

'GLITTERING'
SUNDAY EXPRESS

'CAPTIVATING'
SUNDAY TIMES

GORSKY

VESNA
GOLDSWORTHY

VINTAGE

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

A Note About the Novel

Copyright

About the Book

London dances to the tune of Gorsky's billions. The most enigmatic of oligarchs, Gorsky has been led to the city by his love for Natalia, whom he first knew in Russia. That she is now married to an Englishman is an inconvenient detail.

Gorsky desires and gets the best of everything. His mansion by the Thames is set to make Buckingham Palace look like an ungainly box by a roundabout. At its heart will be a grand library, denoting taste and breeding. Now he just needs the books.

When Gorsky's armour-plated car halts in front of a down-at-heel bookshop, the startled young man behind the till receives the commission of a lifetime. The bookseller suddenly gains privileged access to the wealthy and the beautiful; a world filled with delectable books but fraught with danger...

About the Author

Vesna Goldsworthy was born in Belgrade in 1961 and has lived in London since 1986. She writes in English, her third language. She has authored three widely translated books: a memoir, *Chernobyl Strawberries*; *Inventing Ruritania*, on the shaping of cultural perceptions of the Balkans; and the Crashaw Prize-winning poetry collection, *The Angel of Salonika*. *Gorsky* is her first novel.

For Jacqueline Lewis

Gorsky

Vesna Goldsworthy

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Such was the report which the English legations made of what they had seen and suffered in Russia; and their evidence was confirmed by the appearance which the Russian legations made in England. The strangers spoke no civilised language. Their garb, their gestures, their salutations, had a wild and barbarous character. The ambassador and the grandees who accompanied him were so gorgeous that all London crowded to stare at them, and so filthy that nobody dared to touch them. They came to the court balls dropping pearls and vermin.

Thomas Macaulay, *The History of England* (1848)

1

IT WAS A piece of business that comes along once in a lifetime. If you are lucky.

First there was a year of glamorous parties: an unexpected, undeserved year, unlike anything I had ever experienced. Then it all suddenly stopped and I had to return to what I was before, to a different language and a different place. Gorsky changed my life.

I remember his first visit to the shop. You couldn't fail to notice him, even in a city like London, in which millions are bent on attracting attention. People walk around with exhibitionist swagger, as though starring in their own YouTube clip. He was quietly remarkable: foreign, expensive, somehow still even when he moved, his volume turned down permanently. His melancholy muzzle was equine and aristocratic, and his tailored worsteds so ripely English that at first I thought he could only be Prussian.

A lot of redundant Deutsche princes dabble in antiques and art in these reaches of Knightsbridge and Chelsea. They often punch above their meagre monetary weight when it comes to tailoring, these von Thises and von Thats. He possessed billions, more money than anyone can surely spend, let alone need, in a lifetime. He dressed the part, too, but you had to look closely to notice it. His money did not shout. It whispered in the rustle of whitest Egyptian cotton, finest cashmere and softest calfskin, and in the ticking of the most precise platinum watch mechanism ever made. He had so many more or less identical Savile Row suits that they must have been as disposable as tissue paper: I don't imagine he bothered with dry-cleaning. And

although I used to spend half my life staring out of the shop window, trying to guess the birthplace of each occasional passer-by, Russia did not even cross my mind. It's not so much that his hyperborean blondness did not fit the frozen marshes of the Neva estuary. Something more intangible about the set of his features directed me towards old Königsberg. Narrow and chiselled like a tall crystal vase, with blue eyes set a touch too near his long straight nose, his face made him look taller than he was, and like a creature from another era - Ernst Jünger's best mate, a wandering Balt, or Byron's Germanic pen pal painted from the back by Caspar Friedrich, turning slowly towards the viewer with some profound insight about the frozen sea he had been gazing at a minute before.

The Russians looked tougher, beefier and coarser, even when they were undeniably handsome. I don't mean Russians in general, of course, but the Russians in this handful of London's richest postcodes, that self-selected set of men belonging to the generation which in the West would have been called baby-boomers. In Russia, their lives had spun a full circle. They grew up in shared apartments, made billions in crude oil, gas or sophisticated scams, spent it on houses, horses, whores, and occasionally hired killers, and finally returned to playing cards with each other just as they did in the bad old Communist days, only now surrounded by squads of bodyguards. I should have guessed that he was Jewish too. But in the end his Jewishness mattered to him and Natalia Summerscale more than it mattered to me. They were Russian. I am not.

I am from a small and insignificant nation in an insignificant corner of Europe and am glad this is so. For this story my nationality matters only in the negative, only in so far as I was neither English nor Russian, and only because, after it had all happened, it was the one thing that persisted in the captions below the grainy photographs of me and him, then me alone, as though it was my defining feature,

despite it being the last thing I reached for in describing myself. You could say I am tumbleweed, a species that disengages from its roots once matured. The condition of exile was not altogether unpleasant. I had chosen it for myself.

All those months in London now seem as cold as November. My recollections are vivid but they refuse to obey the calendar. England offered no seasons to anchor the memory. The rare bursts of blue could just as easily have been furnished by Constable or Turner: you went to galleries to escape the drizzle. It rained all the time and the weather changed only when the rain turned into sleet. Once or twice, on my way to work, I raised my eyes towards the clouds that sat low over waterlogged gardens and I glimpsed a pale orb behind them; an early sun or a late moon, you couldn't tell, just hanging up there, like a thief's promise. Even mid-spring, it felt like the *beginning of next winter*, or so everyone joked. Throughout most of that unseasoned year people would walk into the shop, shudder, say something about the weather, then stare at the book spines on the shelves while they got warm or until they spied a title they wanted, inspected a copy and made a note to order it online. Although it cost eight thousand pounds a month in rent alone, Fynch's bookshop might as well have been a showroom for the internet book trade. Only a few souls would buy something, out of guilt, before walking back into the rain – a card or, if they were feeling flush, one of those slim poetry volumes which shift so few copies that the web-based outfits don't bother to reduce their prices. Even with such meagre pickings the business perked up once the winter was allegedly over, but only just, only against our usual seasonal figures, and those were, let's face it, far from great.

Fynch's is not the kind of bookshop anyone goes to for their beach reads, unless perhaps it's a private beach. And

it is definitely *off the beaten track* – the cliché has rarely been as true – tucked away in one of those side streets where there are no other shops and the footfall is minimal. Only someone who is not too keen on selling anything would bury a bookshop in a row of mews houses in the no man's land between Knightsbridge and Chelsea, the dominion of interior decorators and sleekly furnished dwellings in which coffee-table books outnumber other volumes by three to one. These are the actual numbers, by the way, not figure-of-speech ones.

There are exceptions, in 'old Chelsea'. There is no 'old Knightsbridge' any more, unless you count the first wave of Kuwaitis pushed out by the sort of people for whom oil is now less exciting as a commodity than lemon sherbets. 'Old Chelsea', however, Christopher Fynch's so-called regulars, are English right down to their M&S underwear. They fritter away the last copper coins from their imperial petty cash in gentle ways that do include buying an occasional book. I don't necessarily prefer the 'old' to the 'new' Chelsea, with its European and North American usurpation of gentlemanly styles, but I am ethnically predisposed to be sentimental about any group of people collectively stupid enough to be pushed out of their own land. They are a dying breed, 'old Chelsea', and will soon be as extinct as their orders of biographies of Viscount Allenby or Cardinal What'shisname, and their talk of Martin Amis as a risqué young thing. Their own children prefer to look like 'new money' even when they have none.

The morning he first asked me for a quick chat, if he might – *if he might?! –* I watched him emerge from a long silver Bentley or some such vehicle, the sort of car that must be sufficiently armour-plated to withstand an anti-tank grenade attack. I did not foresee that he would turn towards Fynch's. He was hesitant and stiff, one eye partly closed while he inspected the shop sign, as though he had a monocle over

the other. Though he must have purchased more than anyone else I am ever likely to meet, I don't suppose he often bothered with *shopping*. I watched him, still not quite believing that he was about to come inside, through the rain-spattered window behind which I sat for hours each day at a desk covered with handwritten receipts ('old Chelsea' loved those), under a poster that asked the patrons to support their local independent bookshop. We were independent all right. And bookish, too. In spite of the mess, which gave the appearance of frantic activity, I managed to read a couple of titles a day, even on what passed for a busy one. I certainly did not ever expect to have to deal with 'big business', and everything about this man – from the way he stepped out of the vehicle, giving brief instructions to the sharp-suited driver who held the car's door for him, to the manner in which he lingered uncertainly among the shelves as I completed a minute transaction and chatted with one of our morning regulars, and the tone in which he finally uttered that *if I might* – spelled out big business.

Morning regulars hereabouts mostly meant elderly ladies in carefully coiffed, inky-white helmets of hair, who had been up since four thirty, and who enjoyed reading stories about cultured spinsters by the likes of Anita Brookner or Salley Vickers, and empathising fully, even though they were not spinsters themselves. Only a banker's widow can afford to live alone in this part of town, and some of these tough old birds had been multiply widowed by multiple bankers. They enjoyed talking to me, killing half an hour, before taking a lift to the top-floor cafe at Peter Jones where they killed the rest of the morning. My foreignness was an advantage in their eyes, because they liked explaining England's ways to me, although they were now as lost in England as I was. They were my best customers. They never bought books online not because they disliked the internet

but because they did not even know that such a thing was possible.

I was not a gentleman bookseller, although I made some efforts to resemble one. I slipped into Britain in the early '90s, as a draft dodger with a Ph.D. in English literature. A testimony to a platonic Anglophilia which I caught in my early twenties like a mystifying virus, my undistinguished doctorate on William Hazlitt was useless even back home, let alone on board 'mother ship UK' where Ph.D.s in Eng lit are two a penny, and Hazlitt an uncool has-been amidst the fashion for post-literary study of isms and theory. I reached London as a refugee in a sea of refugees, part of a wave that was swelling in the war-torn Balkans and breaking on the hard but porous cliffs of Dover. Those who mention the lost generation when they talk of Hemingway or Fitzgerald have no idea what *lost* means.

My progress from *there* (my family's two-room flat in a concrete monstrosity on the edge of the capital, its image frozen in memory's Polaroid at the moment when the postman rang to deliver my call-up papers) to *here* (Christopher Fynch's bookshop in Chelsea on a miserable, sodden morning) involved quite a few lies, the first but not the last of which was my mother claiming that I had already escaped. It accompanied her refusal, point blank and repeated three times, like something from the Bible, to sign for anything on my behalf.

Who knew that she had it in her to decline to obey the state? She looked like a leaf the gentlest wind could blow over. She did not know that she was riddled with cancer when she drove me to the Hungarian border in the dead of the following night. Many of those who stayed on to fight later despised people like me. They called us 'runaway brides'. Mother was a better person than I. She said she would rather not see me again than see me with a gun in my hands. She had her wish.

Viewed from a distance, my path to London seems relatively painless. The parental deaths that eventually ensued and the subsequent sale of their miserable dwelling for the princely sum of ten thousand euros – the only capital I had ever possessed – only cemented my ability to disengage from feeling, a knack that was as useful as my ability to disengage from my roots. I had also and always, I admit this freely, been a lucky bastard.

After I had taken my education as far as it could formally go in order to delay the challenge and discipline of gainful employment, I found I had few ambitions. Even fewer survived the ferry crossing from Holland, where I had dossed for a couple of nights in the house of a school friend who in Belgrade was a painter of murals and in Holland had become a painter of walls. Amsterdam was full of Balkan draft dodgers high on legal weed and each other's company. Had I been in possession of any kind of manual skill I would have stayed on the mainland.

When I obtained my British work permit, I landed in book-sales just as accidentally as – before the permit became a foregone conclusion – I landed in Eaton Square, in a maisonette belonging to an American banker's British wife who wanted a male au pair for her IVF-conceived triplets. Male au pairs were fashionable. The job required no qualifications but she thought that my Ph.D.-qualified input would complement the care already provided by a full-time Filipino nanny. The Filipina was as devoted as she was inarticulate. I ferried the boys to school and took them to play football in Hyde Park. They liked me as I liked them: without attachment. When I was no longer needed as their minder, I still saw them from time to time, when they came over from Oxford, Princeton and Brown, to visit mum and dad. They read, unlike mum and dad. They dropped into the store and called me *dude* in an exaggeratedly American way. All British kids aspire to be American these days and the three boys preferred their father to their mother anyway.

I started working for Christopher Fynch in 1995. Christopher was a gentleman bookseller, in that order: a gentleman all the time and bookseller for an occasional hour or two when he bothered to turn up to check on me. He paid me miserably, but it was as much as he could afford, and often more than that. We rubbed along. He had been widowed since 1987. Although he had a stepdaughter barely younger than him somewhere in West Hampstead, he had no children of his own. He once explained that *mumps took care of that*. I doubt that he had ever been of a child-making persuasion. I am not even sure – his marriage to a woman eighteen years older than him notwithstanding – whether Christopher Fynch was homo- or heterosexual. Without being ascetic in many other ways (his daily table at La Poule au Pot and his half bottle of claret are proof of that), in matters even remotely sexual Fynch seemed to be the kind of otherworldly *old boy* for whom the concept of celibacy had been invented. He liked me, and I liked him, although I did not for a moment think that he would ever make me his heir in the book business or elsewhere. I never possessed a mercenary bone in my body – and there wasn't much to be inherited anyway.

Our enterprise remained as half-hearted as the British weather. Until the day Gorsky turned up with his piece of business. There was something so obvious in his solitary and slightly taciturn appearance that, almost from day one, I called him 'The Great Gorsky' in my e-mail exchanges with Fynch. My boss was a keen writer of e-mails in spite of his fusty Old Etonian technophobe façade. E-mails, *e-pistles* as he called them, enabled him not to get out of bed when he did not feel like it. And he was not alone. We are talking about the ageing population of an entire island in a mild stupor of post-imperial depression.

'My name is Gorsky, Roman Borisovich Gorsky,' the Prussian prince in Scottish cashmere finally said, having

inspected the shelves of Christopher Fynch's for the best part of half an hour, here and there taking a volume down and leafing through it in a way that was at once careful and absent-minded. His accent was unmistakably Russian, his English careful and correct.

'My name is Gorsky, Roman Borisovich Gorsky,' he said in a voice that mixed equal traces of softness and nicotine gravel. 'I was wondering if I might have a quick chat with you.'

'Do you speak Russian?' he asked after I stood up from my desk. A book fell off my knees and a pile of handwritten receipts scattered on the floor. I stammered something about *understanding* and *reading*. My mother tongue was similar enough.

'What do you read?' Roman Borisovich interrupted, still in English. 'From Russia, I mean.'

'Babel. Bunin. Bulgakov.'

He smiled at my row of Bs.

'But Chekhov also . . . Tolstoy, of course.' Having no idea about his literary tastes, I was trying to cover the field.

'No Dostoevsky?'

There was the merest shadow of a smirk in one corner of his upper lip. He could see I was trying to please.

'Well, yes. And no . . . I used to, once. I am not sure I would enjoy his work much now. Life is, you could say, hard enough . . .'

That sounded wrong. What was I saying about Fyodor Mikhailovich or indeed about myself? All around me there was ample evidence that life, including mine, was anything but hard. He was not paying attention anyway.

'Poetry?'

'Yes, poetry too. Tsvetaeva. Andrei Bely. Akhmatova. Blok. The Silver Age in general. And Pushkin, naturally. Like everyone else. How can you not read Pushkin?'

How profound, Nikola, I thought with deepest sarcasm, even as I reeled off my all-too-obvious list.