

## **FULL CIRCLE**

When I met her, Varvara was a Russian living in Norfolk. I think of her as a migrating butterfly, a fragile creature, exquisitely created, capable of being carried great distances, preserving her beauty through wind and rain. There was something mysterious that she came to be living in a Norfolk village, except that the mystery was perfectly explicable. It is just that she did not talk about it. When asked, her answers were incomplete, barely saying more than that she left the Soviet Union in the 1960s and lived in London before coming to Norfolk. She was a private, self-sufficient person, but she did become friendly with Vera, who happened to be a friend of mine. It was therefore through Vera that I learnt more about her. When I myself first saw her, I was intrigued by the looks, beautiful in the face, even if disproportioned in the body: one noticed the turquoise eyes, delicate cheekbones, the silken skin, pale brown hair with satiny lustre, worn in a plait. She was still wearing well as she moved into middle age. Those attributes had played a part in her story, because Vera told me Varvara had defected in London during an opera tour, when she'd been in the chorus. She had so impressed one of the stage staff at Covent Garden that he arranged for her to go into hiding on the last night of her visit. I imagined the impossibility of it - how had she slipped her minders? – although I never found out. Then a diplomatic row, a promise by the UK government to find her and hand her back, then the trail going cold. Besides beauty, she must have had nerves, imagining her escape, nurturing the details of it, executing it precisely. The butterfly had found an air current and perfect weather conditions, so she was carried to unexpected places far out of sight, and thrived. There was no going back. She had metamorphosed into a species of

White Russian, *hostis populi var. Russica*, yet it was not the Soviet Union but she who survived.

The young protector kept her pinioned, it appears, and then let her go. Ten years after her arrival, she'd spent a weekend in Norfolk one June, and on a late, still, pure summer evening she had walked on the common, evening birdsong still in the air, and heard children's voices, shrieks and shouts, which when filtered over the fields sounded like echoes in a chamber, immaterial, transfigured, almost hallucinatory. The sounds had triggered memories of the countryside around Leningrad, a different landscape naturally, but one which put her in mind of her homeland. Moving here and then finding a tiny cottage to rent in Great Cressingham, she assumed the public name of Barbara to throw people off the scent. These were the facts as Vera told me, but they did not explain where the young man had gone, nor how she had got hold of money.

I can still remember my first meeting with her on the village green. It was during some, to my mind, specious event like the children prancing round a maypole. I was with Vera and Varvara had come along to watch, lending a touch of far-away beauty to the scene as I conceived it, although if I saw things through her eyes, I realised that she was the unremarkable part, that it was the scene that was exotic. She seemed very reserved, and when I had commented that this spectacle of Merry England was not to be taken at face value, that it was England striving to be merry rather than achieving it spontaneously, she gave me a serious look, quizzical too: "I like to see the children dancing," she commented. I backtracked, twisted my views to agree with her, and even confessed to the notion that scepticism could prevent proper appreciation of these things. Whether she understood my reasoning or not, she gave a warm smile.

Later I had an opportunity to ask Vera whether Varvara was lonely. “She doesn’t seem to be. She is liked where she works.”

“Where’s that?”

“Oh, she’s a farm secretary for Henry Baggins.” It flashed through my mind how she had managed to secure a position there, perhaps her looks opening doors for her again. “You know, she loves working for someone called Baggins. You know Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit? V loves that book.”

“V?”

“I call her V because she asked me to, rather than Barbara. Working for someone called Baggins tickles her. She said to me that even though hobbits are small and Mr Baggins was not, and though hobbits live ‘sort of underground’, and he has a large house, on five floors she had worked out, she still felt that both belong to England. ‘Perhaps they are related!’ she once said to me with a laugh.”

I had wondered if she ever made jokes. Her face was so finely poised in its seriousness that excessive mirth might spoil it. Some beautiful faces lose something when they laugh, and I thought Varvara’s would be one.

I asked whether she had any possessions. “Hardly. A few bits of furniture, but she does have books and records. She used to sing of course, and told me she’d like a piano. You know, the cottage is a gem really. Virtually one up, one down. Well 1 ½ up, 1 ½ down. She has a little front garden in which a silver birch grows. She told me, ‘So marvellous! In Russia we have many many birch. I look at this tree and think of home.’” Vera liked to mimic Varvara’s accented English, and I sensed a slender beam of light

shed on her personality by the warmth of this remark, even when it was second-hand, V's voice via Vera.

And what about family? "I've never asked," said Vera. "She sort of keeps the Russian part of her life off-limits, except when she mentions Russian plants or birds or butterflies." Vera gave me a look suggestive of complicity. "I can see I'm going to have to get both of you round my house so you can get to know her better." I was keen on this, thinking of those eyes, that skin, that hair: everything about this Russian was silky.

So it was that Vera had Varvara and me to Sunday lunch, except that my wife came as well, which complicated the conversation, muddling it considerably because she's called Barbara too. Varvara introduced herself as Barbara, and so we made facetious conversation about Barbara One and Barbara Two, as though there was some connection between the two women. Well, I suppose there was a connection, namely me. Yet my Barbara was Babs, English with no nonsense, while Varvara was only Barbara-in-apostrophes with a risky history behind her, a double agent of a benign kind. Anticipating the lunch, I had explained to my Barbara that I wanted to find out more about the Soviet Union and her past, although I thought I'd keep off her stay in London, best preserved as a black hole. She was real in Norfolk; had she been real in Russia? My Barbara did not demur, but did she sense a rival? Absurd, but she did do a lot of talking and somehow we didn't get as far as I had hoped. However, towards the end, Varvara let slip that she had a sister in the Soviet Union with whom she had somehow been in contact. This was 1980, and I was amazed at the time. (As I write this now, in light of the subsequent fall of the Iron Curtain, descending more hastily, more dramatically, and with more finality than a curtain on any opera stage, it somehow did not seem so

impossible.) Anyway, Varvara told us that her sister Marina had told her she had seen a film called *Circle*, which had stirred something in her because it had some scenes at a country dacha a bit like the one their parents had, where they had spent holidays. It was not grouped with other dachas, because it was set in the countryside with fields and the woods all round. “Do you know this film?” Varvara suddenly asked me. I was a bit lost, but Vera took up the challenge. “I know, I’ll ask my friend Dick Dorling. He’s always going to Cinema City.”

Vera was good like that, moved to help. Where I was intrigued by the mystery Varvara brought to a prosaic English village, Vera had made friends with her because she wanted to help, because she felt she must be cut off, because mystery was no barrier. To follow up the lunch, she went and asked Dick who it turned out certainly knew of the film. He told Vera that he’d heard it was a bit slow. “Well you must tell me if it ever comes to Norwich, because I want my Russian friend to see it,” Vera said to him.

Ignorance has its place in life. *Circle* did come to Norwich, but if Varvara hadn’t known that, some pain, I estimate a lot of pain, could have been avoided. Dick mentioned to Vera that it was being shown one Sunday afternoon in June. This was inconvenient for Vera because she had it in her diary to visit her sister’s family in Eastbourne then. But she felt that the remark she had made to V was now a promise, in order to fulfil which she fixed for Dick to come and collect Varvara, take her to the cinema and transport her home afterwards. “Okay,” he said. “I’m not into Russian films but okay.” Vera had the definite impression that it was all fine, but I wondered afterwards if Dick had really understood what he was being asked to do. She blamed

herself a little, but I dare say in fact that Vera herself hadn't understood the significance of it.

What happened I found out was this: Varvara was all ready on the Sunday afternoon to go into Norwich, but Dick never turned up, so she never went, she never saw the film, she never got a glimpse of Russian land, Russian trees, Russian people. When she got back from Eastbourne on Tuesday evening, Vera rang Dick to thank him.

"But I wasn't able to take her," he said. Vera's immediate reaction was one of alarm: "What happened?"

"Everything was against me: my girlfriend told me I had to paint the house that day. Then it rained in the morning, so she said I had to do it in the afternoon. When I protested, Jane insisted." It flashed through my mind that if Jane had seen Varvara, she might have insisted even more. "You know what she said? 'You don't even like Russian films!' Then I couldn't find the piece of paper with your friend's address. I didn't have a phone I could ring, so I couldn't let her know." To her surprise Vera found herself a little upset by this turn of events. When she didn't reply, Dick went on, "I'm sorry, but it was one of those days. Anyway, the film will come round again."

Expecting to offer an apology, best made in person, she went round after work on Wednesday. She found that what Varvara needed was not an apology but consolation, not a courtesy, but an emotional communion. V opened the door to her with her habitual serious expression. Vera embarked on an explanation for what had happened. V tossed her hair, unusually out of its plait. "How do you say? It was one of those things." Vera caught herself looking hard at her, "Were you very sorry not to go?"

“Well, I’ll tell you. In the evening, Sunday, I cried. Quite a lot actually.” She paused and looked past Vera as if she had seen a bird that interested her, while Vera continued to look at her intently. This slow-motion moment V broke with an urgency. “Come in, let me play you something.” Vera stepped over the threshold, as she had done before, but this time she felt she was entering a different space. She sat down in an armchair, very close to the front door, for it gave immediately onto the sitting room. V took out a long-playing record, and turned it over looking for the right bit. Without a word, she put it on the turntable, carefully placed the arm on the record and sat down herself. The music started with the piano, and then a soprano, singing the melody with clear diction and a longing in the voice. The words were in German, so Vera didn’t understand them. At various moments, the piano accompaniment took over and the notes toppled into the room, as if overbalancing. Vera still felt mystified at this point (she told me), when a shiver came over her: she noticed Varvara sobbing a little. This paralysing moment ran through Vera, then vanished. Vera wanted V to pull herself together, so she furrowed her brow. When the song ended, V had her handkerchief in her hand in order to blow her nose. As she did this, the record started on the next song and unconcernedly, she stood up to finish wiping her face, looking down at Vera all the while, then moved to the record, already several bars into the next song, and lifted the arm. In the gap to say something, Vera looked for an opening gambit, but V forestalled her with a matter-of-fact voice.

“It’s a German song, sung by a Russian singer actually. She lived in Leningrad.”

“I couldn’t understand the words.”

V picked up the record sleeve and studied it. “They sound a bit odd in English: ‘Knowest thou the land where the lemon trees bloom?’ Why does it say ‘knowest thou?’”

“Let me see,” said Vera, taking the sleeve. “It’s something like, ‘do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom?’ It’s an old-fashioned way of saying it.”

“Yes. Anyway. When I saw you when I open the door, I want to play this song. I didn’t know that you had come about Sunday. This was the song I played on Sunday evening. I played it several times, actually. I sat here on my own, in the chair you’re sitting in, actually, and I felt it was like a snowstorm here. Snow falling all round me and a wind such as we get in Russia, which you don’t have here, and it made my eyes smart with pain. I was thinking about my parents’ dacha, not seeing it in pictures but, how should I say, hearing it in my head like in a cinema, you know that metallic recorded sound. You know, with volume, and the volume drowns out the sound, or makes it harsh. So, the dacha was always in my head like that, and also this song was in my head, so I had one gentle sound and another brutal sound also. I say to myself, ‘Varvushka, you know Russians hate Germans. You cannot forget what they did to Leningrad. They didn’t care about lemon trees then.’ But actually this is a real *schmerz*, you know, a real pain. I feel it deep inside my soul. The song is very beautiful.”

Vera listened to her saying so much more than she was used to, at least telling her things she didn’t talk about. V added: “I want to see this film very much. You know, such things are very important to Russians.”

Vera told her more about the conversation with Dick, and that he’d said it was bound to come to Norwich again. This elicited a laugh from V.

“I’m very sorry,” said Vera.

V tried to smile properly but quickly cast her eyes downward. “Somehow I don’t think it will come again. I try to be hopeful about things. Should we have ‘hope against hope’ or ‘hope abandoned’? These things are very important for Russians,” she repeated, as if she lacked the resources to say it differently, as if she’d learnt the sentence in a book of grammar.

I myself had forgotten what Varvara had said about this film at Vera’s lunch, and when shortly afterwards Vera met me and Barbara (my one) by chance, we would have talked about other things except Vera told us. I sensed it was weighing on her mind, and Babs chipped in breezily, “You tried very hard to make it happen.”

“Well I tried. I’m a bit annoyed with Dick. I think it was a cheek to tell me that the film would come round again.”

Reflecting on it, I marvelled that Varvara had been so upset. As someone who had been through what she had, missing a film she wanted to see did not seem to come to much. Yet it had counted it seemed much more than I could have understood. I reflected ruefully that I had learnt a little, that Vera had been chastened a little, and that the Varvara butterfly had suffered some damage: rough handling had caused some of the wing-scales to come off, marring just fractionally the perfect symmetry and sheen of those wings. She was still beautiful, but when I read that Russians still talk of the soul, I, not being a metaphysician, flippantly say to myself, “But what is the state of Varvara’s?”

There was a happy ending, an unexpected one anyway. In 1987 *Circle* was shown on television. We only noticed by chance. I don’t pay much attention to films on television, but a caption to a photograph in a weekend supplement caught my eye: ‘This Russian dacha is the centre-piece of a dreamy poetic meditation in *Circle*, being shown

this Saturday. It weaves history and memory in a peculiarly Russian way. Superb.' I wanted to ring Varvara direct, but I always felt I should work through Vera. I told her, and as I expected she quickly followed it up. The two duly watched it on the Saturday evening at Vera's house.

Vera had been baffled by the film, but hadn't liked to criticise. V looked a bit sheepish. "I did like the poems in it," she said. "The sound of a Russian voice is so pleasing to me."

"What about the dacha?" Vera asked.

"Well, actually, it was very different from the one my parents had. I don't know why my sister said it reminded her so much. We had a river and a lake near ours, but there was no water near this one."

Vera added: "It did seem very slow," at which V laughed, almost gaily, as a release from her sheepishness. "I thought that as well!"

That was the happy ending, of a kind anyway, yet there is always more in life, always a more complex narrative that relegates the details to a footnote. As with everything about Varvara, the next stage was unexpected. Inscrutably, miraculously, Soviet communism imploded and Varvara realised she could go back. She did so in 1995, leaving Norfolk as unostentatiously as she had come. Leningrad became St Petersburg. Then silence followed and then the unexpected again. She sent to Vera a millennium greetings card in January 2000. There was a letter with it, saying she was glad to have come back in some ways, but life was very unsatisfactory and that she missed being in the Shire with 'Bilbo (I mean Henry) Baggins'. She told Vera that her mother had died in her absence in 1982, and since her father had been killed in the war

when she was a little girl, she had no relatives really, except her sister's family.

“Actually,” she had written, “my parents were born in 1910 before the Revolution. Leningrad was called St Petersburg so we've come round in a circle. What does the future hold for us? I don't know!”

When Vera told me this, I responded sententiously that the twentieth century was as much Russian as American. Though I've never seen *Circle*, I'm not fussed about it, not being drawn to the Russian soul really. It was how Varvara looked in a Norfolk setting that remained with me.