

NO DIRECT ROUTE

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01 TRIP

My grandfather died in Rostov-on-Don.

He went out to buy a television newspaper and never came back.

I was in London when it happened.

Before the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Rostov built a new airport outside the city. Platov Airport was large, polished, and aggressively international in the way Russian infrastructure projects often were during that period. Glass walls. Interactive screens. Vast illuminated halls designed for future traffic.

During the World Cup, thousands of foreign visitors passed through Rostov. The city briefly entered a different global rhythm.

Then the war began. Platov closed on 24 February 2022 and has stood empty ever since.

Now the route from London to Rostov moves in a deranged zigzag. You fly south toward Istanbul, then back north-east toward Moscow, then down again across Russia by train.

There is a shorter route through Sochi, but Moscow carries more traffic, more flights, more chances to improvise if something collapses mid-journey. On my previous trip I spent two days trapped inside Moscow airports because of drone attacks and repeated cancellations.

This time I slipped through.

I landed at Vnukovo after midnight.

My phone wasn't working.

In Russia, nearly every public Wi-Fi network asks for a phone number. Internet access is routed through mobile authentication because providers are expected to identify users through their numbers. Everybody understands why. Surveillance. State control. The explanations already exist inside the structure itself.

I had forgotten to top up my Russian SIM card before leaving London.

To receive a text message, the number needed credit.

To add credit, I needed internet access.

To access the internet, I needed a text message.

I walked around Vnukovo trying different Wi-Fi networks one after another. Airport Wi-Fi. Café Wi-Fi. Random public networks. Every single one eventually redirected me back toward the same screen asking me to register with my phone number.

Outside the airport I could see the Hilton. It stood a bit uphill beyond the roads and parking barriers, glowing blue through the snow.

International hotel chains promise continuity, predictability, comfort through recognition. This Hilton was a functioning fragment of the same global order I had left behind a few hours earlier.

I decided to walk there.

The direct route had disappeared under snowdrifts.

That winter Moscow had been buried in snow for weeks. I had seen photographs online before leaving England. Cars swallowed by snowbanks. Courtyards turned white. Municipal vehicles pushing through storms.

The information arrived abstractly.

Then I stepped out of the airport wearing trainers.

The sidewalks between Vnukovo and the Hilton had vanished completely. Snow covered the curbs, crossings, and pedestrian paths as one continuous uneven surface. I kept searching for a route somebody else had already compressed into a walkable trail.

Nobody had.

The hotel stayed visible the whole time.

I just couldn't walk to it directly. The snowdrifts were high.

I had to go in a wide circle through the parking access roads and the underpass beneath the highway. The detour took maybe seven minutes.

I reached the Hilton lobby. Every room in the hotel had already been taken by airline crews, but the Wi-Fi worked.

I finally managed to transfer money onto my Russian number. Messages started arriving, and the entire system suddenly un-

locked itself all at once. By then it was already close to four in the morning.

For a moment I considered going into central Moscow and finding another hotel there. Then I opened the Russian Railways app.

There was a train to Rostov leaving at eight.

A new and glossy double-decker Tavriya train.

I took a taxi to the station and waited there in a café until boarding.

Russian long-distance trains ask for a particular kind of bodily tolerance. A compartment is considered the better option, yet it can also become the more intimate trap. Four narrow berths. A sliding door. A corridor outside. At night the door closes and you sleep in a small box with strangers.

I had grown unused to that.

Living in London had changed my sense of normal proximity. I still had the old Russian knowledge somewhere in me. I knew how these journeys worked. I knew how quickly the compartment could become unbearable if one person snored, smelled, talked too much, drank too much, occupied too much of the air.

This time the train was half empty.

I had the whole compartment to myself on the upper deck.

That was the luxury.

Sixteen hours inside a Russian train, with a door I could close, a window I could look through, and no stranger breathing in the berth opposite me.

The train ran toward Crimea. I was going only as far as Rostov.

It was February. In summer it would be different. Families, suitcases, beach bags, children being taken to the sea. A resort train.

The only image for this chapter is a horizontal winter landscape.

The photograph is taken from above ground level, from the second floor of a double-decker train. That height changes the feeling of space. The geometry of the railway becomes more visible from this angle: lines become parallel and perpendicular, the ground is cut into strips, the industrial buildings sit behind the snow like objects placed on a model railway.

I took the photograph shortly after the train left Moscow, or perhaps while we were still inside its outer industrial belt.

A voice had just come through the loudspeaker.

It said something about closing the windows and not filming.

I did not hear it properly. The announcement was distorted by the speaker and by the usual train noise. I understood enough to feel that filming was not allowed, but not enough to know where, why, or from what point.

So I kept filming.

Only later did I understand what the announcement had been about.

At the end of the route the train would cross the Crimean Bridge.

I was not going that far.

I would get off in Rostov, before the train continued south toward the bridge.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Almost immediately, the annexation began to be fixed into place through infrastructure: roads, checkpoints, maps, electricity lines, rail links, a bridge across the Kerch Strait. The physical connection mattered, and so did the visible proof of it. Crimea had to be made reachable from Russia, then made ordinary.

The Crimean Bridge became the largest object in that effort.

Its road section opened before the 2018 World Cup. The railway section opened at the end of 2019. Passenger trains could now travel from Russian cities directly into Crimea, across a piece of infrastructure built to make the annexation feel completed.

Then, in February 2022, Russia began the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

After that, Crimea changed position again. It was no longer only the earlier annexed territory that many Russians had already absorbed into holiday plans, school maps, television language, and summer routes to the sea. It became one of the active military rear zones of the war. Ukraine began striking targets in Crimea and made clear that the peninsula remained part of the territory it intended to recover.

The bridge was attacked more than once.

Still, trains continued to run.

People continued to travel to the sea. They travelled with children, suitcases, food bags, slippers, thermoses, chargers, wet wipes, crossword magazines. They bought tickets, checked berth numbers, argued about luggage space, drank tea from railway glasses.

The danger entered the holiday structure.

It sat in the journey as a small additional calculation. Low probability, serious consequence. The kind of risk people learn to carry without naming it every minute.

The danger was small enough to consider.

It was also real.



INDUSTRIAL BELT IN SNOW

Winter Railway Landscape from the Tavriya Train

02

ROUTES INTO THE FUTURE

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, I had been back to Rostov several times.

Recruitment posters were already part of the Russian street. I had seen them in Moscow, in St Petersburg, in metro stations, on buses, on billboards. Most of them used the same visual language: men in uniform, contract service, good pay, respect, usefulness, belonging.

This poster had a newer tone. I saw it in central Rostov at night, on a wet street with cars moving through the reflections. The post office sign was glowing beside it.

The poster was bright red.

NEW.

IRREPLACEABLE.

Russia's Unmanned Systems Troops.

The phrase at the bottom said: "Choose the most technological troops."

A young soldier stares out from the image with the polished face of a video game character.

Video game. Indeed.

Drone warfare comes with a screen. It has cameras, coordinates, targets, remote control, signal delay, navigation, thermal vision, interface, mission language.

The fantasy already exists in the culture around games.

The poster takes a familiar boyhood dream and gives it an official uniform.

You see what others cannot see.

You control a machine at distance.

You move through danger without placing your own body inside it.

The old military fantasy required courage in the presence of physical risk. This one offers a different fantasy: precision, control, technical superiority and protection from consequence. The body is kept elsewhere. The face is hidden by equipment. The hand touches controls. The screen receives the world.

The person in the poster is not asked to imagine mud, blood, fear, cold, injury or death. He is asked to imagine competence.

This is the cleverness of the image. It turns war into a role. An advanced role. A specialist role. A role for someone who knows how to operate the system.

The future arrives as a playable interface.

The responsibility arrives later, if it arrives at all.

I placed the photograph of a recruitment poster beside another image from Rostov: a Soviet space mosaic in an underground pedestrian crossing. Both images speak in the language of the future.

The mosaic belongs to an older version of that language. It comes from the Soviet world of rockets, scientific institutes, orbital stations, engineering prestige and public belief in technological progress.

The Soviet space programme gave technology a particular emotional position. Technology promised direction. It promised national seriousness. It promised a future that could be calculated, engineered and reached. A rocket launch was never only a rocket launch: it showed that a society could make the future visible.

The recruitment poster also spoke about technological capacity.

Russia has a strong digital layer.

You feel it in ordinary life before you think about it politically. Money moves quickly by phone number. QR payments work in cafés, pharmacies, taxis, railway stations and small shops. Banking apps are full-service domestic ecosystems. The state portal sits inside daily administration: passports, taxes, fines, medical appointments, school access, benefits, official letters, property documents. The Mir card system replaced much of the space left by Visa and Mastercard. The Faster Payments System made instant transfers and QR payments ordinary. The digital ruble is being built through the same vocabulary of platform, security, efficiency and national infrastructure.

This is one of the things Russia likes to say about itself, and in daily use the claim is not empty.

The systems work.

This matters because people often imagine authoritarian decline as visible decay. The streets broken, the bureaucracy primitive, the state unable to function. That is only one version. Another version is much harder to read from the outside: clean apps, fast payments, efficient delivery, competent graphics, smooth digital portals, all running alongside censorship, war, surveillance and repression.

A few months after I photographed the poster, another story appeared.

TikTok began blocking Russian influencers who had promoted Alabuga Polytech, a technical college in Tatarstan linked in public reporting to drone production. Some of the accounts had millions of followers. The bloggers had advertised the college through ordinary formats of online influence: campus tours, lifestyle videos, career advice, bright edits, jokes, enthusiastic voiceovers, the promise that a young person could enter a new world by choosing the right programme.

The Alabuga story changed the scale of the poster.

When I first saw the poster, it seemed like a sophisticated disguise. War had been cleaned into technology. A soldier had been cleaned into an operator. Danger had been cleaned into interface.

After Alabuga, the poster looked almost straightforward. It still said “troops”, “recruitment”, “state”.

Alabuga moved the same route further away from its endpoint. A young person did not have to begin with the army. He could begin with education. He could begin with engineering. Programming. Robotics. Advanced manufacturing. Thoughts about future careers and good salaries.

The vocabulary of innovation does so much work.

It cleans the surface.

It makes the route look rational.

It gives the whole thing the shape of ambition.

A teenager is invited into technology, usefulness and a future-facing profession. The drone enters the frame as an engineering ob-

ject before it enters the frame as a weapon. The person entering the programme enters a story about skills before entering a story about war.

The recruitment material does not need to lie about every detail to distort the larger reality. It only needs to arrange attention.

The Soviet mosaic told people that they belonged to a society moving toward space. In this society, engineering was a moral language. To build was to believe. To study mathematics was to serve the future. To become an engineer was to enter a serious adult structure. Science and technology gave a person a place inside history.

The drone poster and the Alabuga videos use a similar emotional channel.

They address the part of a person that wants to be useful.

They address the part of a parent that wants a child to have a profession.

They address the part of a country that wants proof of modernity.

They address the part of a young person that wants to stand near the future.



RECRUITMENT POSTER FOR UNMANNED SYSTEMS TROOPS



SPACE, TILES, REPAIR

Soviet Space Mosaic in an Underground Crossing

03

EMPTY FLAT

My grandmother died two years before my grandfather. During those two years he continued living alone in the apartment on Communist Avenue. He looked after the flat and himself well. Floors were washed. Shelves were dusted. Food was stored carefully. The apartment continued moving along its familiar tracks.

By then the apartment already contained several generations of accumulated domestic logic. Drawers filled gradually over decades. Sets of dishes expanded. Blankets, sheets, jars, containers, tools, embroidery, documents, kitchen equipment, seasonal objects. Soviet life had trained apartments to become dense internal systems. A home absorbed storage, repair, food preservation, craft, decoration, memory, and preparation for the next season all at once.

Living in England sharpened my awareness of this structure. English domestic culture also values continuity deeply. Objects travel through families. Old furniture acquires character through use. Clothing survives across generations. A repaired object often carries more dignity than a new one. But Russian apartments developed an additional historical function. They learned to operate as stabilising environments inside unstable decades.

The deeper grammar of that domestic world survived several political eras with remarkable consistency, following older instincts about preservation, storage, repetition, and preparedness.

The embroidered icons on the kitchen wall belonged to that same rhythm. My grandmother stitched them herself from commercial embroidery kits. She called them *bozhen'ky*, a tender Russian diminutive for God, used here for the embroidered holy images themselves. Over time they multiplied across the apartment in gold-coloured frames. My grandfather helped frame them carefully. My mother participated in arranging and maintaining the apartment too. By the time I returned to Rostov after my grandfather's death, authorship had become impossible to separate

cleanly. The apartment carried the combined habits of all three of them at once.

Looking at the photographs later, I realised that many of the objects mattered less as individual possessions than as evidence of a particular domestic philosophy. The apartment approached time expansively. It prepared for future use continuously. Space remained active. Balconies became extensions of kitchens. Cabinets became archives of repeated daily life. Containers waited for another season.

That rhythm outlived my grandparents.

The balcony was bright. Light came through the windows in wide stripes. Plants stood along the glass. In spring my grandmother grew seedlings there in plastic cups and cut-open bottles. There were jars of preserved vegetables, plastic containers, bottles, tools, screws, pieces of wire, things kept because they might become useful later.

My grandfather had painted the cupboard pale green.

The colour felt completely ordinary to me.

I had grown up seeing it everywhere, long before I ever thought about it as a colour someone had chosen. It appeared inside apartment blocks, on stairwell walls, metal doors, pipes, railings, fences, playground structures.

The colour had its own Soviet history.

Green paint was produced in huge quantities for public buildings, railway equipment, hospitals, schools, apartment blocks. It was cheap, washable, practical, easy to paint over damaged surfaces. Over time the colour spread far beyond its original uses.

Eventually the colour settled into the background of everyday urban life.

It became the colour of maintenance itself.



THE APARTMENT'S INTERNAL ORDER

Living Room Cabinet with Stored Domestic Objects



THE ROOM CONTINUES

Living Room with Television and Balcony Doorway



THE BALCONY SEEN FROM INSIDE
Balcony Plants Through the Inner Window



GLAZED BALCONY WITH PLANTS
Table, Window, Cabinet



BOZHEN'KY
Kitchen Wall with Embroidered Icons



CARE VISIBLE AS SHINE

Parquet Floor in the Living Room

04

BASEMENT OPENINGS

The pale green paint from my grandparents' balcony continues outside around the base of the building. Above it, grey concrete is embedded with small pale chips. White windows appear at regular intervals, some protected by metal grilles. Beneath them are small openings into the basement.

I photographed twelve.

Although they began with the same dimensions, each has acquired its own arrangement. One is crossed by straight iron bars; another has a pipe extending through it. Several have makeshift shutters made from timber or sheet metal. A grille has slipped sideways and now hangs diagonally across the wall. Another opening has been filled so thoroughly that only a shallow dark rectangle remains. Rust, cement and successive coats of paint have altered the original geometry.

When I first assembled the photographs, I wrote about the openings as faces. The comparison came immediately: twelve versions of a single aperture, each given a different expression by bars, boards, pipes and patches. It was accurate, though it was also the first thing the photographs suggested. To earn its place in the book, the chapter had to explain how one standard element had become twelve separate objects. The answer lay in the history of the house and in the repairs that had accumulated along its lower wall.

So I called my mother.

The block was completed in 1969, during the rapid expansion of the Western district of Rostov-on-Don. My grandparents moved there around 1970, when Mum started school. The apartment was new, much of the surrounding neighbourhood was still under construction, and the stairwell filled with young families whose children were close in age.

She can still reconstruct the house floor by floor. A classmate lived on the second, another child lived above, someone else was a year

younger, and an older brother had already entered the next school year. The classroom continued up the stairs.

The route into the apartment began at the factory.

My grandmother, Valentina Semyonovna, joined Rostov Foundry and Mechanical Plant No. 11 in 1958. Her labour book records no previous employment. She began as a casting fettler in the foundry and heat-treatment section, removing gates, rough edges and excess material from newly cast metal. The work was heavy and repetitive, carried out amid dust, noise and vibration.

In 1960 she moved to the electroplating department as a first-grade metal polisher, working with abrasives, brushes, felt wheels and polishing compounds. She gained a second qualification grade in 1961 and a third in 1964. By 1966 she was doing fine finishing work with chrome paste, removing minute amounts of material to improve the shape and smoothness of a component.

After completing accounting courses, she transferred to the accounts department in 1967. The family received the apartment a few years later through the housing system attached to the same enterprise where she had begun on the foundry floor.

A possible second flat became part of family lore. In Valentina Semyonovna's later account, Grandad's workplace might also have offered him housing. She proposed a formal divorce so that they could apply separately and perhaps receive two apartments. He refused, and she reproached him for the decision for the rest of their marriage.

Mum says they lived like cat and dog. They argued loudly and often, and the lost second apartment remained one of their recurring grievances.

They moved into one modest flat, substantial in what it changed: a private kitchen, a balcony and a front door of their own.

Childhood in the house followed the rhythm of adult work. Parents left for their shifts, children walked to school without them, and many carried a key on a string around their necks. The concentration of families at the same stage of life meant that the stairwell and courtyard were already populated when school ended.

Listening to her, I began to understand the utopian charge of the place. At the scale of one stairwell, the Soviet housing promise had

taken a convincing form. Years of work and waiting ended in a private flat, and because many families arrived together, their children found a social world already in place outside the front door.

For a time, the building held that arrangement together. The first generation grew up side by side, and a second later filled the same courtyard. As the original residents aged and died, flats were inherited, sold or rented. New households arrived one by one, and the shared timetable ended.

The basement openings offer a physical record of what followed. In 1969 they began as identical elements of a standard design. Their differences arrived gradually.



THE ENTRANCE FACADE

Entrance Side of a Nine-Storey Residential Block



BASEMENT OPENINGS
Sequence 01-12





05

THE FIGURE AND THE SURFACE

In one photograph, it is a building facade: plaster, geometric lines, shadows, wires, a metal fence, a barred window, a figure in a niche.

In the other, it is my grandmother's carpet: a large floral pattern, thick fabric, red-brown texture, and a tiny icon sealed in plastic.

In both cases, what caught me first was the way a small human figure appeared against a much larger surface.

The figure on the facade is actually larger than a real person. If you stood next to it, it would probably feel almost giant. But from a distance, the geometry of the facade is stronger. The figure becomes small inside the surface of the building.

The icon of the saint is small in a much more literal way. It is almost the size of a little calendar card, a cheap plastic object that could be kept in a drawer, on a shelf, inside a bag. The carpet is also just a domestic object, part of my grandmother's interior, but in the photograph the proportion becomes similar: a small figure inside a larger texture.

At first I saw them almost in the same way: a small body against a surface.

Then the next layer appears.

You start asking why this particular body is here, on this particular surface.

Why was this male figure placed on the facade? What kind of person was the building meant to show? A student, perhaps. A young man. Someone upright, formal, prepared, held in public view. Why does he stand in a niche, high above the street, as if a human figure had been made architectural?

And with the icon, the questions change. Why did my grandmother keep this saint? Why this one? What did this image promise her:

protection, blessing, help, memory, order, a small private connection to something larger? Was it chosen deliberately? Was it a gift? Was it kept because it was holy, because it was familiar, because it had already entered the room and found a place there?

At the moment of photographing, I did not know the answers.

But the fact that I did not know does not make the figures empty.

That is one of the strange responsibilities of making images. You can enter a photograph through texture, proportion, colour, rhythm, the way one thing sits inside another. You can think you are taking a surface. But the surface is already carrying names, histories, habits, beliefs, uses.

If I do not recognise the saint, someone else might.

If I first see the facade figure as a pale male figure in a niche, someone else may immediately recognise the language of the building. My first reason for taking the photograph is only one layer of the photograph. It does not cancel the others.

This is one of the things art school teaches, sometimes in an irritating way and sometimes usefully: the work contains more than your intention. The meanings you did not consciously put there can still arrive inside it, because the objects themselves bring them in.

So the question becomes more precise. What did I take when I took this picture?

Later, I found out that the building was a school. The figure was part of its facade. What I had first read as a male figure, almost a young man or a student, belonged to a public image of childhood and education. The building had placed him there as part of its own language.

That changes the photograph, but it does not replace my first encounter with it.

I still began with the surface.

Then there is a third level. The photograph also points back at me.

Why did this arrangement stop me? Why this kind of order? A flat wall, a niche, a pale figure, hard shadows, a barred window, wires, a fence. Why did the small icon on the carpet feel connected to it? Why did I recognise the proportion before I recognised the meaning?

There is something in me that responds to these arrangements: a small body held inside a larger system, a figure placed where it can be looked at, a surface that seems stronger than the person or image attached to it. The photograph is never neutral in my direction either.

It asks why I wanted the figure like this: contained, framed, reduced by the surface around it, made visible and made small at the same time.

Maybe that is part of my work: finding these moments where the world has already arranged something before I arrive.



A SMALL FIGURE INSIDE THE SURFACE
School Facade with Figure in Niche



PLASTIC ICON ON A PATTERNED CARPET



PIONEER GIRL IN A NICHE
School Facade, Budyonnovsky Prospekt



SCHOOLGIRL
Pale Wall, A Girl Beside the Surface

06

A VALUABLE BUILDING

A historical facade in the city centre had been covered with construction mesh.

Pushing directly through the dark fabric was a bright green balcony.

The balcony looked ridiculous. A small domestic structure suddenly bursting through the middle of this huge dark temporary surface. On either side of it, you could still see fragments of the original columns. One side remained unpainted.

Whoever painted the balcony seemed uninterested in architectural preservation, historical consistency, or whether the building looked coherent as a whole.

The logic was more immediate.

The paint was old.

The facade was dirty.

The building was neglected.

So somebody painted the balcony green.

I looked at the lower floors.

At first they seemed to belong to a different category. The green balcony looked amateur, almost comic. The lower facade looked more deliberate. Someone had repainted it in warm peach colours, outlined the decorative mouldings in white, installed plastic windows, hung a vertical sign advertising blinds beside the entrance.

It had the appearance of renovation.

But the effect was close to the balcony above.

Both interventions treated the building as a set of separate usable fragments. One person painted the balcony green. Someone else renovated the ground floor for a business. Plastic windows entered the historical facade. A column was painted where the balcony began. The work stopped where the area of responsibility seemed to stop.

The balcony looked more absurd because it was more exposed.

The lower renovation looked more acceptable because it used the language of improvement.

Architecturally, both belonged to the same situation.

The building was being changed piece by piece by people who needed it to function now. A shop needed windows, a sign, a cleaner facade. Someone upstairs needed a balcony that looked less neglected. Each gesture made sense at the scale of the person making it. Together, they damaged the building as a whole.



A VALUABLE BUILDING IN PRACTICAL HANDS
Fragmentary Repair on a Historical Building

07

HUMAN ANTHILL

This photograph began with the billboard.

It says: “Tired of living in a human anthill?”

Below that:

“Only eight floors.”

I stopped because the promise sounded surreal. Eight floors were being offered as relief, as something peaceful, almost pastoral. It felt like a bad joke.

The Russian word on the billboard is “челове́йник”. It is made from “человек”, meaning human being, and “муравейник”, meaning anthill. Literally, a human anthill.

In Russian, the word is immediately recognisable. It describes the huge residential complexes that have become a familiar part of the urban imagination: giant tower blocks, repeated windows, thousands of residents, thousands of lives compressed into one housing machine.

A human anthill is rarely only a matter of height. It usually means a whole arrangement of daily inconvenience. Too many flats for the surrounding roads. Too many cars for the available parking. Too many people leaving for work and returning at the same time. Too little greenery. Schools, clinics, shops and transport trying to catch up with the amount of housing already built.

So the advertisement is stranger than it first appears. It felt like a bad joke, but only at first sight. If you think about the places this joke is addressing, the promise becomes more precise.

What kind of place makes an eight-storey building feel like relief?

Part of the answer is already inside the photograph.

This is the country I know. Russian cities often feel as if each new layer has been added before the previous one was cleared away. Wires stay outside. Signs hang over older signs. Traffic lights, shop-fronts, advertisements, balconies, cables, cars, fences, air conditioners and fragments of different decades occupy the same visual field. Every system leaves a line on the city.

So when the billboard promises “only eight floors”, it is selling a reduction of pressure.



BILLBOARD: TIRED OF LIVING IN A HUMAN ANTHILL?

Housing Advertisement in Central Rostov

08

THE FORCE OF GOOD

This photograph was taken from the side of a road.

We were driving down from a larger road towards the dacha settlements outside Rostov. It was the kind of place usually seen through a car window: a slope, a turn, a few houses, open ground, industrial buildings, fences, wires, mud, small structures placed without much ceremony. Nothing asked to be looked at as a view.

Then I saw the words.

СИЛА ДОБРА.

The words made me ask the car to stop.

For a few seconds, the scene was only a roadside image: a low structure painted in the colours of the Russian flag, open ground, industrial buildings behind it, the phrase СИЛА ДОБРА placed in the middle like a small public declaration.

Then my companions reminded me where we were and when we were there. Russia was at war. We had stopped near an industrial-looking site. There was a large building behind the cabin, fences, power lines, factory walls, and almost no passing traffic. We did not know exactly what the place was. A person photographing industrial buildings from a car could be read in the wrong way. In wartime, looking can become suspicious very quickly. A photograph can start to look like information.

I took the photograph anyway.

Then we drove on.

Only later, when I looked at the image properly, did I notice the name on the large building behind the cabin.

Cargill.

That changed the photograph for me.

At first, I had thought I was photographing a phrase: The Force of Good. A low patriotic surface, painted in national colours, standing beside a road to the dacha settlements. Then the photograph

opened another layer. Behind the phrase was the name of one of the largest agricultural companies in the world.

Cargill is a huge name. It belongs to the world that moves crops, ingredients and profit across borders. It also belongs to a long list of arguments about what global agribusiness does to land, forests, rivers, workers, farmers, animals, and local economies.

So the image started to hold two kinds of declared “good” at once.

In the foreground, a local phrase: СИЛА ДОБРА. A moral slogan painted in the Russian flag. Strong, simple, almost childish in its certainty.

The Russian word “сила” can move into English as power or force. “Power” sounds smoother. It belongs more easily to moral optimism: the power of good, the power of love, the power of truth. “Force” keeps the harder edge of the Russian word. It can mean strength, capacity, impact. It can also mean pressure, coercion, armed force, force applied to another body.

“Добро” has its own problem.

Russian has another word, “доброта”, closer to kindness. “Доброта” belongs to human behaviour: gentleness, mercy, generosity, the ability to help or spare someone.

“Добро” is larger. It is good as a moral category. Good as a side. Good as something that can be defended, claimed, organised, fought for.

Kindness with force sounds broken.

Good with force sounds familiar.

Good can be made strong. Good can be armed. Good can be turned into duty. Good can acquire enemies. Good can begin to need discipline, sacrifice, obedience, pressure, correction. A phrase that sounds morally clean can become very practical once it enters public space.

The words on the cabin are powerful because everyone wants them to be true. Good should have force. Good should survive contact with cruelty, corruption, fear, cowardice, violence, cynicism. There is something deeply human in the wish that goodness might be strong enough to defend itself.

Then the phrase becomes concrete. It is painted in the colours of the Russian flag, inside Russia, during a war Russia began by invading another country. After that, force becomes a present-tense word. Strong, simple, almost childish in its certainty, Good becomes a public claim.

A global food company does not need to say “good” in large letters. Its version of good usually arrives through other words: feeding, supply, stability, productivity, development, responsibility. These words sound practical. They sound adult. They sound difficult to argue with, because food is real and supply is real.

But this is also how large systems protect themselves. They describe their scale as service. They describe their expansion as solution. They describe their pressure on land, labour and smaller producers as part of a larger rational order.

The next level is the space.

One of the reasons I wanted to make this book was the possibility of placing images next to each other and letting them correct, disturb, or complicate one another.

The Force of Good was meant to be next to the Human Anthill because both photographs ask the same question from opposite sides.

What makes a place livable?

In the first photograph, the problem is compression. Too much has entered the same urban frame. Housing, signs, wires, traffic, shopfronts, promises of relief, the daily machinery of a city pressing itself into one surface.

In this photograph, the pressure has fallen away.

There is room.

That should change everything, and in a way it does. The eye can move. The objects have distance between them. The road, the ground, the houses, the industrial buildings and the sky no longer fight for the same small piece of attention.

The space is wide, but the wideness does not feel generous. It can be open and still feel as if nobody has really taken responsibility for how a person is meant to live inside it, cross it, pause in it, belong to it, or even look at it.

Russia is often imagined through size. Even people who know very little about it know that it is enormous. The map becomes part of the national image: distance, territory, rivers, fields, forests, steppe, long trains, far regions. Space becomes a kind of proof.

In actual places, space can feel much less triumphant.

It can be empty without being free. It can be open without being cared for. It can sit between systems that do not quite meet: private houses, industrial walls, road edges, construction materials, waste ground, wires, temporary cabins, fields waiting for a purpose or left after one. Space does not automatically become a humane environment. It can be passed through, fenced off, underused, over-claimed, left in a condition of waiting.

This is the Russia I know.

Open space arranged without tenderness.



THE FORCE OF GOOD
Roadside and Industrial Buildings

09

CRAYFISH

Rostov-on-Don grew around the river, and the Don still shapes its food habits through markets, local catch, dried fish, fish soup, home recipes and ordinary knowledge about what comes from water. In a river city, food often carries a chain of small decisions before it reaches the table. People know where to buy, when to buy, which stall looks trustworthy, which season matters, what should smell right, what should still move, and what can be accepted because someone reliable says it can be accepted.

Crayfish belong to that world with a rhythm of their own. They are food for beer, for conversation, for hands that stay occupied for a long time. You take one, twist it open, crack the shell, peel what can be peeled, pick out the meat, get at the small pieces, put the shell aside, wipe your fingers, and take another one. Eating them is slow because each body gives very little back. Some of it is appetite, some of it is work.

I told my friend Diana that I wanted to eat crayfish. In my head this meant going somewhere, sitting at a table, ordering beer, and being given a plate of crayfish already cooked. Diana understood the same wish through a more complete and more local sequence. For her, eating crayfish began at the place where they are kept alive in a tank. You look at them, choose the ones you want, watch them being taken out and packed, then bring them home and cook them yourself with dill and spices.

I asked if she meant that they were boiled alive. She said yes, as if I had asked whether tea is made with hot water. Her answer carried no performance of cruelty. It belonged to a practical system of freshness, trust and proof. You see what you are buying. You know the animal was alive. The animal is still moving, so the product is honest. The living body closes the gap where something could have been replaced, spoiled, mislabelled or softened into a nicer story.

There is also a test that everyone seems to know. If a crayfish is boiled alive, its tail curls inward. If it was already dead before boil-

ing, its tail stays straight. People notice this without turning it into a moral discussion. It belongs to the same ordinary knowledge as choosing the crayfish from the tank, adding the right dill, knowing where to buy, knowing when the season begins, knowing which places can be trusted. The curled tail is part of the language of the food.

I wanted to see the whole process because I had never done it that way. I wanted to see the tank where the crayfish were still moving, choose them with Diana, bring them home, and watch the water, dill and spices become part of the same practical sequence. I wanted to see the moment when food was still visibly an animal and freshness was proved by movement.

It was early March, and the season had not started. The tanks were empty. Diana took me to a place she trusted, and we bought the crayfish already cooked.

By then they had turned red. That red is part of their appeal: bright, wet, excessive, almost indecently alive for something already dead. The shells shine, the dill stalks lie across them in green lines, and the black eyes remain visible among claws, tails, legs, seeds, liquid and spice. The image looks abundant and appetising, almost festive. It also has the bluntness of a still life, where pleasure and death sit in the same arrangement.

The photograph looks like the crayfish looked, and in life they looked even better: brighter, wetter, heavier, more convincing as food. It keeps some of that force. It also keeps the part that caught me after Diana explained the process. The earlier stage sits outside the frame, but it presses on the image because the red bodies already contain it. They have passed through selection, boiling, seasoning, trust and death before arriving at the table.



COOKED CRAYFISH WITH DILL AND SPICES

A Local Food Ritual in Rostov

10

TAJIK ROTHKO

A wall has been patched many times. One colour covers an old mark. Another colour covers another mark. A strip of grey lies over yellow. A pale lilac area sits beside beige. Red appears where red has no obvious reason to appear. The marks were probably made at different times, by different people, with different tins of paint, under different instructions. The wall, at some point, begins to behave like one single picture. An artwork.

That is when someone says: Tajik Rothko. The name enters at the moment when the wall becomes available to the same kind of looking that abstract painting asks for: composition, colour, rhythm, weight.

For a Russian ear, both words in the phrase do work.

Rothko is the obvious part for an English reader. His name stands here for abstract painting in its most publicly recognisable form: large fields of colour, solemn looking, museum silence, the idea that a rectangle can carry feeling, weight, depth, even when there is no figure and no story.

Tajik is the part that needs translation.

In Russian cities, Tajiks are strongly associated with migrant labour from Central Asia. The word often appears in everyday speech as shorthand for the men who clean entrances, repair courtyards, carry materials, paint walls, lay tiles, sweep streets, patch surfaces, and do the low-paid maintenance work that keeps the city usable. The person who made a particular patch may have been Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Russian, or someone else entirely. In the phrase, Tajik works as a social shorthand before it works as a fact.

Placed together, the two words create a collision.

Rothko took colour seriously. Very seriously. His paintings ask for attention, time, silence, almost reverence. To attach his name to a patched city wall sounds like an insult to that seriousness. It imagines the grand abstract painter dragged into municipal repair,

leftover paint, bad plaster, low-paid work, and the visual life of Russian courtyards.

The insult does not finish the thought.

The phrase has a second movement. After the laugh, the eye returns to the wall. The wall still has colour. The wall still has balance. The wall still holds the gaze. The comparison may have begun as a joke, but the joke depends on something visible. Without that visible force, nobody would reach for Rothko's name.

This is where the problem of abstract art opens.

At what point does a painted surface become a painting? At what point does a block of colour become serious? Who is allowed to say that a rectangle has depth, or silence, or emotional force? Who is pretending? Who is seeing? Who is afraid to admit that they see nothing? Who is afraid to admit that they do?

The old joke about abstract painting is always nearby: maybe the emperor has no clothes. Maybe the museum has trained everyone to nod politely at expensive coloured fields. Maybe a child could do it. Maybe a decorator could do it. Maybe a worker covering graffiti with leftover paint could do it.

Tajik Rothko keeps that suspicion alive, then complicates it.

The phrase laughs at art-world seriousness, but it also borrows that seriousness. It uses Rothko because Rothko gives the patched wall a frame. The name says: look at this surface with the same attention you might give to a painting. Look at the red. Look at the grey. Look at the pale lilac against the beige. Look at the old yellow still visible underneath. Look at the way separate repairs begin to make one field.

There is a small attack on abstraction here.

The phrase says: perhaps the gallery has been asking too much reverence from us. Perhaps some abstract paintings are closer to patched walls than their prices and wall texts admit. Perhaps the distance between a solemn colour field and a badly repaired surface is partly held in place by authorship, permission, money, and the room in which we are asked to look.

There is also an unexpected defence of abstraction.

Because the patched wall really can work. It can hold the eye in the same way a painting holds the eye. It can produce attention through colour, scale, relation, imbalance, heat, pause. The fact that it came from maintenance does not cancel the visual experience. If anything, it sharpens it, because the surface arrives without asking for admiration and receives it anyway.

That is the best part of the phrase.

It insults abstract art and confirms abstract art in the same breath.

It says: maybe this whole system of reverence is ridiculous.

It also says: maybe a colour field really can happen anywhere, even here, on a damaged wall, through several acts of repair, by people whose names will never enter the image.

The worker becomes a possible author, though the authorship is unstable. One person may have painted quickly. Another may have tried to match the colour. Another may have chosen the red with some small private pleasure. Another may have cared only about finishing the job. The wall does not tell us. It keeps the intentions inside the surface.

This uncertainty matters.

Calling it Tajik Rothko should not require the claim that nobody intended beauty. That would be too easy and too arrogant. A person doing maintenance can still have taste. A worker sent to cover a mark can still make a choice. The patch may come from hurry, shortage, habit, skill, indifference, humour, care, irritation, or some mixture of all of them.

The final surface is what remains.



TAJIK ROTHKO
Layered Paint and Repair Marks

NO DIRECT ROUTE

Marina Smith

English digital edition, 2026

Text and photographs © Marina Smith, 2026

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