

# Russian Bookshop, London, 1991

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Gorka lets me into the shop, switches the CLOSED sign to OPEN, and does his thing where he goes to say something but doesn't. I want to ask *What?* But I can't. Maybe it's the being late again. He flicks his lighter and goes out back to smoke *Celtas*, the ripped-out filters scattered below the cashing up desk. I watch him tap ash into a rusty samovar and open his *El País*. He's a good boss. I unpack *Pravdas* tied like hay bales with red string, stamped with Cyrillic postcodes, slotting them into the newspaper carousel, rotating it to pull out the old news.

Gorka joins me at the cash register. Now there's the both of us waiting in silence for the door to open. He coughs, then says he likes my pussycat moustache. For a moment, we freeze. We look at each other—the possibilities compressed within that look: him leaving his wife, his mouth on mine, a life in the Basque country! But a customer brings what feels like the Siberian wind into the shop and Gorka retreats for another smoke.

In a few months the Soviet Union will collapse. Gorka will flip the sign CLOSED for good and we'll box up the books and sign on the dole. A year later, I'll hear Gorka died of lung cancer and, like everything else that decade, I'll wonder from behind another empty bookstore window how it is we see the signs of what's coming, but still. The shock.