

## n: version

from A by Tom Bullough

The first thing Angus saw when he opened his eyes was Grigori Efimovich Rasputin, notorious Siberian debauchee, self-proclaimed miracle worker and pernicious influence behind the Imperial Russian throne. He was looking well: the bedraggled hair less greasy than it often was and his facial expression a fitting combination of piety, near-mechanical sexual potency and a desire to get hammered immediately on vodka. So far as they could, his eyes locked onto him. He was swimming. Not paddling in the manner he may once or twice have tried before his death in the River Neva, but sort of pulsating with the pain in his temples.

Angus squeezed his eyes closed and tried to move his head enough to be confronted by something other than his own drunkenness when he opened them again.

With the vodka bottle in the corner of his vision, he was staring across the dust, mouse droppings and tattered carpet of the kitchen floor. For a moment he remained disoriented, then, in a surge, he remembered himself and the unwelcome prospect of another day. The Rasputin was practically finished. Filthy stuff it might have been, but it remained the best thing going for this horrible little cottage and now there was almost nothing between him and the emergency bottle of Vladivar.

He was lying on the rug in front of the cold iron woodburner, his head on the pair of moccasins, suffering. Even if he did prove able to get himself upright it would be a good half-hour before any hope of a cup of tea. Without milk. So for some minutes he remained where he was, frozen by the cold.

Across the room there was a noise. He became aware of it slowly: a kind of rustling scrunching. It seemed to be coming from the shelves at the end of the partition wall. Pressing a hand against a freezing flagstone, he levered himself into a sitting position, waiting a second while the room caught up with him and edged into some kind of focus, squinting in its direction.

The mouse was sitting in the fruit bowl like an old man in his particular chair in a pub. Its back legs were spread for balance and its front legs pinned securely to a peach: the only fresh piece of food left in the cottage. Now and then it seized a chunk between its teeth, enlarging the hole it had made already and chewing sensuously. It had the eyes of an errant pet.

Angus pulled himself to his feet, staring at it, steadying himself against the table. He'd hear the mice frequently – squabbling in the woodstack – and occasionally he'd see one, scurrying across the floor, but this was something altogether different.

He might not have been there at all.

– Fucking gall! he shouted.

He waved his arms, which hastened the mouse's munching but nothing more. So he picked up the bowl and shook it; at which the mouse chewed twice, swallowed, then leapt the five and a half feet to the flagstones and disappeared into the utility room.

Angus threw open the door and hurled the bowl as far as he could into the adjacent field. Which turned out not to be very far.

As usual the squirrels piled from their hole at the end of the roofspace, scrambling down the climbing rose and rushing off into the undergrowth.

Angus sank back onto the rug he'd woken up on, wrapping the blanket round his shoulders, shaken by the sunlight, closing his eyes. The burning in his head was swollen like an infection. Already the story was scratching to get out of him.

– Would that I had seven lives to give for my country!

The words startled me, appearing unannounced. Reaching to my right, I adjusted the volume of the radio equipment, listening intently to my headphones; but all I could hear were the roar and the vibrations of the aircraft. The other Zeroes were flickering before me, ghostly above the shadowed mass of Okinawa.

Perhaps, after all, I had uttered them myself.

– Would that I had seven lives to give for my country!

They were the words of the samurai Masashige Kusuneki, who in 1336 took his life on the banks of the Minato River, the forces of Takauji consuming his own and the Emperor Go-Daigo exposed beyond hope in the capital behind him. Six centuries of significance, dispelled in a mere ten days. How strange that they should reappear now, when they could finally be of no benefit.

Yet suddenly there was the hiss of static in the headphones, and the catch of troubled breathing. For a second or two they continued; then, with a powerful intake of breath, the Vice-Admiral began to speak:

– I alone, he declared, am to blame for our failure to defend the homeland and destroy the arrogant enemy...

His face emerged slowly in my mind: tears in streams on his noble, rounded

cheeks, the hachimaki tight around his forehead, the precise movements of his mouth like a mirror to the devotion of his faith. He was weeping for all who had died, for the future in which he had believed, for the impossibility of the present, for his terrible, incurrent shame: for, in fact, everything but his own approaching death. Then I could see even the moon reflected in the streams' bead-like heads, and the intensity of the image was such that I flinched and, in that second, lost it.

- I am going to make an attack at Okinawa, the Vice-Admiral continued, where my men have fallen like cherry blossoms. There I will crash into and destroy the conceited enemy in the true spirit of Bushido, with firm conviction and faith in the eternity of Imperial Japan.

The measured flow of the words correlated with the pulse of the propeller blades. It was as if I were looking down, soaring over the mouths of successive, bottomless pipes: each with its own unblinker view of the universe. And, through these, I began to understand some aspect of the questions that were plaguing me. If nothing else, that the Vice-Admiral had despatched men to their deaths, certain in the knowledge that the Empire could never win this war.

- I trust that the members of all units under my command will understand my motives...

And now the war was to resume, with Tokyo burnt and Nagasaki and Hiroshima razed ineffably behind us.

- ...and will strive for the reconstruction of our great homeland that it may strike forever. Tenno haika. Banzai!

There were sounds outside - voices. They'd started a couple of sentences back. Angus dropped his pen and listened. A number of people were somewhere on the other side of the stream, emitting the odd shriek and yell. Conceivably, they were something to do with Mrs Lloyd, although it didn't seem especially likely. They were probably just ramblers. Lost urbanites.

Angus rose and went over to the fire to restoke it with waterlogged bits of wood, tugging on the wire attached to the handle and poking at the embers to see if they might be persuaded to burn. A flame or two appeared obligingly towards the back, so he sacrificed a piece of kindling and erected a tepee of branches around it.

The voices were getting louder. They seemed to have crossed the stream and to be working their way along the bank from the direction of the footbridge.

- Please, he found himself muttering. Sod off up across the field or something.

Don't come poking around down here.

There was a deity for this function, Angus realised. He—stroke—She would be the last before global atheism, or the apocalypse, or whatever completive event. The deity of the testing situation. The ultimately assured position.

The sun had reached that point of the day when it could find its way between the trees to the east of the house and the eaves of the roof. It shone off pieces of crockery on the sill of the normally shadowed easterly window, spattering twisted bits of light across the ceiling.

– Look! a woman shouted, close enough now for words to be discernible. Look! Isn't it sweet!

Angus felt a sort of seizure in his stomach. He took a step towards the window, then changed his mind and stood away from it to avoid detection, then changed his mind again and hurried upstairs, where he lay on the bed and prayed that the voices would recede.

They didn't. Soon they were outside the door, hushed now so he could barely make out what they were saying, even through the thinness of the window beside the bed.

The knock on the door was like his heart misfiring. Angus froze, prone. It was Mrs Lloyd. It had to be. Who else, after all, ever came down here? Mrs Lloyd, and a few of her friends. Okay, he didn't want them there but she'd visited before and he'd survived, hadn't he? They'd only be after a cup of tea or something...

There was a second knock on the door, more forceful this time, then the sound of the squirrels bounding across the roofspace and eructing from the hole at the end. Painfully, Angus pulled himself up from the bed, treading across the sagging boards of the bedroom and entering the stairwell.

The fire was crackling wetly. For a moment he stood between the table and the last step, attempting to compose himself; then he said loudly:

– Come in!

The door swung open, revealing Mrs Lloyd. Or. Four figures, all with Mrs Lloyd's head. Angus staggered backwards, the feeling in his head like a sudden, manyfold increase in atmospheric pressure.

– Hello, Angus! said the first figure, a little uncertainly.

Mrs Lloyd began to dissolve. It was Fay. And Pete, And Tim. And... Belle!

– I... said Angus.

Paolo and Nick appeared breathlessly behind them, grinning excitedly, swarming through the doorway.