

Vox Dei

Valentin Fortunov

with Andrew Carey

Part 1: Overture



OVERTURE

For the third time that night the smoke rings that hung remorsefully over the habitués of the Lions Club swung idly to the rhythm of [Sentimental Journey](#). Well, at least the third, but Riley was well aware of the disorienting effects of a looped soundtrack. He thought of his mother. Briefly. The air conditioning had lost the will to condition air. And this being Sofia, and this being a Saturday evening, the Flamingo Hotel maintenance team had long since gone home and switched his phone to silent.

The Bog, as Riley and his fellow members called the club with all the affection that a group of displaced journalists can muster, was a long, narrow, charmless room on the hotel mezzanine. What the room had been meant for, nobody knew – perhaps not even the architect, who had ‘gone dead’ at the critical moment. But the first-anointed manager had confidently turned it

into an International Press Centre, respecting the French spelling not the American and savouring the distant perfume of dollars and free PR.

Perhaps not the most visionary of decisions, as the determinedly shabby clientele was now engaged in a protracted stand-off with the management. It went like this: the clientele refused to accept even the most modest improvements (knowing they would be accompanied by an improved range of drinks at improved prices). The management refused to repair the upholstered seats or repaint the emphysema ceiling unless their modernisation proposals were accepted in full. Both sides felt hurt, resentful and betrayed. All in all, a very Balkan dispute. Wars had been started over lesser matters.

Behind the bar, a rainbow of whisky, vodka, brandy, vermouth and rakia stretched along the endlessly mirrored, post-glossy brass shelves. Among them the usual Duty Free suspects – *London Bridge* gin, *Clan Macalister* finest Scotch whisky, and the ineffable *Bolting*

Horse Kentucky bourbon – none of them drunk or even trademarked in their country of presumed origin. At the opposite end of the room from the door, a huge fish tank occupied the entire wall – in it a solitary and undemonstrative geophagus competed (in the most exhausted sense of the word) with the Club’s human occupants for any stirrings of oxygen still to be found.



It was almost midnight and no more than seven or eight people were left in the club. A middle-aged man entered, blenched and blanched in quick succession, closed the door and peered into the fug.

‘Riley?’ he solicited the people at the nearest table.

‘In the fish tank,’ one of the men nodded to general laughter, and the visitor made his way to the other end. Behind him, a couple burst in.

‘Ah, France-Pressé, comment ça va?’

‘Ça va bien, merci,’ came the slight reporter’s auto-response. Her companion, groaning, dumped two overfilled camera bags and grumbled at the bartender in an accent already strangled by his Marseillais origins and now further deformed in an effort to make his English comprehensible:

‘Borka, the white wine, it is off?’

‘What if it is off? White water is on! Here is the tap!’ offered the man behind the bar, laughing – and leaving his customer, as usual, puzzling over whether he had received an answer.

A stir about the bar. A few people gathered round the newcomers and, as one weary patron left the room, the bartender took to pouring drinks.

‘Boris, will you give me a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, the naïf one; where was it from... Pleven? Sliven?’ the AFP reporter asked the bartender with the smile that had clinched her current job. ‘What time is it?’ - a rhetorical question as a large quartz clock hung right behind the barman, and she was already facing it.

‘Voilà, Mademoiselle, the youngish one, sparkling,



directly from Sliven. And the time...’

But the bartender was unable to be of further help. As he looked up to see that it was 23:58, a blinding explosion boiled into a fully-fledged fireball which, in the next second, swept away the windows, doors and light partition walls, and hurled itself out over the hotel car park and, simultaneously, into the mezzanine, where it took out the windows with mounting confidence. The whole building shook in a grave spasm, rocked, but came to rest still upright.

Image credits:

Geophagus: [Flunter!](#)

Clock: [Alavaini](#)