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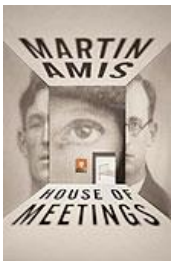

House of Meetings

By Martin Amis
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Chapter One

The Yenisei, September 1, 2004

My little brother came to camp in 1948 (I was already there), at the height of the war between the brutes and the bitches ...

Now that wouldn't be a bad opening sentence for the narrative proper, and I am impatient to write it. But not yet. "Not yet, not yet, my precious!" This is what the poet Auden used to say to the lyrics, the sprawling epistles, that seemed to be lobbying him for premature birth. It is too early, now, for the war between the brutes and the bitches. There will be war in these pages, inevitably: I fought in fifteen battles, and, in the seventh, I was almost castrated by a secondary missile (a three-pound iron bolt), which lodged itself in my inner thigh. When you get a wound as bad as that, for the first hour you don't know whether you're a man or a woman (or whether you're old or young, or who your father was or what your name is). Even so, an inch or two further up, as they say, and there would have been no story to tell-because this is a love story. All right, Russian love. But still love.

The love story is triangular in shape, and the triangle is not equilateral. I sometimes like to think that the triangle is isosceles: it certainly comes to a very sharp point. Let's be honest, though, and admit that the triangle remains brutally scalene. I trust, my dear, that you have a dictionary nearby? You never needed much encouragement in your respect for dictionaries. Scalene, from the Greek, *skalenos*: unequal.

It's a love story. So of course I must begin with the House of Meetings.

I'm sitting in the prow-shaped dining room of a tourist steamer, the *Georgi Zhukov*, on the Yenisei River, which flows from the foothills of Mongolia to the Arctic Ocean, thus cleaving the northern Eurasian plain-a distance of some two and a half thousand versts. Given Russian distances, and the general arduousness of Russian life, you'd expect a verst to be the equivalent of-I don't know-thirty-nine miles. In fact it's barely more than a kilometer. But that's still a very long ride. The brochure describes the cruise as "a journey to the destination of a lifetime"-a phrase that carries a somewhat unwelcome resonance. Bear in mind, please, that I was born in 1919.

Unlike almost everywhere else, over here, the -is neither one thing nor the other: neither futuristically plutocratic nor futuristically stark. It is a picture of elderly, practically tsarist *Komfortismus*. Below the waterline, where the staff and crew slumber and carouse, the ship is of course a fetid ruin-but look at the dining room, with its honey-gold drapes, its brothelly red velvets. And our load is light. I have a four-berth cabin all to myself. The Gulag Tour, so the purser tells me, never quite caught on ... Moscow is impressive-grimly fantastic in its pelf. And Petersburg, too, no doubt, after its billion-dollar birthday: a tercentenary for the slave-built city "stolen from the sea." It's everywhere else that is now below the waterline.

My peripheral vision is ringed by crouching waiters, ready to pounce. There are two reasons for this. First, we have reached the penultimate day of our voyage, and by now it is massively established, aboard the *Georgi Zhukov*, that I am a vile-tempered and foul-mouthed old man-huge and shaggy, my hair not the downy white of the unprotesting dotard but a jagged and bitter gray. They also know, by now, that I am a psychotic overtipper. I don't know why. I was from the start, I suppose, a twenty-percenter rather than a ten, and it's climbed steadily since; but this is ridiculous. I always had a lot of spare cash, even in the USSR. But now I'm rich. For the record (and this is my record), just one patent, but with wide applications: a mechanism that significantly improves the "give" of prosthetic extremities ... So all the waiters know that if they survive my cloacal frenzies, then a competence awaits them at the end of every meal. Propped up before me, a book of poems. Not Mikhail Lermontov or Marina Tsvetaeva. Samuel Coleridge. The bookmark I use is a plump envelope with a long letter in it. It's been in my possession for twenty-two years. An old Russian, coming home, must have his significant keepsake-his *deus ex machina*. I haven't read the letter yet, but I will. I will, if it's the last thing I do.

Yes, yes, I know-the old shouldn't swear. You and your mother were quite right to roll your eyes at it. It is indeed a charmless and pitiful spectacle, the effing and blinding of an ancient mouth, the teeth false or dropped, the lips licked half away. And pitiful because it is such a transparent protest against failing powers: *saying* fuck is the only dirty thing we can still get up to. But I would like to emphasize the therapeutic properties of the four-letter word. All those who have truly grieved know the relief it eventually brings, to dip your head and, for hour upon hour, to weep and swear ... Christ, look at my hands. The size of cheeseboards, no, cheeses, whole cheeses, with their pocks and ripples, their spread, their verdigris. I have hurt many men and women with these hands.

On August 29 we crossed the Arctic Circle, and there was a very comprehensive celebration aboard the *Georgi Zhukov*. An accordion, a violin, a much-bejeweled guitar, girls in wenchy blouses, a jodhpured drunk who tried to fake the Cossack dance and kept falling off his stool. I now have a hangover which, two days later, is still getting steadily worse. And at my age, in the "high" eighties, as they now say (in preference to the "late," with its unfortunate connotations), there just isn't room for a hangover. Dear oh dear ... Oh dear oh dear oh dear. I didn't think I was still capable of polluting myself quite so thoroughly. Worse, I succumbed. You know very well what I mean. I joined in all the toasts (a miniature dumpster had been provided for us to smash our glasses into), and I sang all the songs; I wept for Russia, and staunched my tears on her flag. I talked a very great deal about camp-about Norlag, about Predposylov. Around dawn, I started physically preventing certain people from leaving the bar. Later on I did a fair amount of damage to my cabin and had to be moved the next day, in a blizzard of swearwords and twenty-dollar bills.

Georgi Zhukov, General Zhukov, Marshal Zhukov: I served in one of his armies (he commanded a whole front) in 1944 and 1945. He also played a part in saving my life-eight years later, in the summer of 1953. Georgi Zhukov was the man who won the Second World War.

Our ship groans, as if shouldering yet more burdens and cares. I like this sound. But when the doors to the galley blat open I hear the music from the boombox (four beats to the bar, with some seventeen-year-old yelling about self-discovery), and it comes to my ears as pain. Naturally, at a single flicker of my eyelid, the waiters take the kitchen by storm. When you are old, noise comes to you as pain. Cold comes to you as pain. When I go up on deck tonight, which I will do, I expect the wet snow to come to me as pain. It wasn't like that when I was young. The wake-up: *that* hurt, and went on hurting more and more. But the cold didn't hurt. By the way, try crying and swearing above the Arctic Circle, in winter. All your tears will freeze fast, and even your obscenities will turn to droplets of ice and tinkle to your feet. It weakened us, it profoundly undermined us, but it didn't come to us as pain. It answered something. It was like a searchlight playing over the universe of our hate.

Now the boombox has been supplanted by a radio. I hold up a hand. This is permitted. Today saw the beginning of the siege of Middle School Number One, in North Ossetia. Some of the children happened to be watching when the gunmen and gunwomen came over the railway track in their black balaclavas-and they laughed and pointed, thinking it was a game or an exercise. Then the van pulled up and out he climbed, the killer with the enormous orange beard: "Russians, Russians, don't be afraid. Come. Come ..." The authorities are saying three or four hundred, but in fact there are well over a thousand hostages-children, parents, teachers. And why is it that we are already preparing ourselves for something close to the worst possible outcome? Why is it that we are already preparing ourselves for the phenomenon understood by all the world-Russian heavy-handedness? For what reason are our hands so heavy? What weighs them down?

Another cup of coffee, another cigarette, and I'll go up on deck. The Siberian expanse, the olive-green immensity-it would frighten you, I think; but it makes Russians feel important. The mass of the land, of the country, the size of the stake in the planet: it is this that haunts us, and it is this that overthrows the sanity of the state ... We are cruising north, but downriver. Which feels anomalous. Up on deck, it's as if the ship is motionless and the facing riverbanks are on the move. We are still; the riverbanks bob and undulate. You are borne forward by a power that is traveling the other way. You have a sense, too, that you are looming up over the shoulder of the world and heading toward an infinite waterfall. Here be monsters.

My eyes, in the Conradian sense, have stopped being Western and started being Eastern. I am back in the bosom of a vast slum family. Now it has to fend for itself. All the money has been divided up between the felons and the state.

It is curious. To type the word "Kansas" still seems reassuringly banal. And to type the word "Krasnoyarsk" still seems wholly grotesque. I could of course type "K-," like a writer from another age. "He journeyed to M-, the capital of R-." But you're a big girl now. "Moscow," "Russia": nothing you haven't seen before. My mother tongue-I find I want to use it as little as possible. If Russia is going, then Russian is already gone. We were very late, you see, to develop a language of feeling; the process was arrested after barely a century, and now all the implied associations and resonances are lost. I must just say that it does feel consistently euphemistic-telling my story in English, and in old-style English English, what's more. My story would be even worse in Russian. For it is truly a tale of gutturals and nasals and whistling sibilants.

The rest of me, even so, is becoming Eastern-re-Russifying, all over again. So keep a lookout, hereafter, for other national traits: the freedom from all responsibility and scruple, the energetic championship of views and beliefs that are not only irreconcilable but also mutually exclusive, the weakness for a humor of squalor and cynicism, the tendency to speak most passionately when being most insincere, and the thirst for abstract argument (abstract to the point of pretension) at unlikely moments-say, in the middle of a prison stampede, at the climax of a cholera riot, or in the most sepulchral phase of a terror-famine.

Oh, and just to get this out of the way. It's not the USSR I don't like. What I don't like is the northern Eurasian plain. I don't like the "directed democracy," and I don't like Soviet power, and I don't like the tsars, and I don't like the Mongol overlords, and I don't like the theocratic dynasts of old Moscow and old Kiev. I don't like the multi-ethnic, twelve-time-zone land empire. I don't like the northern Eurasian plain.

Please indulge the slight eccentricity in my use of dialogue. I'm not being Russian. I'm being "English." I feel it's bad form to quote oneself. Put it that way.

Yes, so far as the individual is concerned, Venus, it may very well be true that character is destiny. And the other way around. But on the larger scale character means nothing. On the larger scale, destiny is demographics; and demographics is a monster. When you look into it, when you look into the Russian case, you feel the stirrings of a massive force, a force not only blind but altogether insentient, like an earthquake or a tidal wave. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

There it is in front of me on the screen of my computer, the graph with its two crinkly lines intersecting, one pink, one blue. The birth rate, the death rate. They call it the Russian cross.

I was there when my country started to die: the night of July 31, 1956, in the House of Meetings, just above the sixty-ninth parallel.

Chapter Two

House of Meetings

It was with some ceremony, I remember, that I showed my younger brother the place where he would entertain his bride. I say "bride." They'd been married for eight years. But this would be their first night together as husband and wife ... You head north from the zona, and after half a mile you strike off to the left and climb the steep little lane and the implausible flight of old stone steps, and there it is: beyond, on the slope of Mount Schweinsteiger, the two-story chalet called the House of Meetings, and, to the side, its envied annex, a lone log cabin like an outpost of utter freedom.

Just the one room, of course: the narrow cot with its furry undersheet and dead-weight gray blanket, the water barrel with the tin mug chained to it, the spotless slops-bucket with its tactful wooden lid. And then the chair (armless, backless), and the waiting supper tray-two fist-sized lumps of bread, a whole herring (slightly green around the edges), and the big jug of cold broth with at least four or five beads of fat set into its surface. Many hours had gone into this, and many hands.

Lev whistled.

I said, Well, kid, we've come a long way. Look.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

And I produced from my pocket the squat thermos of vodka, the six cigarettes (rolled out of the state newspaper), and the two candles.

Maybe he was still recovering from the power-hose and the shearer-there were droplets of sweat on his upper lip. But then he gave me the look I knew well: the mirthless rictus, with the two inverted chevrons in the middle of

his brow.

(Continues...)