

Ivan Bunin

SUNSTROKE

IVAN BUNIN, the first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize (1931), was born in 1870 to an aristocratic family in Voronezh. After attending the University of Moscow briefly, he brought out his first book, a volume of verse. For this and his realistic accounts of the decay of the Russian nobility, he was awarded the Pushkin Prize for Literature and elected to the Russian Academy. He fled to western Europe, following the Revolution, and lived mainly in Paris, sometimes nearly destitute, until his death at the age of eighty three. His study of the dying patriarchy among Russian peasants raises him into the front rank of European novelists, but his present reputation rests on his short stories, in such collections as *The Gentleman from San Francisco* and *The Grammar of Love*. In many of his stories he contrasts the transitoriness of human life with the endurance of beauty and nature. Somerset Maugham has called "Sunstroke" one of the world's best stories.

They had had their dinner, and they left the brilliantly lighted dining room and went on deck, where they paused by the rail. She closed her eyes and, palm turned outward, pressing her hand to her cheek, laughed with unaffected charm. Everything was charming about this little woman. She said:

"I'm quite intoxicated . . . Or I've gone wholly out of my mind. Where did you drop down from? But three hours ago I scarcely suspected your existence. I don't even know where you came on board. Was it Samara? Well, it doesn't matter, my dear. Really, my head's in a whirl, or is it the boat turning?"

Before them was darkness—and lights. Out of the darkness a strong soft breeze blew in their faces, while the lights glided past them: with Volga friskiness the steam cut a sharp curve, as it approached the small pier.

The lieutenant took her hand, lifting it to his lips. The strong small hand smelt of sunburn. Bliss and anguish caused his heart to grow tremulous at the thought that underneath this light linen dress she was doubtless all strong and tanned after a whole month's lying under the southern sun upon the hot sea sands (she had said she was coming from Anapu). The lieutenant murmured: "Let's get off here. . . ."

"Where?" she asked in astonishment.

"Here, on this pier."

"Why?"

He was silent. Again she laid the back of her hand upon her hot cheek.

"You're mad. . . ."

"Let's get off," he repeated dully. "I implore you. . . ."

"Akh, do as you like," she said, turning away.

The moving steamer crashed with a dull thud against the dimly lighted pier, and the pair almost fell upon each other. The end of a cable came flying above their heads, then the ship reeled and the water clamorously seethed, the gangplank rattled. . . . The lieutenant ran for the luggage.

Presently, they passed through the tiny drowsy pier shed and, once out of doors, found themselves ankle-deep in sand; in silence they seated themselves in the dust covered hackney cab. The ascent of the steep road, soft with dust, punctuated with infrequent lamp posts standing awry, seemed endless. At last they emerged on top, the carriage rattled along a paved street; here was a square, some administrative buildings, a belfrey, the warmth and the smells of a summer night in a provincial town. . . . The cabby stopped before a lighted entrance; through the open doors could be seen the steep wooden stairway. An old unshaven servant in a pink shirt and frock coat reluctantly took their bags and went forward on his tired feet. They entered a large but terribly stuffy room still hot from the day's sun, its windows hung with white curtains, its mirror-topped mantelpiece decorated with two unused candles—and no sooner had they entered and the servant closed the door upon them than the lieutenant impetuously flung himself upon her and they both lost themselves in a kiss of such agonizing rapture that the moment was long to be remembered by them: nothing like it had ever been experienced by either one or the other.

At ten o'clock the next morning, a morning hot and sunny and gay with the ringing of church bells, with the humming in the market-place facing the hotel, with the smell of hay and tar and all those complex odors with which every provincial Russian town reeks, she, this nameless little woman, for she refused to reveal her name, jestingly called herself the lovely stranger, left him, resuming her journey. They had slept little, but when she emerged from behind the screen near the bed, within five minutes all washed and dressed, she looked as fresh as a seventeen-year-old girl. Was she embarrassed? Very little. As before, she was simple, gay and— quite rational.

"No, no my dear," she said in response to his suggestion that they pursue the journey together. "No, you must remain here until the next boat. If we go on together, everything will be spoiled. I wouldn't like that. Please believe me, I'm not at all the sort of woman I may have led you to think. All that happened here never happened before and never will again. It's as if I suffered an eclipse . . . Or, to be more precise, it's as if we both experienced something in the nature of a sunstroke."

The lieutenant rather lightly agreed with her. In gay happy spirits he escorted her in a carriage to the pier, which they reached just as the rose-tinted steamer was on the point of departure, and, on deck, in the presence of other passengers, he kissed her, and barely managed to jump on to the already receding gangplank.

With the same lightness of spirit he returned to the hotel. Yet something had changed. Their room without her seemed quite different. It was still full of her—and empty. That was strange! It still smelt of her excellent English eau-de-cologne, her unfinished cup was still on the tray, but she was no longer there. . . . And the lieutenant's heart suddenly felt such tremors of tenderness that he made haste to smoke, and slapping his boot-leg with a crop, he paced up and down the room.

"A strange occurrence!" he said aloud, laughing, yet conscious of tears in his eyes. " 'Please believe me, I'm not at all the sort of woman I may have led you to think. . . .' And now she's gone. . . . An absurd woman!"

The screen was pushed to one side, the bed had not yet been made. And he felt that now he simply hadn't the courage to look upon this bed. He arranged the screen around it, closed the window that he might avoid hearing the market hum and the creaking of cart wheels, lowered the blown-out white curtains, and sat down on the divan. . . . Well, so that was the end to the "chance encounter!" She was gone—and was now far away, doubtless sitting in the glassed-in white salon or on the deck, gazing at the immense sun glinting river, at the passing barges, the yellow sandbanks, the distant radiance of water and sky, at the whole immeasurable expanse of the Volga. . . . And farewell, for ever, for eternity. . . . For how could they ever meet again? "I can't, after all," he mused, "for one reason or another, visit the town where her husband is, and her three-year-old daughter, and the rest of her family, the place where she leads her everyday life!"—And that town suddenly appeared to him as a most exceptional, a forbidden town, and the thought that she would go on living in it her lonely life, perhaps frequently remembering him, remembering their chance transient encounter, while he would never see her again, this thought stunned and unmanned him. No, this could not be! It was wholly absurd, unnatural, incredible! And he felt such anguish, such futility of existence in the years to come, that he was seized with terror, with despair.

"What the devil!" he thought, rising, and, again pacing up and down the room, he tried to avoid the sight of the bed behind the screen. "What's the matter with me? Who'd have thought it possible that the first time—and there. . . . What is there about her, and what exactly has happened? Really, it is as if there were some sort of sunstroke! But the main thing is, how am I to spend the whole day without her in this God-forsaken place?"

He vividly remembered her as she was, with all of her most intimate traits; he remembered the smell of her sunburn and of her linen dress, of her strong body, the live, simple, gay sound of her voice. . . . The mood of but lately experienced delights of her feminine loveliness, was still singularly strong upon him; nevertheless, the main thing was another altogether new mood—that strange, incomprehensible mood, non-existent while they were still together, a mood which he could not have even imagined yesterday, when he first made this new, merely diverting, as he had thought, acquaintance, and concerning which he could no longer speak to anyone, no, not to anyone! "Yes, the main thing," he went on thinking, "is that you'll never be able to talk about it! And what is one to do, how is one to pass this endless day, with these memories, with this intolerable anguish, in this God-forsaken little town by that same radiant Volga, upon whose waters this rose-tinted steamer has borne her away!"

It was necessary to save himself, to occupy himself with something, to find amusement, to go somewhere. He resolutely put his cap on; strode vigorously, clinking his spurs, down the empty corridors; ran down the steep stairway toward the entrance. . . . Well, where should he go? At the entrance was a young cabby in a smart peasant's coat, calmly smoking a tiny cigar, apparently waiting for someone. The lieutenant glanced at him in distraught wonder: how was it possible for anyone to sit so calmly on a coachbox, and smoke, and seem so unconcerned, so indifferent? "Evidently, in this whole town I alone am so terribly unhappy," he thought, turning in the direction of the market place.

The market was dispersing. Unwittingly he trod upon the fresh manure among the wagons, among the cart loads of cucumbers, among the new pots and pans, and the women, who sat on the ground, vied with one another in trying to call his attention to their pots, which they took in their hands and made ring with their fingers, demonstrating their quality, while the peasants dinned in his ears: "Here are first-class cucumbers, Your Honor!" All this was stupid, absurd, and he ran from the place. He entered the

church, where chanting was going on; it was loud and cheerful and determined, as if the chanters were conscious of the fulfillment of a duty; then he strode on through the streets, and in the heat of the sun wandered along the paths of a tiny neglected garden on the slope of a hill, overlooking the broad river with its splendor as of glinting steel. The shoulder straps and buttons of his white summer uniform grew so hot that it was impossible to touch them. The inner band of his cap was wet with perspiration, his face flamed. . . .

On returning to the hotel he found delicious relief in the shelter of the large, empty, cool dining room; he removed his cap, sat down at a little table before an open window, through which the heat blew—a breeze for all that—and ordered an iced soup of pot herbs. Everything was good, in everything there was immeasurable happiness, intense joy, even in this sultriness and in these market smells; in the whole unfamiliar little town and in this old provincial hotel it was present, this happiness, and with it all, his heart was simply being rent into shreds. He drank several small glasses of vodka, and made a snack of pickled cucumbers, and he felt that without the least faltering he would choose to die tomorrow, if only by some miracle he could return here and spend but this one day with her—if only to have a chance to tell her and somehow prove to her, persuade her of his harrowing and marvelous love. . . . But why prove it to her? Why persuade her? He could not tell why, yet it seemed more necessary than life itself.

"My nerves are playing me pranks," he thought, as he poured himself a fifth glass of vodka.

He consumed an entire small decanter, hoping in intoxication to forget, to bring to an end his agonized exultation. But, no, it only grew more intense.

He pushed away the cold herb soup, asked for black coffee, and began to smoke and resolutely to deliberate upon ways and means of freeing himself from this unexpected, sudden love. But to free himself—he felt this acutely—was impossible. And, suddenly, with a rapid movement, he rose, picked up his cap and crop, and, asking where the post office was, quickly went in the direction indicated, with the phrasing of a telegram already in his head: "Henceforth my life is wholly yours, unto death, to do with what you will." On reaching the thick-walled house, which sheltered the post and telegraph office, he paused in horror: he knew the town where she lived, he knew that she had a husband and a three-year-old daughter, but he knew neither her first name nor her surname! Several times in the course of the evening he had asked her, and each time she laughed and said:

"Why must you know who I am? I am Maria Green, Fairyland Queen. . . . Or simply the lovely stranger. . . . Isn't that enough for you?"

On the corner, near the post office, was a photographic showcase. He looked steadily at a large portrait of a military man with elaborate epaulettes, with bulging eyes and low forehead, with surprisingly magnificent whiskers and expansive chest, all decorated with orders. . . . How absurdly ridiculous, how horribly ordinary it all was, because his heart had been vanquished, he understood it now—by this terrible "sunstroke," this intense love, this intense happiness. He glanced at a bridal couple—a young man in a long frock coat and white necktie, his hair cut in hedge-hog style; on his arm, in bridal veil—but he then diverted his gaze to the portrait of a good-looking, spirited girl in a student's cap perched awry. . . . Then, tormented by a harrowing envy toward all these strangers, non-suffering human beings, he began to look fixedly down the street.

"Where can I go? What can I do?" the insoluble, oppressive question persisted in his mind and soul. The street was deserted. The houses were all alike, white two-storied, middle class, with large gardens, and they gave the appearance of being uninhabited; a thick white dust covered the pavement; all this dazzled; everything was drenched with the hot, flaming, joyous, seemingly aimless sunshine. In the distance the street rose, humped and pressed against the pure, cloudless, grayish horizon, reflecting lilac. There was something southern in this, reminiscent of Sebastopol, Kertch . . . Anapu. The thought of the last was particularly unbearable. And the lieutenant, with lowered head, screwing up his eyes against the light, with fixed gaze on the ground, reeling, stumbling, spur catching on spur, retraced his footsteps.

He returned to the hotel, shattered with fatigue, as if he had performed a long journey in Turkestan or the Sahara. Gathering his last strength, he entered his large, desolate room. The room had already been cleaned, and her last traces removed—only a solitary hairpin, forgotten by her, lay on the tiny table by the bed! He took off his jacket and glanced in the mirror: his face—the ordinary face of an officer, swarthy from sunburn, with whitish sun-bleached mustaches and bluish-white eyes, seeming against the sunburn whiter than they were—now showed a disraught, insane expression, and in his thin white shirt with standing starched collar there was something youthful and infinitely pathetic. He lay down on the bed, on his back, and rested his dust-covered boots on the footboard. The windows were open, the curtains lowered, and from time to time the light breeze filled them, blowing into the room sultriness and the odor of hot roofs and of all that luminous, now quite desolate, mute, unpeopled world of the Volga. He lay with his arms under his head and gazed fixedly into space. His head held the dim picture of the remote south, of the sun, the sea, Anapu, and it was something fabulous—as if the town to which she had gone, the town in which she had doubtless arrived, was like no other town—and with it all there ripened the persistent thought of pungent, hot tears—and at last fell asleep. When he again opened his eyes there was already visible, through the curtains, the darkening reddish evening sun. The breeze had died down, the room was stuffy and dry, as in a wind furnace. . . . And he remembered yesterday and this morning precisely as if they had been ten years ago.

In no great haste he rose, in no great haste he washed himself; then he pulled the curtains aside, rang for the servant, asked for a samovar and his bill, and for a long time he drank tea with lemon. Then he ordered a cab and had his luggage taken out, and, seating himself in the reddish, burnt-out seat of the carriage, he gave the servant a whole five rubles as a tip.

"It looks, Your Honor, as though I brought you here last night!" said the cabby cheerfully, as he seized the reins.

When they reached the pier, the blue summer night already darkened above the Volga and many varicolored flames were scattered upon the river and flames hung in the mast of the approaching steamer.

"Got you here just in time!" said the cabby ingratiatingly.

The lieutenant also gave him five rubles, then with ticket in hand went to the pier. . . . Even as yesterday there was the soft sound of the hawsers, and the light dizziness from the vacillation under foot; then came the flying end of the cable, the clamor of the seething waters under the wheels of the steamer receding from the impact. . . . And the sight of the much-peopled steamer, ablaze with light, and the smells of its kitchens, seemed to extend a warm welcome.

Another minute, and the steamer was under way, going up the river, in the direction in which it had borne her away that same morning. Ahead of it, the dark summer sunset was rapidly fading; gloomily, dreamily and iridescently, it was reflected in the river, showing patches glimmering with tremulous ripples in the distance under the sunset, and the flames scattered in the darkness round the steamer went on receding and receding.

The lieutenant sat under cover on deck, conscious of having aged by ten years.

[Translated by Teka Matheson]