



'Hilarious'
Guardian

'A funny,
charming,
rollicking
road trip'
Observer



MARINA LEWYCKA

'Buoyant and witty... *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* was entertaining, but this is better'

Sunday Times

Two Caravans
by
Marina Lewycka

Copyright © Marina Lewycka, 2007
All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Two Caravans

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

Two Caravans

There is a field – a broad south-sloping field sitting astride a long hill that curves away into a secret leafy valley. It is sheltered by dense hedges of hawthorn and hazel threaded through with wild roses and evening-scented honeysuckle. In the mornings, a light breeze carries up over the Downs, just enough to kiss the air with the fresh salty tang of the English Channel. In fact so delightful is the air that, sitting up here, you might think you were in paradise. And in the field are two caravans, a men's caravan and a women's caravan.

If this was really the Garden of Eden, though, there ought to be an apple tree, thinks Yola. But it is the Garden of England, and the field is full of ripening strawberries. And instead of a snake, they have the Dumpling.

Sitting on the step of the women's caravan, painting her toenails fuchsia pink, petite voluptuous Yola watches the Dumpling's Land Rover pull in through the gate at the bottom of the field, and the new arrival clamber down out of the passenger seat. Really, she cannot for the life of her understand why they have sent this two-zloty-pudding of a girl, when what is clearly needed is another man – preferably someone mature, but with his own hair and nice legs, and a calm nature – who will not only pick faster, but will bring a pleasant sexual harmony to their small community, whereas anyone can see that this little miss is going to set the fox among the chickens, and that all the men will be vying for her favours and not paying attention to what they are really here for, namely the picking of strawberries. This thought is so annoying that it makes Yola lose concentration on her middle toe, which ends up looking like a botched amputation.

And there is also the question of space, Yola broods, studying the new girl as she makes her way past the men's caravan and up the field. Although there are more women than men, the women's caravan is the smaller, just a little four-berth tourer that you might tow behind when you go off on holiday to the Baltic. Yola, as the supervisor, is a person of status, and although petite she is generously proportioned, so naturally she has a single bunk to herself. Marta, her niece, has the other single bunk. The two Chinese girls – Yola can never get the hang of their names – share the fold-out double bed, which, when extended, takes up the whole floor space. That's it. There is no room for anyone else.

The four of them have done their best to make their caravan seem bright and homely. The Chinese girls have stuck pictures of baby animals and David Beckham on the walls. Marta has stuck a picture of the Black Virgin of Krakow beside David Beckham. Yola, who likes things to smell nice, has set a bunch of wild flowers in a cup, hedge roses, campion and white-gold honeysuckle, to sweeten the air.

A particularly charming feature of their caravan is the clever storage space: there are compact cupboards, cunning head-level lockers and drawers with delightful decorative handles where everything can be hidden away. Yola likes things to be neat. The four women have become skilled at avoiding each other, skirting round each other in the small space with womanly delicacy, unlike men, who are defective creatures, prone to be clumsy and take up unnecessary room, though of course they can't help it and they do have some good points, which she will tell you about later.

This new girl – she skips straight up to the caravan and drops her bag down right in the middle of the floor. She has come from Kiev, she says, looking around her with a smile on her face. Irina is her name. She looks tired and dishevelled, with a faint whiff of chip fat about her. Where does she think she is going to keep that bag?

Where does she think she is going to sleep? What does she have to smile about? That's what Yola wants to know.

★

'Irina, my baby, you can still change your mind! You don't have to go!'

Mother was wailing and dabbing at her pinky eyes with a tissue, causing an embarrassing scene at Kiev bus station.

'Mother, please! I'm not a baby!'

You expect your mother to cry at a moment like this. But when my craggy old Pappa turned up too, his shirt all crumpled and his silver hair sticking up like an old-age porcupine, OK, I admit it rattled me. I hadn't expected him to come to see me off.

'Irina, little one, take care.'

'*Shcho ti*, Pappa. What's all this about? Do you think I'm not coming back?'

'Just take care, my little one.' Sniffle. Sigh.

'I'm not little, Pappa. I'm nineteen. Do you think I can't look after myself?'

'Ah, my little pigeon.' Sigh. Sniffle. Then Mother started up again. Then – I couldn't help myself – I started up too, sighing and sniffing and dabbing my eyes, until the coach driver told us to get a move on, and Mother shoved a bag of bread and salami and a poppy-seed cake into my hands, and we were off. From Kiev to Kent in forty-two hours.

OK, I admit, forty-two hours on a coach is not amusing. By the time we reached Lviv, the bread and salami were all gone. In Poland, I noticed that my ankles were starting to swell. When we stopped for fuel somewhere in Germany I stuffed the last crumbs of the poppy-seed cake into my mouth and washed it down with nasty metallic-tasting water from a tap that was marked not for drinking. In Belgium my period started, but I didn't notice until the dark stain of blood seeped through my jeans into the seat. In France I lost all sensation in my feet. On the ferry to Dover I found a toilet

and cleaned myself up. Looking into the cloudy mirror above the washbasin I hardly recognised the wan dark-eyed face that stared back at me – was that me, that scruffy straggle-haired girl with bags under her eyes? I walked about to restore the circulation in my legs, and standing on the deck at dawn I watched the white cliffs of England materialise in the pale watery light, beautiful, mysterious, the land of my dreams.

At Dover I was met off the boat by Vulk, waving a bit of card with my name on it – Irina Blazkho. Typical – he'd got the spelling wrong. He was the type Mother would describe as a person of minimum culture, wearing a horrible black fake-leather jacket, like a comic-strip gangster – what a *koshmar!* – it creaked as he walked. All he needed was a gun.

He greeted me with a grunt. 'Hrr. You heff passport? Peppers?'

His voice was deep and sludgy, with a nasty whiff of cigarette smoke and tooth decay.

This gangster-type should brush his teeth. I fumbled in my bag, and before I could say anything he grabbed my passport and Seasonal Agricultural Worker papers and stowed them in the breast pocket of his *koshmar* jacket.

'I keep for you. Is many bed people in England. Can stealing from you.'

He patted the pocket, and winked. I could see straightaway that there was no point in arguing with a person of this type, so I hoisted my bag onto my shoulder and followed him across the car park to a huge shiny black vehicle that looked like a cross between a tank and a Zill, with darkened windows and gleaming chrome bars at the front – a typical mafia-machine. These high-status cars are popular with primitive types and social undesirables. In fact he looked quite like his car: overweight, built like a tank, with a gleaming silver front tooth, a shiny black jacket, and a straggle of hair tied in a ponytail hanging down his back like an exhaust pipe. Ha ha.

He gripped my elbow, which was quite unnecessary – stupid man, did he think I might try to escape? – and pushed me onto the back seat with a shove, which was also unnecessary. Inside, the mafia-machine stank even more of tobacco. I sat in silence looking nonchalantly out of the window while he scrutinised me rudely through the rear-view mirror. What did he think he was staring at? Then he lit up one of those thick vile-smelling cigars – Mother calls them New Russian cigarettes – what a stink! – and started puffing away. Puff. Stink.

I didn't take in the scenery that flashed past through the black-tinted glass – I was too tired – but my body registered every twist in the lane, and the sudden jerks and jolts when he braked and turned. This gangster-type needs some driving lessons.

He had some potato chips wrapped in a paper bundle on the passenger seat beside him, and every now and then he would plunge his left fist in, grab a handful of chips and cram them into his mouth. Grab. Cram. Chomp. Grab. Cram. Chomp. Not very refined. The chips smelt fantastic, though. The smell of the cigar, the lurching motion as he steered with one hand and stuffed his mouth with the other, the low dragging pain from my period – it was all making me feel queasy and hungry at the same time. In the end, hunger won out. I wondered what language this gangster-type would talk. Byelorussian? He looked too dark for a Belarus. Ukrainian? He didn't look Ukrainian. Maybe from somewhere out east? Chechnya? Georgia? What do Georgians look like? The Balkans? Taking a guess, I asked in Russian, 'Please, Mister Vulk, may I have something to eat?'

He looked up. Our eyes met in the rear-view mirror. He had real gangster-type eyes – poisonous black berries in eyebrows as straggly as an overgrown hedge. He studied me in that offensive way, sliding his eyes all over me.

'Little flovver vants eating?' He spoke in English, though he must have understood my Russian. Probably he came from one of those

newly independent nations of the former Soviet Union where everyone can speak Russian but nobody does. OK, so he wanted to talk English? I'd show him.

'Yes indeed, Mister Vulk. If you could oblige me, if it does not inconvenience you, I would appreciate something to eat.'

'No problema, little flovver!'

He helped himself to one more mouthful of chips – grab, cram, chomp – then scrunched up the remnants in the oily paper and passed them over the back of the seat. As I reached forward to take them, I saw something else nestled down on the seat beneath where the chips had been. Something small, black and scary. *Shcho to!* Was that a real gun?

My heart started hammering. What did he need a gun for? *Mamma, Pappa, help me!* OK, just pretend not to notice. Maybe it's not loaded. Maybe it's just one of those cigar lighters. So I unfolded the crumpled paper – it was like a snug, greasy nest. The chips inside were fat, soft and still warm. There were only about six left, and some scraps. I savoured them one at a time. They were lightly salty, with a touch of vinegar, and they were just – mmm! – indescribably delicious. The fat clung to the edges of my lips and hardened on my fingers, so I had no choice but to lick it off, but I tried to do it discreetly.

'Thank you,' I said politely, for rudeness is a sign of minimum culture.

'No problema. No problema.' He waved his fist about as if to show how generous he was. 'Food for eat in transit. All vill be add to your living expense.'

Living expense? I didn't need any more nasty surprises. I studied his back, the creaky stretched-at-the-seams jacket, the ragged ponytail, the thick yellowish neck, the flecks of dandruff on the fake-leather collar. I was starting to feel queasy again.

'What is this, expense?'

'Expense. Expense. Foods. Transports. Accommodations.' He took both hands off the steering wheel and waved them in the air.

‘Life in vest is too much expensive, little flovver. Who you think will be pay for all such luxury?’

Although his English was appalling, those words came rolling out like a prepared speech. ‘You think this will be providing all for free?’

So Mother had been right. ‘Anybody can see this agency is run by crooks. Anybody but you, Irina.’ (See how Mother has this annoying habit of putting me down?) ‘And if you tell them lies, Irina, if you pretend to be student of agriculture when you are nothing of the sort, who will help you if something goes wrong?’

Then she went on in her hysterical way about all the things that go wrong for Ukrainian girls who go West – all those rumours and stories in the papers.

‘But everyone knows these things only happened to stupid and uneducated girls, Mother. They’re not going to happen to me.’

‘If you will please say me what are the expenses, I will try to meet them.’

I kept my voice civilised and polite. The chrome-bar tooth gleamed.

‘Little flovver, the expense will be first to pay, and then you will be pay. Nothing to be discuss. No problema.’

‘And you will give me back my passport?’

‘Exact. You verk, you get passport. You no verk, you no passport. Someone mekka visit in you mamma in Kiev, say Irina no good verk, is mek big problem for her.’

‘I have heard that in England . . .’

‘England is a change, little flovver. Now England is land of possibility. England is not like in you school book.’

I thought of dashing Mr Brown from *Let’s Talk English* – if only he were here!

‘You have an excellent command of English. And of Russian maybe?’

‘English. Russian. Serbo-Croat. German. All languages.’

So he sees himself as a linguist; OK, keep him talking.

‘You are not a native of these shores, I think, Mister Vulk?’

‘Think everything vat you like, little floverver.’ He gave me a leery wink in the mirror, and a flash of silver tooth. Then he started tossing his head from side to side as if to shake out his dandruff.

‘This, you like? Is voman attract?’

It took me a moment to realise he was referring to his ponytail. Was this his idea of flirtation? On the scale of attractiveness, I would give him zero. For a person of minimum culture he certainly had some pretensions. What a pity Mother wasn’t here to put him right.

‘It is absolutely irresistible, Mister Vulk.’

‘You like? Eh, little floverver? You vant touch?’

The ponytail jumped up and down. I held my breath.

‘Go on. Hrr. You can touch him. Go on,’ he said with horrible oily enthusiasm.

I reached out my hand, which was still greasy and smelt of chips.

‘Go on. Is pleasure for you.’

I touched it – it felt like a rat’s tail. Then he flicked his head, and it twitched beneath my fingers like a live rat.

‘I heff hear that voman is cannot resisting such a hair it reminding her of men’s oggan.’

What on earth was he talking about now?

‘Oggan?’

He made a crude gesture with his fingers.

‘Be not afraid, little floverver. It reminding you of boyfriend. Hah?’

‘No, Mister Vulk, because I do not have a boyfriend.’

I knew straightaway it was the wrong thing to say, but it was too late. The words just slipped out, and I couldn’t bring them back.

‘Not boyfriend? How is this little floverver not boyfriend?’ His voice was like warm chip fat. ‘Hrr. Maybe in this case is good possibility for me?’

That was a stupid mistake. He’s got you now. You’re cornered.

‘Is perhaps sometime we make good possibility, eh?’ He breathed cigay smoke and tooth decay. ‘Little floverver?’

Through the darkened glass, I could see woodland flashing past, all sunlight and dappled leaves. If only I could throw myself out of the vehicle, roll down the grassy bank and run into the trees. But we were going too fast. I shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

We drove on in silence for maybe twenty minutes. Vulk lit another cigar. I watched him through my lowered lashes, puffing away hunched over the wheel. Puff. Stink. Puff. Stink. How much further could it be? Then there was a crunching of gravel under the wheels, and with one last violent lurch the mafia-machine came to a halt. I opened my eyes. We had pulled up in front of a pretty steep-roofed farmhouse set behind a summery garden where there were chairs and tables set out on the lawn that sloped down to a shallow glassy river. Just like England is supposed to be. Now at last, I thought, there will be normal people; they will talk to me in English; they will give me tea.

But they didn't. Instead, a podgy red-faced man wearing dirty clothes and rubber boots came out of the house – the farmer, I guessed – and he helped me down from Vulk's vehicle, mumbling something I couldn't understand, but it was obviously not an invitation to tea. He looked me up and down in that same rude way, as though I was a horse he'd just bought. Then he and Vulk muttered to each other, too fast for me to follow, and exchanged envelopes.

'Bye-bye, little flovver,' Vulk said, with that chip-fat smile. 'Ve meet again. Maybe ve mekka possibility?'

'Maybe.'

I knew it was the wrong thing to say, but by then I was just desperate to get away.

The farmer shoved my bag into his Land Rover and then he shoved me in too, giving my behind a good feel with his hand as he did so, which was quite unnecessary. He only had to ask and I would have got in myself.

‘I’ll take you straight out to the field,’ he said, as we rattled along narrow winding lanes. ‘You can start picking this afternoon.’

After some five kilometres, the Land Rover swung in through the gate, and I felt a rush of relief as at last I planted my feet on firm ground. The first thing I noticed was the light – the dazzling salty light dancing on the sunny field, the ripening strawberries, the little rounded caravan perched up on the hill and the oblong boxy caravan down in the corner, the woods beyond, and the long curving horizon, and I smiled to myself. So this is England.

★

The men’s caravan is a static model, a battered old fibreglass box parked at the bottom of the field by the gate, close to a new prefab building where the strawberries are crated and weighed each day. Stuck onto one corner of the prefab is the toilet and shower room – though the shower doesn’t work and the toilet is locked at night. Why is it locked? wonders Andriy. What is the problem with using the toilet at night?

He has woken early with a full bladder and an unspecific feeling of dissatisfaction with himself, his caravan mates, and caravan life in general. Why is it, for example, that although the men’s caravan is bigger, it still feels more cramped than the women’s caravan? It has two rooms – one for sleeping and one for sitting – but Tomasz has the double bed in the sleeping room all to himself and three of them are sleeping in the sitting room. How has this happened? Andriy has one of the seat-beds and Vitaly has the other. Emanuel has made himself a hammock from an old sheet and blue bale-twine, skilfully twisted and knotted, and slung it across the sitting room from corner to corner – he is lying there breathing deeply with his eyes closed and a cherubic smile on his round brown face.

Andriy recalls Emanuel’s look of astonishment and horror when the farmer suggested he should share the double bed with Tomasz.

‘Sir, we have a proverb in Chichewa. One nostril is too small for two fingers.’

Afterwards, he took Andriy to one side and whispered, ‘In my country homosexualisation is forbidden.’

‘Is OK,’ Andriy whispered back. ‘No homosex, only bad stink.’

Yes, Tomasz’s trainers are another insult – their stink fills the caravan. It is worst at night when the trainers are off his feet and stowed beneath the bed. The fumes rise, noxious and clinging, and dissipate like bad dreams, seeping through the curtain that divides the sleeping from the sitting room, hovering below the ceiling like an evil spirit. Sometimes, in the night, Emanuel rolls silently out of his hammock and places the trainers outside on the step.

Another thing – why are there no pictures on the walls in the men’s caravan? Vitaly keeps a picture of Jordan under his bed, which he says he will stick up when he finds something to stick it with. He also keeps a secret stash of canned lager and a pair of binoculars. Tomasz keeps a guitar and a pair of Yola’s knickers under his bed. Emanuel keeps a bag full of crumpled papers.

But the worst thing is that because of the slope, and the way their caravan is positioned, you can only get a view of the women’s caravan from the window above Tomasz’s bed. Should he ask Tomasz to move over so he can take a look, and see whether that girl is still around? No. They’d only make stupid remarks.

★

In the women’s caravan they have been up since dawn. Yola has learnt from experience that it is better to rise early if they don’t want the Dumpling knocking on the door and inviting himself in while they are getting dressed, hanging around watching them with those hungry-dog eyes – doesn’t he have anything better to do?

Irina and the Chinese girls have to get up first and fold away the double bed before there is room for anyone to move. They cannot use the lavatory and washroom until the Dumpling arrives with

the key to the prefab – what does he think they're going to do? Unroll the toilet rolls at night? – but there is a handy gap in the hedge only a few metres away, though Yola cannot for the life of her understand why there always seem to be faces grinning at the window of the other caravan whenever any of the women takes a nip behind the hedge, don't they have anything better to do down there?

There is a cold water tap and washing bowl at the side of the women's caravan, and even a shower made from a bucket with holes in the bottom, fed from a black-painted oil drum stuck up in a tree. In the evening, after it has been in the sun all day, the water is pleasantly warm. That nice-looking boy Andriy, who is quite a gallant despite being Ukrainian, has erected a screen of birch poles and plastic sacks around it, disregarding the protests of Vitaly and Tomasz, who complained that he spoiled their innocent entertainment – really those two are worse than the children at nursery school, what they need is a good smacking – and now they can no longer see the shower, they spend all their time making comments about the items on the women's washing line. Recently a pair of her knickers has disappeared in mysterious circumstances. Yola cannot for the life of her understand how grown men can be such fools. Well, in fact, she can.

★

It was Tomasz who stole the knickers, in a moment of drunken frivolity one night last week. They are of white cotton, generously cut, with a pretty mauve ribbon at the front. He has been looking out ever since for the right moment to return them discreetly without being caught – he wouldn't want anyone to think he is the sort of man who steals women's underwear from washing lines and keeps it under his bed.

'I see Yola has washed her undies again today,' he says morosely in Polish, peering through Vitaly's binoculars from the window above his bed. 'I wonder what is the meaning of this.'

The white knickers dangle in the air like a provocation. When Yola recruited him to her strawberry-picking team, there had been a twinkle about her that had seemed to suggest she was inviting him to . . . well, more than just to pick strawberries.

‘What do you mean, *what is the meaning?*’ asks Vitaly in Russian, mimicking Tomasz’s Polish accent. ‘Most of what women do is completely meaningless.’

Vitaly is vague about his origins and Tomasz has never pressed him, assuming he is some kind of illegal or gipsy. Despite himself, he is impressed by the way Vitaly can slip easily between Russian, Polish and Ukrainian. Even his English is quite good. But what use are all those languages, if you have no poetry in your soul?

‘In the poetry of women’s undergarments, there is always meaning. Like the blossoms that fall from a tree as the heat of summer approaches . . . Like clouds which melt away . . .’

He can feel a song coming on.

‘Enough,’ says Vitaly. ‘The Angliskis would call you a soiled old man.’

‘I am not old,’ protests Tomasz.

In fact he has just turned forty-five. On his birthday he looked in the mirror and found two more grey hairs on his head, which he at once pulled out. No wonder his hair is beginning to look thin. Soon, he will have to surrender to the greyness, to cut his hair short, put away his guitar, exchange his dreams for compromises, and start worrying about his pension. What has happened to his life? It is just slipping away, like sand through an hourglass, like a mountain washed to the sea.

‘Tell me, Vitaly, how has life turned you into a cynic at such a young age?’

Vitaly shrugs. ‘Maybe I was not born to be a loser, like you, Tomek.’

‘Maybe there is still time enough for you.’

How can he explain to this impatient young man what it has taken him forty-five years to learn – that loss is an essential part of the human condition? That even as we are moving on down

that long lonesome road, destination unknown, there is always something we are leaving behind us. He has been trying all morning to compose a song about it.

Putting down the binoculars, he reaches for his guitar, and begins to strum, tapping his feet in time to the rhythm.

*‘There once was a man, who roamed the world o’er.
Was he seeking for riches, or glory, or power?
Was he seeking for meaning, or truth or . . .’*

This is where he gets stuck. What else is that wretched man seeking?

Vitaly gives him a pitying look.

‘Obviously he is looking for someone to fuck.’

He picks up the binoculars, turns the knob for focus and gives a soft whistle between his teeth.

‘Hey, black man,’ he calls to Emanuel in English, ‘come and see. Look, it’s just like the little panties that Jordan is wearing in my poster. Or maybe . . .’ – he adjusts the binoculars again – ‘. . . maybe it is one of those string nets they use to package salami.’

Emanuel is sitting at the table, chewing a pencil for inspiration as he composes a letter.

‘Leave him, leave him,’ says Tomasz. ‘Emanuel is not like you. He is . . .’ He strums a couple of chords on his guitar as he searches for the right phrase. ‘In this box of fibreglass, he is searching for a gem.’

‘Another loser,’ snorts Vitaly.

★

Dear Sister

Thank you for the money you sent for with its help I have now journeyed from Zomba to Lilongwe and so on via Nairobi into England. I hope these words will receive you for when I came to

the address you gave in London a different name was written at the door and nobody knew of your whereabouts. So being needful of money I came into the way of strawberry-picking and I am staying in a caravan with three mzungus here in Kent. I am striving with all my might to improve my English but this English tongue is like a coilsome and slippery serpent and I am always trying to remember the lessons of Sister Benedicta and her harsh staff of chastisement. So I write hopefully that you will come there and find these letters and unleash your corrections upon them dear sister. And so I will inform you regularly of my adventures within this rainstruck land.

From your beloved brother Emanuel!

★

The women's caravan is already in sunshine, but the sun hasn't yet reached the bottom of the field, where Andriy is standing at the kitchen end of the men's caravan, trying to light the gas to make some tea. The coarse banter from the sleeping room irritates him, and he doesn't want the other three to notice the agitation that has come over him since yesterday. He lights another match. It flares and burns his fingers before the gas will catch. Devil's bum! That girl, that new Ukrainian girl – when their eyes met, did she smile at him in a particular way?

He replays the scene like a movie in his head. It is this time yesterday. Farmer Leapish arrives as usual in his Land Rover with the breakfast food, the trays of empty punnets for the strawberries and the key to the prefab. Then someone steps out of the passenger door of the Land Rover, a pretty girl with a long plait of dark hair down her back, and brown eyes full of sparkle. And that smile. She steps into the field, looking around this way and that. He is there standing by the gate, and she turns his way and smiles. But is it for him, that smile? That's what he wants to know.

He made a point of sitting next to her at dinner.

'Hi. Ukrainka?'

'Of course.'

'Me too.'

'I can see.'

'What's your name?'

'Irina.'

He waited for her to ask – 'And yours?' – but she didn't.

'Andriy.'

He waited for her to say something, but she didn't.

'From Kiev?' he continued.

'Of course.'

'Donetsk.'

'Ah, Donetsk. Coalminers.'

Did he detect a hint of condescension in her voice?

'You been to Donetsk?'

'Never.'

'I came to Kiev.'

'Oh yes?'

'In December. When demonstrations were going on.'

'You came for demonstrations?' A definite condescending lilt.

'I came to demonstrate against demonstrations.'

'Ah. Of course.'

'Maybe I saw you then. You were there?'

'Of course. In Maidan Square.'

'In demonstration?'

'Of course. It was our Orange Freedom Revolution.'

'I was with the other side. White and blue.'

'The losing side.'

She smiled again. A flash of white teeth, that's all there was to it. He tries to picture the face, but he can't get it into focus. No, there was more to it than teeth; there was a crinkling round the nose and eyes, a little lift of the eyebrows and two infuriating dimples winking below the cheeks. Those dimples – he can't get them out of his mind. Was it just a smile, or did it *mean* something?

And if it *means* something, does it mean I've got a good possibility here? A good possibility of a man–woman possibility? Should I take things further? Or should I just play cool? A girl like that – she's too used to men running after her. Wait for her to show the first card. But what if she's shy – what if she needs bit of help with that first card? Sometimes a man must act to bring about a possibility.

But then again, isn't this wrong time and place, Andriy Palenko, to be involving yourself with another Ukrainian girl? What about the blond-haired *Angliska rosa* you came all this way to England for, the pretty blue-eyed girl who is waiting for you, though she doesn't know it yet herself, packed with high-spec features: skin like smetana, pink-tipped Angliski breasts, golden underarm hair like duckling down, etc. And a rich Pappa, who at first may not be too happy about his daughter's choice, because he wants her to marry a banker in a bowler hat like Mr Brown – what father would not? – but when he gets to know you will soften his heart and welcome you into his luxurious en-suite-bathroom house. For sure, he will find a little nice job for his Ukrainian son-in-law. Maybe even a nice car . . . Mercedes. Porsche. Ferrari. Etc.

Yes, this new Ukrainian girl has some positive features: nice looking, nice smile, nice dimples, nice figure, nicely rounded, plenty to get hold of, not too thin, like those stylish city girls who starve themselves into Western-type matchsticks. But she's only another Ukrainian girl – plenty of those where you came from. And besides, she's a bit snobbish. She thinks she's better than you. She thinks she's a high-culture type with a superior mentality, and you're a low-culture type. (And so what if you are? Is that something to be ashamed of?) You can tell by the way she talks, being so stingy with her words, as if it's money she's counting out. And the ridiculous plait, like that crow Julia Timoshenko, fake-traditional-Ukrainian. Tied with an orange ribbon. She thinks she's better than you because she's from Kiev and you're from Donbas. She thinks she's better than you because your dad's a miner – a dead miner, at that.

Poor Dad. Not the life for a dog let alone a man. Underground. Down below the mushrooms. Down with the legions of ghost-miners, all huddled up in the dark, singing their eerie dead-men's songs. No, he can't go down there any more, even if it's the only way he knows how to live, how to put bread on the table. He'll have to find another way. What would his father have wanted him to do? It's hard enough living up to your parents' expectations when you know what they expect. But all Andriy's father ever said to him was, 'Be a man.' What is that supposed to mean?

When the pit-prop gave way and the roof fell in, Andriy was on one side of the fall and his father was on the other. He was on the living side; his father was on the side of the dead. He heard the roar, and he ran towards the light. He ran and ran. He is still running.

★

I AM DOG I RUN I RUN FROM BAD MAN CAGE I HEAR DOGS
BARK ANGRY DOGS GROWL ANGRY DOGS BARK THEY WILL
FIGHT THEY WILL KILL I SMELL DOG-SWEAT MAN-RAGE
MAN OPENS CAGE MAN PULLS COLLAR MEN SIT SMOKE
TALK DOGS BARK LIGHT TOO BRIGHT BIG ANGRY DOG
SNARLS SHOWS TEETH HAIRS BRISTLE ON HIS BACK HE
WILL KILL I AM NOT FIGHTING DOG I AM RUNNING DOG
I JUMP I RUN I RUN TWO DAYS I EAT NO MEAT HUNGER
PAINS IN BELLY MAKE ME MAD I FEEL HUNGER I FEEL FEAR
I RUN I RUN I AM DOG

★

The women's caravan was small, but so cosy. I fell in love with it straightaway. I put my bag down and introduced myself.

'Irina. From Kiev.'

OK, there was some unpleasantness upon my arrival. Yola, the Polish supervisor, who is a coarse and uneducated person with an elevated view of her own importance, said some harsh words about

Ukrainians for which she has yet to apologise. OK, I was a bit dismayed at the overcrowded conditions, and I may have been a bit tactless. But then the Chinese girls very kindly told me I could share their bed. I wished I hadn't finished the poppy-seed cake, for a small gift can go a long way in these circumstances, but I still had a bottle of home-made cherry vodka for emergencies, and what was this if not an emergency? Soon, we were all firm friends.

We ate our dinner sitting out on the hillside all together, drinking the rest of the vodka and watching the sun set. I was pleased to discover there's another Ukrainian here – a nice though rather primitive miner from Donetsk. We chatted in Ukrainian over dinner. Poles and Ukrainians can understand each other's language, too, though it's not the same. But of course I have come to England mainly to improve my English before I start my university course, so I hope I will soon meet more English people.

English was my favourite subject at school, and I had pictured myself walking through a panorama of cultivated conversations, like a painted landscape dotted with intriguing homonyms and mysterious subjunctives: *would you were wooed in the wood*. Miss Tyldesley was my favourite teacher. She even made English grammar seem sexy, and when she recited Byron she would close her eyes and breathe in deeply through her nose, trembling in a sort of virginal ecstasy, as though she could smell his pheromones wafting off the page. Please, control yourself, Miss Tyldesley! As you can imagine, I couldn't wait to come to England. Now, I thought, my life will really begin.

After dinner I went back to the caravan and unpacked my bag. On a patch of wall below the head-level locker I stuck my picture of Mother and Pappa, standing together in front of the fireplace at home. Mother is wearing pink lipstick and a ghastly pink scarf tied in what she thinks is a stylish bow; Pappa is wearing his ridiculous orange tie. OK, so they wear terrible clothes, but they can't help

it, and I still love them. Pappa's arm is around Mother's shoulder, and they're smiling in a stiff uncertain way, like people whose hearts aren't in it, who are just posing for the camera. I looked at it while I drifted off to sleep, and a few pathetic tears came into my eyes. Mother and Pappa waiting for me at home – what's so weepy about that?

Next morning, when I woke up, the caravan was flooded with sunlight and everything seemed different. The gloomy thoughts and fears of yesterday had fled like ghosts into the night. When I went out to the tap to have a wash, the water splashing on the stones caught the sunbeams and broke them into hundreds of brilliant rainbows which danced through my fingers, cold and tingly. In the copse behind me, a thrush was singing.

As I bent towards the tap, the orange ribbon slipped off my plait, swirling in the water. For a moment I remembered the orange balloons and banners in the square, the tents and music, and my parents, so excited, gabbling like teenagers about freedom and other such stuff. And I did feel a stab of sadness. Then I picked up the wet ribbon, shook it out, and hung it over the washing line. As I looked down over the valley, my heart started to dance again. I took a deep breath. This air – so sweet, so English. This was the air I'd dreamed of breathing; loaded with history, yet as light as . . . well, as light as something very light. How had I lived for nineteen years without breathing this air? And all the cultured, brave, warm-hearted people that I'd read about in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens (OK, I admit, mostly in translation). I was ready to meet them.

In fact I was particularly looking forward to meeting a gentleman in a bowler hat like Mr Brown in my *Let's Talk English* book, who looks supremely dashing and romantic, with his tight suit and rolled-up umbrella, and especially the intriguing bulge in his trouser-*zip* area, which was drawn very realistically in black ink by a previous owner of that textbook. Who wouldn't want to talk

English with him?! Lord Byron looks romantic, too, despite that bizarre turban.

English men are supposed to be incredibly romantic. There's a famous folk-legend of a man who braves death and climbs in through his lady's bedroom window just to bring her a box of chocolates. Unfortunately, the only Englishman I have met so far is farmer Leapish, who doesn't seem to fit into this category. I hope he is not typical.

Please don't think I'm one of those awful Ukrainian girls who come to England only to ensnare a husband. I'm not. But if love should happen to come my way, OK, my heart is open and ready.

★

The kettle starts to whistle. Andriy pours the water onto the teabag, adds two spoonfuls of sugar, and cradling the hot cup in his hands, he wanders down to the gate, where he sometimes stands when he has an idle moment, observing the passing cars and looking out for his *Angliska rosa*. Leaning on his elbows, he drinks slowly, enjoying the heat in his throat, the cool breeze blowing up the Downs, and the noisy chatter of birds doing their early morning stuff. The sun has come up over the hill and although it isn't yet eight o'clock, he can already feel its warmth on his skin. The light is as sharp as crystal, marking out the landscape with hard crisp shadows.

He likes to come down here, to look out at this England which, despite being just beyond the gate, still seems tantalisingly out of reach. Where are you, *Let's Talk English* Mrs Brown, with your tiny waist and tailored spotted blouse? Where are you, Vagvaga Riskegipd, with your bubblegum and ferocious kisses? Since he came to England two weeks ago he hasn't met a single *Angliska rosa*. He has seen them drive past, so he knows they exist. Sometimes he waves, and once one of them even waved back. And yes, she was blonde, and yes, she was driving a red open-top Ferrari. She

was gone in the twinkling of an eye, before he could even vault over the gate to see the rear spoiler disappear round the bend in the lane. But for sure she lives somewhere nearby, so it is only a matter of time before she reappears. OK, so his last girlfriend Lida Zakanovka went off with a footballer. Good luck to her. There are better women waiting for him over here in England.

He blows on the hot tea to cool it down, and thinks about his last visit to England. How long ago was that? It was about eighteen years, so he must have been seven years old. He was accompanying his father on a fraternal delegation to visit the mineworkers' union in the city of Sheffield, which is twinned with his home town, Donetsk. Learn, boy, his father had said. Learn about the beauty of international solidarity. Though it didn't do him much good when he needed it. Poor Dad.

He doesn't remember much about Sheffield, but three things stand out in his memory from that visit. First, he recalls, there was a banquet, and a sticky pink dessert, of which he ate so much that he was later horribly, messily, pinkily sick in the back of a car.

Second, he remembers that the renowned visionary ruler of the city, who had welcomed them warmly with a long-long speech about solidarity and the dignity of labour (the speech had so impressed his father that he repeated it many times over), who had sat next to them at the banquet and kindly pressed more and more of that treacherous pink dessert on him, and in the back of whose car he had later been sick – this man was blind. The man's astonishing blindness, the fearsome all-excluding wall bricked up behind his visionary eyes, had fascinated Andriy. He had closed his eyes tight and tried to imagine what it would be like to live behind that wall of blindness; he went around bumping into things, until his father slapped him and told him to behave himself.

The other thing he remembers is his first kiss. The girl – she must have been a daughter of one of the delegates – was older and bolder than him, a long-legged girl with white-blond hair and a sprinkle of freckles on her nose. She smelt of soap and bubblegum. While the fraternal speeches droned on and on in the hall, the two of them had played a wild game of chase along the echoing corridors of the vast civic building, racing up and down stairs, dodging in doorways, shrieking with excitement. She had pounced on him at last and wrestled him down on the stone stairs, pinning him to the ground, pressing her strong body on top of him. They were both out of breath, panting and laughing. Suddenly she had swooped down on him with her lips and kissed him – a wet, insistent kiss, her tongue pushing against his mouth. It was a kiss of subjugation. He'd been too young and too astonished to do anything but surrender. Then she'd given him a bit of paper with her name scrawled on it, the 'I's dotted with little hearts. *Vagvaga Riskegipd*. An incredibly sexy name. And a telephone number. He still has it, tucked into the back of his wallet like a talisman. At school, when the other boys chose to study Russian language or German, he chose English.

He tries to conjure up her face. Fair hair. Freckles. The smell of bubblegum is vivid in his memory. An incredibly sexy smell. Does she still remember him? What does she look like now? She would be in her early thirties. What would she do if he suddenly appeared on her doorstep?

They say *Angliski* women are incredibly sexy. According to Vitaly, who knows these things, *Angliski* women are as cold as ice to touch, but once they start to melt – once the passion heats them and they melt inside – it's just like a river bursting its banks. There's no stopping these *Vagvaga* women; these *Mrs Brown* women. A man has to keep a cool head or he could drown in the torrent of their passion. But getting them to melting point – there's a real skill in that, says Vitaly. The *Angliska* woman is attracted to dashing men of action, men who are bold enough to make hazardous

journeys and climb in through bedroom windows bearing boxes of chocolates, etc. This type of behaviour melts the Anglika woman's icy heart. Will strawberries be OK as a substitute for chocolates? For all other acts in this drama he's prepared. He's ready for anything. He feels the life-blood pulsing through his body, and he wants to live – to live more sweetly, more intensely.

'Be a man,' his father had said.

★

One of the annoying things about my mother is the way she always classifies people according to their level of culture. It's as if she carries a perfectly defined hierarchy of culture in her head.

'It doesn't cost anything to be cultured, Irina,' she says, 'which is just as well, because if it did, teachers would be among the least cultured people in Ukraine.'

The worst thing is, I seem to have picked up her habit, even though I know you shouldn't judge people by appearances, but sometimes you can't help it. Take us strawberry-pickers, for example.

Although they are Chinese, the Chinese girls are definitely cultured types. One is a student of medicine and one is a student of accountancy. I can't remember which is which, but medicine is more cultured than accountancy. The Chinese Chinese girl has her hair cut short like a boy's, and she's quite pretty, but her legs are too thin. The Malaysian Chinese girl is also pretty, but she has a perm, which looks stupid on that type of hair. Maybe it's the other way round. They are friendly towards me, but they talk and giggle together all the time, which is annoying when you don't know what they're giggling about. Their English is terrible.

Next come Tomasz, Marta and Emanuel. Tomasz is some kind of boring government bureaucrat, though he has taken leave of absence from his job because he says he can earn more money picking strawberries – stupid, isn't it? He claims to be a poet, which of course is extremely cultured, though there is little evidence of

this, unless you count those dreary songs he sings whenever Yola is around. And besides he is quite ancient, he must be in his forties, and he has a pathetic little beard and hair almost down to his shoulders like a hippy. *Koshmar!* And there's a dire smell about him.

Marta is educated, and she even speaks a bit of French, but that Roman Catholic-type education is full of rules and mysteries and lacking practical content – like Western Ukrainians. Anyway, Mother says that Catholic is less cultured than Orthodox. Marta is nice and friendly, but she has a big nose. Probably that is why she's still unmarried at the age of thirty.

Emanuel is adorable, but he is not quite eighteen and also a Catholic, though he appears to be an intelligent type, and he wears a horrible green anorak even when it's not raining. Of course he is black, but this does not make him any less cultured, because as any cultured person knows, black people are just as cultured as anybody else. He often sings as he picks strawberries in the field, and he has a beautiful voice, but he only sings religious songs. It would be nice if he sang something more amusing.

Vitaly is mysterious. He never gives you a straight answer. Sometimes he disappears, no one knows where. He is clearly intelligent because he speaks good English and several other languages, but his manner is rather coarse and he wears a gold chain with a silver penknife dangling round his neck. His eyes are dark and twinkly with cute curly eyelashes, and his hair is black and curly. In fact he is not bad-looking in a flashy curly sort of way. I would give him seven out of ten. Though he is not my type. Maybe he is a gipsy.

Near the bottom is Ciocia Yola (strictly speaking she is only Marta's aunt, but we all call her Ciocia). She is a vulgar person with a gap between her front teeth and obviously dyed hair. (My mother's hair is dyed too, but it's not so obvious.) She claims she was once a nursery school teacher, which is not a proper teacher at all, and

Two Caravans

she also claims to be the supervisor, and puts on airs which are unwarranted and extremely irritating. She likes to sound off about her opinions, which are generally not worth listening to.

Right at the bottom is Andriy, the miner's son from Donbas. Unfortunately miners are generally primitive types who find it difficult to be cultured, however hard they try. When he works in the field I can smell his sweat. He takes his shirt off when it gets too hot and shows off his muscles. OK, they may even ripple a bit. But he is definitely not my type.

As for me, I'm nineteen, and everything else about me is still to-be. Fluent English-speaker to-be. I hope. Romantically-in-love to-be. Are you ready, Mr Brown? World-famous writer to-be, like my Pappa. I have already started to think about the book I will write when I get back home. But you have to have something interesting to write about, don't you? More interesting than a bunch of strawberry-pickers living in two caravans.