakfast and it will sputter and reverberate at the turn of the key much like myself clearing the hoarse throat after waking up the ignition one more thing in an encyclopedia of things that could go wrong and if possible always did but we persevered and there is no point blaming the camel for having humps as someone used to say whose name escapes me but it was surely one of those streetwise men talking of their wife or possibly critically of themselves but who certainly had no formal education but nonetheless could conjure up images of profound beauty and their sincerity and honesty gave them a quality of authenticity which even the best

hacks of Hollywood cannot fake so there I was rattling along with those curious little windows flapping open now and again like a headless chicklet's defunct wings in the onrushing breeze and it was getting darker and the wind colder and the motorway tarmac blacker under the tireless tyres and the cat's eyes blinked at me and blinked at me and blinked at me so that gradually hypnotised by their stubborn gaze we swerved a little too harshly into the next lane and it was only the prolonged hoot of a rather inarticulate lorry that brought us momentarily back to the present and into the right lane with some screeching rubber beneath and as the trucker passed brandishing a moist middle finger fat folds of skin flowing over a twelve carat gold ring and holding it aloft in the air as if to test the direction of the wind but only catching the bugs and insects on the windshield of his unkempt dirty nail he departed leaving only the cliché glint of chrome women on the mud-flaps behind and the red trails of light hanging in the polluted air long after they should have disappeared and yet they hung and the cat's eyes blinked again and hung there too bloodshot and tired on the retina and when I blinked back at them we plunged into an abyss so dark that only the fear of it would catapult the eyelids back and staring wild like pyromaniacs do at a burning barn listening to the screams of cattle inside but it was yet another car into the path of which we strayed and it mooed at us and this time there was no finger accompanying it but a scream of invective meaning much the same insulting thing but the Doppler effect took care off it so it was just a blimp in the distance much like the red-shift of break-lights curiouser and curiouser I thought to myself noticing again the line of kittens in the middle of the road and their shining little pupils began to merge and dissolve so I had to rub away the mist with the sleeve of my shirt or my eyes or the window or theirs I don't remember but they became a little clearer and lucidly they smiled at me and it put me at ease but I remembered that there's a great many twists

in the road according to the old map and that the road ought to be treated with a little more respect and so I followed the cat's eyes a touch timidly so the wheels went bump bump bump over their profile and that I thought would keep me awake a little longer so far so good I thought but would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here and the cat's eyes raised a brow and said that depends a good deal on where it is you want to get to I don't much care where anymore I said then it doesn't matter which way you go answered the cat's eyes and I added as an explanation so long as I get somewhere and they blinked or rather winked at me as if to say oh you're sure to do that if you only drive long enough I wouldn't argue with that but I was interested in what sort of people live about here and a huge luminous sign appeared and it pointed to the right and the village of Maupossene was written upon it and then another sign came out of the dark and this one was identical to the first but pointed to the left and said village of Bronier and the cat's eyes could see the confusion and the indecision that I had and the worries whether I'd have enough gas to reach either one of these destinations and that's the least of them but they said go any way you like they are both mad there French village asylums is the last place I wanted to visit but they intervened again saying we're all mad here I'm mad and you're mad and they were right of course so that my fears were immediately abated and I veered into the right lane ready for the exit in a kilometre and a half I indicated early tick tick tick it went orange light flashing how do they know that I'm insane I thought and the kittens grinned as if to laugh at me and it struck me that if I am bothered by cat's eyes on the road mocking me than I very well must be as mad as a Hatter so I continued and for a while there was silence and the eyes vanished the car floating on freshly laid asphalt feet devoid of the vibrations falling asleep then again they come back with a smile saying three quarters of a kilometre to go and quickly vanishing again into silence I

waited for it to reappear but it didn't come and when finally a sign dissolved out from the gloom it said Bronier instead of the expected Maupossene I turned winching my head behind and sure enough the backside of the sign pointing towards Maupossene was mooning at me I looked down at the cat's eyes and said I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly you make one quite giddy all right they said and this time the luminous sign vanished slowly and took the road with it beginning with the far off lights of passing cars and ending with the bowed arrow of the sign itself bent into the shape of a grin emphasising the curve in the road ahead and the smile remained for some time after the rest had gone well I've often seen a road without a sign I thought to myself but a sign without a road it's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life.