

## Moscow Calling

I WAS ON THE St. Petersburg-Moscow Express when I learned about the explosions in the Moscow Metro. We were an hour and a half out when suddenly my neighbor got a call on his cellphone. He asked loudly, “Papa, you at home? What happened?” He spoke for a long time in a whisper, then turned to me and said, “An hour ago there were two explosions in the Moscow Metro. Two. At different stations: Lubyanka and Park Kultury. They didn’t give me any details, but there are casualties.” After he spoke, he turned to stare out the window.

We were approaching Moscow at 200 km per hour. I had no doubts: Islamic terrorists. Not long ago, our military exterminated one of their charismatic leaders. They had taken their revenge on us.

The previous underground terrorist attack had been a long time ago, in 2004.

In 2002 there was the bloody Dubrovka siege, a tragedy that took 131 lives. It seems so long ago.

I hurriedly called Mama. On Mondays she works in the Historical Museum on Red Square. It’s very close to Lubyanka, where one of the explosions took place. Thank God, she travels on a different metro line.

“You alive?” I stupidly asked.

“Alive, alive!” she pluckily replied. “I’m in the metro, can’t hear you, call back later.”

At times life can be so absurd. She didn’t know about the bombings yet, and answered as she always

did, with a joke. I often ask her this foolish question; it’s become something of a tradition.

A moment later, I got a text message from my daughter in Mumbai, where she’s shooting a documentary.

“You alive there? Not by chance riding metro?”

“Alive, and you?” I type back.

“Need 400 dollars, want to stay longer, can u send?”

Next my son, the photojournalist, calls from Georgia.

“Papa, you alive?”

“Alive, alive!”

“Well, I’ve got a sore throat. I rented a Ford Explorer and am heading out today for Batumi.”

All the other passengers in my cabin, it seemed, were asking the same question. They had all snuggled up to their cellphones. Soon it was impossible to call anywhere. Calls didn’t go through; the network had collapsed.

The streets of the capital had also collapsed. Lines of militia had cordoned off the center. The Metro line, understandably, was closed. Only with great difficulty was I able to get a taxi.

Cars were trudging through the streets, or simply standing still. The taxi driver, having made me pay through the nose – twice the normal rate, swore at everyone: terrorists, the government, the militia. He leaned out his window, howling blood-curdling profanities at everyone who cut him off. Yet he himself

drove perpendicular to traffic, not giving a damn about anyone. The radio announced 26 dead.

“There’ll be more, they’re all lying, but the *zverkov* (“beasts” – a rude name some use for Chechen terrorists, or which “native” Muscovites use for foreign guest workers) – I would hack them up into little pieces and make sure they suffered,” said the taxi driver, oozing hatred.

I kept silent. I knew the casualties would go higher. I really wanted to whack the taxi driver on the back of the head, but I didn’t, because I wanted to get home even more. I turned to stare out the window. Twenty-six people died.

No fright. No despair. Just emptiness and loathing. As if this filthy taxi driver had climbed into my bed with wet boots. Or stolen my favorite painting from my apartment wall.

At home I turned on the news. This is the tenth terrorist attack on the Metro since 1974. I turned off the TV and slumped into the couch.

“Nature, seeking a solution that would satisfy all, opted for death, which, as might be expected, satisfied no one,” as one philosopher wrote.

I recalled my Mama’s joking reply, “Alive-Alive!” and felt a bit better.

I thought about it and decided that tomorrow I would send \$400 to my daughter in Mumbai.

Though I really don’t feel like going outside.

*A much shorter version of this essay appeared in the New York Times on March 30, the day after the bombings.*