

# The Station Master

Nikolay closes the door to the office and stands with his back to it, eyes shut, breathing hard. In a moment he will turn and lock it, though this is against the rules and he has to harden his heart to do so. He thinks of the tiny organ beating beneath his shirt, touches his fingers to the spot where he imagines it lies. He inhales, tensing the chest muscles as if this might protect him from the pain of those on the other side of the door. As his fingers find the key, the handle rattles, then a thud, and a battering of fists. Individual voices, inches away, rise above the hubbub. He has grown so accustomed to the din he barely notices it. Occasionally a woman wails, the sound piercing the clamour like the rise and fall of a siren. He has no answers for them.

There is no window but the scene beyond the door is printed on his mind. He walks to the desk and checks the computer. The timetable was suspended days ago; trains come and go with little relation to normal service. There is no news, no guidance. He knows that the train west is due within the hour. The arrivals board maintains the fiction 'On time'. What is he supposed to do? Nothing in his years of training or experience has taught him how to manage the hundreds who have gathered outside. They are everywhere, camped in the booking hall, spread across the platforms and into the sidings and the sheds. Last night as the temperature fell, they built a fire beneath the clock. This morning smaller fires have sprung up like mushrooms in the night. Smoke hangs in the air.

The woman is sitting against the wall at the end of Platform One, eyes closed, a child sprawled across her lap. Nikolay is close enough to see where tears or sweat have carved a trail through the grime on her face. She is wrapped in some thin grey fabric patterned with flowers. He pauses, watches the shallow rise and fall of her chest.