

Douna Loup
Boris, 1985



ZOE

“BORIS, 1985” BY DOUNA LOUP
Publication date: January 2023 (France)

ENGLISH SAMPLE
Translated from French by Alexis Bernaut

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ZOE
éditions

pp. 11-21
Incipit of the novel

Vino del mar

Early in January of 2018, I just came from a concert and your name is with me – Boris. I just heard the song *Vino del mar*, dedicated to Marta Ugarte, a young left-wing activist woman who was tortured and thrown from a helicopter into the sea by Pinochet’s soldiers in 1976. Boris, my great-uncle, went missing in Chile in 1985, and this song resonates as a calling to remember, to go, and to find out.

I have never felt very close to the story of Boris, but it was always there – a part of the family landscape. This brilliant great-uncle, an adventurer, a Russian turned American mathematician, was mysteriously reported missing nearby a German sect in Chile. I would typically hear frightening words such as torture, retention, extremism...

There is a website about Boris Weisfeiler, which his sister Olga maintains – Olga, who has spent over thirty years fighting for truth and justice: research work, trials, journeys; but the facts themselves remain a blur. On January 5th, 1985, Boris was on a hike in Chile; he had spent the previous night with a shepherd in the mountain; in the morning, he said his goodbyes and left. He went down by the river El Ñuble, which is where we lost track of him. Within a hundred kilometers from La Colonia Dignidad, the infamous German sect at the foot of the Andes, suspected of sequestration and torture, among other atrocities.

February 8th, 2018

Hello Olga,

Thank you for your prompt answer to my message!

Jacqueline – my grandmother – had actually told me the story of Boris a long time ago. I can’t tell why I have suddenly taken interest in it. I wrote two novels on life and destiny. I really enjoy this manner of telling real-life stories with the breath of fiction.

I understand how you may have started but not yet completed that “book” you mentioned about the story of your brother Boris. The stoppage of the trial in Chile and the lacking of an “ending” must make it very difficult.

Til soon!

Douna

And so, month after month, we started corresponding.

And so, my project of flying across the ocean to meet her in Boston and ask her about Boris, started taking shape.

And so, I perfected my English:

Olga: “If I may – it’s Chile in English – chili is a spicy dish from Texas, USA, and from Mexico.”

In January 2019, after a year spent outlining my approach, emailing Olga, reading, feeling around, it actually started. Moving. I left with my daughters – I had them leave school for three months – and we flew to New York, and from there took a bus to Boston. There we were.

Olga, who had been both wary and enthusiastic at first, couldn’t but testify to the fact that my words were backed up, and that I wasn’t bluffing out of short-lived curiosity. There I was.

Boston, January 13th, 2019

It's cold. The streets are wide.

I have an appointment with Olga in Brookline, west Boston. Olga is a familiar stranger. A great-aunt whom I am meeting for the first time. She looks like my grandmother. Her smiling and melancholic little eyes soon get wet when I mention her brother. Russian lakes, these eyes. Her English flows as a raw river, too. She gives us one extra woolen pull-over, like the protective mother she is. And gloves. January in Boston is cold indeed. In a few days, we will meet again to begin the interviews and arrange meetings with friends of Boris who live in Boston. This is where the journey begins. In this iced reality which strikes our faces in spite of the sun. My daughters and I walk on a frozen sidewalk. We fill our bags with garments from Goodwill, a massive second-hand store, where seeing all these good deals hanging in the alleys drives us crazy. A promise of comfort, more fitted to the winter in the US than the clothes we brought in our suitcases.

A trip, however, always implies reassessing pre-established plans.

Mine were totally wiped out by an ice-skating accident. A broken tibia and fibula, surgery, endless nights in the hospital, and a snow storm to boot. My trip is suddenly turning into a nightmare.

I must come through, and I get help. When I get out of the hospital, we are lucky enough to be accommodated by two friends – women aged 70 –, and their respective daughters and families, in an incredible house. Three generations under one roof, several floors, and one big single kitchen in this wooden house on Chestnut Hill.

A week after my accident, meetings begin; here I am opposite Veronika for a first interview with my leg in plaster.

Now Boris is starting to assume different features. And then again, he is also elusive, he is the one who disappears without a trace. At first, says Veronica, after he disappeared in Chile, at first, well, yes, it was business as usual, as it always was, I was so used to him suddenly getting out of my life and keeping quiet that I expected him to resurface. But this time, months passed by and he did not show up again. I had to come around to admitting that something was wrong. Something had happened.

Veronika is a tall, elegant woman; her eyes shine as she mentions Boris, whom she has loved. She's seen him for several years, on and off as they lived far away from one another, but intensely, with exchanges filled with poetry, hiking, and a passion for mathematics. Getting too close to him, however, was out of the question – he didn't like being touched, or maybe he was afraid of it, I don't know, she told me. But I keep strong memories of him.

The day after our meeting, Veronika sent me the following message:

Douna,

I do hope that you are less in pain.

Memories are coming back, by bits. One way or another, mathematics was always a topic. As an exploration, a way of getting involved in the world. Boris would say that everything could fit in that Mandelstam poem:

И я выхожу из пространства
В запущенный сад величин

И мнимое рву постоянство
И самосознание причин

И твой, бесконечность, учебник,
Читаю один, без людей
Безлиственный дикий лечебник
Задачник огромных корней.

I look at these incomprehensible words, written in Cyrillic alphabet.
As locked up as mathematical equations.
And beautiful, too, in their mysterious arabesques.
I request an instant translation from Google. It helps a little, but not much.
I get in touch with my friend Maud, who is a translator in Moscow, and ask her whether or not she knows this poem and would she provide a better French translation.

Dear Douna,
I am so happy that you are writing from the USA to ask me about Mandelstam! Your great-uncle was a man of great taste. This is a translation which I've thrown together; it's literal – not as bad as Google's:

And here I am, out of space
In the neglected garden of values
I rip up the unreal permanence
And conscience of the reasons

As for your handbook, o infinity,
I read it alone, without anybody else,
You are the sole medicine book, fallen leaves,
The collection of problems with massive roots.

Space as in space-time, values in terms of amounts or measures – that was meant for a mathematician. It is a very musical poem – my instant translation fails to render the play on sounds and the play on meanings... It goes from the abstract sense to the "sensual." It would be best if you found a better translation !
Good luck with your research,
Maud

January 25th, 2018

And in the hospital I am dreaming
that I just didn't break my bones like that
on a skating rink with skates
I am dreaming of a Siberian lake and secret links
of an invisible pact, from bone to bone,
from ancestors to the living
and of the passage of blood like a river and
I am dreaming of a white-colored initiation which
nails me
with a pain after surgery so acute that I scream
and my teeth chatter as I grab onto the bedside table
I am alone

My daughters are at Olga's
it is snowing
but my teeth chatter and I cannot speak anymore
to say
that we're past 10 on the scale of pain
I mean way beyond
and I am calling Boris, I am upset at him for being here
within this pain
in this ice
in my memories
and in this quest
From bone to bone in my hospital nights I tell him
I am not giving up, Boris,
if that's what you want to know.
It is not because the tibia and fibula of my right leg are broken
that I'm catching a flight back barely a week
after my arrival.
No, I'll make do.
In the black nights of the hospital
I do not question that journey – which will take place
with or without crutches.
And with the pain.

pp. 55-63

Boris' notebook

Boris left some travelogues. Written in Russian, which Olga translated into English, and which I am translating into French.

At last, I can hear Boris' voice directly.

I am separated from his language by two translations. But these simple notes make his presence felt to me. His tasteful descriptions. The attention paid to the wildlife; the details noted during his long, solitary walks. Like in the Canadian notebook which he kept during his summer '81 hike.

7-3

Arrival on July 3 at 7pm.

The landing strip is unpaved. A taxi drove me to Mayo for \$3, then I crossed the river Stuart with Indian Sam for \$10. I walked until 11pm. Didn't find any water and set up my tent for the night. An interesting bird flew over me, making frightening sounds. I moved on the next day, but decided I didn't like where the road led, so I left it. Then I roamed about the swamps, and got out and headed for a river. I thought it was Lake B. Kalzas.

A black "Admiral" bird with a red mark was chasing seagulls for a reason I forgot. I couldn't cross the river. I spent the night on its bank, then walked along it, and made it to Lake B. Kalzas. (I found a strange mushroom with spikes underneath it.) I circled around the lake, and, again, camped for the night. It was raining. So, the next day, I stayed inside the tent and slept because of the rain.

7-17

As I was crossing Lake B. Kalzas towards stream Mist, I saw drowned plants, among them a blooming wild rose a meter deep underneath the water. On the morning of the 17th, I saw some animal which climbed on a tree and then disappeared. On the same day, I saw a rabbit and I tried my alarm clock. The rabbit got close to see what was happening.

7-19

I saw a purple mushroom. A gray-purple top, deep purple gills.

7-21

Saw a strange vehicle.

It's the vehicle that makes the road, obviously. This one runs along Russell brook, but is invaded by small walnut trees in many places.

7-22

A beehive stopped me; the bees, however, left me alone. However, they looked agitated – the camp fire probably disrupted them.

7-23

I saw my first beaver – even though I passed by a great number of old beaver dams.

7-24

A small rodent chewed a bit of my plastic spoon. It happened at night. I heard that something was moving the spoon, and wondered what would become of it. A rodent – in all likelihood the same one – slipped underneath the tent fabric.

7-25

I was by North MacMillan River at 6pm. I made a small raft which I dragged on the river. I almost lost it in doing so. At some point, the raft was on quiet waters while I was dealing with rapids, and we had quite a hard time remaining a tight unit... Then, it became very difficult as I was going against the current. Still, I managed to push it towards the shore. It almost toppled over, but I eventually got it out of the water.

Asheville, February 20th, 2019

Boris, I am drinking tea and listening again to the recorded voices of relatives who are talking to me about you,

about your discreet and yet wide-open smile,
on that last picture of you at your friends' place,
the Kacs, that family which is the nerve center
of so many encounters

and Ma Kac is worried about you
what? Off to one of those impossible countries again?
what are you going to do over there?

Walk

What are you looking for?

Boris smiles and keeps silent

His friends remember that smile

I hear that many years after

your loss

your Moscow friends still gather on

your birthday

and call Olga, in remembrance,

as a tribute

as a token of friendship,

as they all did while you were alive
All gathered at Olga's in Moscow
and you made the call, Boris,
as you apparently had no lovers, Boris
nothing official at least
but loyal friendships
oh plenty of them

Canada 1981

7-26

I saw a forest fire in the distance. The smoke reached the sky and triggered off a driving rain.

7-27

Went through the fire area. It was a small fire, apparently the rain quickly put it out.
I camped next to a great marshy lake. Seagulls are chasing magpies. I wonder why.

7-28

Went to River S. MacMillan. A while later, I found a road with horse manure, so I thought it must be somewhat busy. On the opposite shore, at the confluence with a stream, there was a log cabin. There are likely more humans here than I thought.

7-29

I walked along the road. A good road, poorly maintained though. Many trees have been chopped. There are marks on the pines and aspens. Then I thought: this track is going in the wrong direction. No more manure. I turned southwards and found the river soon enough. I made a small raft, and by 6pm, I was on the other side. The river is shallow but the current is strong; I could not have made it to the other side without the raft. I was pushing the raft and so managed without swimming, but my legs got very tired. I crossed before that confluence I'm interested in, I am hoping. I'd like to walk by River Riddell. It is now 8pm. It is raining (has been since 6 30pm).

7-30

Day off. I tried to dry myself. Then I packed everything back up. I have enough food for 6 days. Very little salt left. Tea is almost gone. It's pouring rain.

7-31

I've reached River Riddell; I walk along it as planned. Picked lots of mushrooms. Saw an old log cabin, but there doesn't seem to be a way. Found raspberries. Even though I've walked quite a bit, I haven't covered a great distance.

8-1

I was on a good track at first. But then, I lost it. It might have been a moose track. Found a bush of wild gooseberries. I ate mushrooms for the fourth time, and at 6pm, I ate soaked granola. Around 7pm, I heard axe noises coming from the opposite shores. I decided not to get any closer. Until 8pm, I ran on the heights. That was great. I had no idea of my whereabouts. I am now having a meal of mushrooms nearby a stream. In spite of all the mushrooms, food is lacking.

8-3

I had found a track, but lost it soon enough. So, I carried on nonetheless. Until 3pm, the sun shone and the walk was very hard. Here again, I have no idea of either my whereabouts or how far away I am from the canal. I'd better get there fast. Now, I'm going to eat mushrooms.

Yet again.

As I stopped for the night, a helicopter took off not far away from me, and flew down over River Riddell. Spotting the smoke of my camp fire, it made a U-turn and circled above me to see what was going on.

8-5

Got out of my tent at 8 in the morning. Immediately saw several people in a canoe. They took me on board for 30 kilometers then someone else took me to River Ross. That person carried a moose which he had killed by the lakes. I made it to Ross River at 5pm. I had hoped to get on a plane, but arrived too late and took the road to Watson Lakes. Then I changed my mind and decided it would be a better option to get on a plane the next day. So, I returned to Ross River. Geologists took me and I spent the night with them. One of them was very talkative and a philosopher of sorts. There were Indians over there. He was invited to visit their village.

pp. 84 – 92

Pedro Aguirre Cerda Commune, Santiago,
March 12th, 2019

Claudia's uncle and aunt, who are accommodating us, have agreed to talk to me about the 1980s in Chile, and especially about their memories of year 1985. I need to hear about the background, the atmosphere of that specific year. Marco and Maria were activists, and were very involved in the events that were disrupting their country. The story of Boris – his journey to Chile in 1985 to go hiking in the Andes – startles them. Was he involved, on one side or another? What was he looking for? Hell, it was a dictatorship, there was tremendous tension. From 1983 on, the popular upheaval had grown stronger; the unifying of the various opposition movements to Pinochet's regime had given impetus to the revolt. Pressure and repression were mounting. Marco made a comparison with the yellow vests in France. It was the same, instead it was every day, not only on Saturdays, and the police didn't hesitate to shoot. Upon Boris' arrival, there was much tumult. This was far from a peaceful atmosphere. The economic debacle had widened the social gap and increased poverty. The rage was all the more potent. The government had tried to cope with the disaster by offering men jobs: underpaid road work, without any pension or health contribution – State-sponsored precariousness.

In the Poblaciones, women's committees put together common pots, *la olla comunitaria*. They gathered all they could find, various vegetables and edible goods, and served meals to families in need.

Marco and Maria had been activists since the 1970s. They had begun in the hippie movement in high school. Then it had taken a political turn. When Pinochet came into power, they had had to learn the undergrounds methods of survival so as not to get arrested. Secrecy was key. Political meetings were held amidst family reunions so as not to arouse suspicion. Politics were the topic of whispered talks above wedding banquets – the only authorized meetings.

Big demonstrations, however, gradually resumed in the 1980s. They were very dangerous, and heavily repressed. People were searched in the middle of the streets, anytime, under any excuse. A screwdriver in a bag was deemed a weapon, and would be confiscated on the spot. Marco tells an anecdote which now has him laughing out loud. There was a search at their house, in the course of which the *carabiñeros* tore everything down – furniture, the wooden carpet, beds – looking for a sign of something subversive. They found nothing. They eventually left with a book entitled The

Revolution of Mathematics, which they took with them and burnt; it was so ridiculous. Back in the days, Maria, who now embroiders *arpilleras*, then painted raised fists on walls. And democracy, I asked them, when did you feel it coming? Democracy? What democracy? We struggled to get up, Maria tells me. *Levántate* Now we are standing.

March 13th, 2019

In Chile, I let go of my crutches.
I only used one, in the beginning, in the streets of Santiago.
And then after a few days
through training by going up and down
the stairs at Claudia's
I feel confident enough to walk without them.
Walking. Slowly but surely.
Softly but swiftly
on the earth, on the tarmac,
on the stones, on the asphalt, on the grass, on the sand.
And I walk. And I breathe in the saturated air
and I taste the many fruits
the sweet and massive watermelons
we buy them chopped in halves so we can
carry them.

It's hard to write
on the weight of this story
which I'm carrying at arm's length
As I can't take anything away
I bear it whole, under my skin
in my bags, underneath my eyelids,
and in my sandals.
It's hard, for hidden reasons.
I've never met Boris.
But I do see, as I am following in his footsteps,
that since my first novel of mine which features
a dead man found in a forest,
until the latest one where a sister goes searching for her
unknown brother,
death or missing people or quests
are often nigh
I feel like a bearer of absence, of miscarriages,
of concealed deaths
silence
Abortions, violent disappearances, suicided friends, and abandoned children.
Is that why I feel so upset
by the life of this lost great-uncle?

This story of Boris I let it disperse
among my cells
I write and it bleeds like a watermelon
I would rather not sacrifice it

not leave anything aside from this quest
neither your first name nor your lost steps on a riverbank
of which I am getting closer
I've been getting closer to it for a year now
and now
it is close
it's just a couple hundred kilometers
south.

March 14th, 2019

I meet Pascale, a Chilean reporter who has since become Olga's interpreter, and then her friend. Olga has made seventeen trips to Chile, to plead her brother's cause and seek justice. She went to La Colonia twice. She once made it close to the river where Boris was last seen.

In Pascale's garden, we are drinking cold beer. Talking with her reminds me how much this whole story is still confused. Boris went missing, La Colonia was nearby, so it is likely that the local police brought him there for questioning, since he was a foreigner and didn't speak any Spanish. But this is merely a hypothesis – the police may just as well have disposed of him right away. Nobody can be sure that Boris was actually killed inside the German enclave. Nobody can tell, even thirty-four years later. One thing, however, is more or less certain: Detective Oscar Duran's investigation was botched, and the theory of Boris' drowning doesn't gel. Which draws my attention to the fact that I tend to take for granted that Boris died in La Colonia. Pascale has me challenge my preconceptions.

Ever the investigator, she suggests I speak to the only “witnesses” of that day of January 5th, 1985. Most of the *carabineros* who were on Boris' tracks that day, are still alive. The troops who were on border guard duty in the valley, too. Hernan Fernandez, the lawyer, will have their addresses. Four *carabineros*, four troops. These are the eight men who were auditioned during the trial – unsuccessfully, for lack of evidence. They all deny having found Boris, but hearing them might prove worthwhile enough.

A big cat which isn't hers forays over the walls into Pascale's jungle-garden. She chases it away; it keeps coming back. There is a vine climbing, and plants in bloom. Trees bear fruit. The heat tends to subside with sundown. Pascale mentions a story somehow similar to Boris'. Maarten Visser, a young 18-year-old Dutchman, went missing in December 1985 near the Osorno volcano as he was on a hike, taking pictures. Pascale knows the Visser couple well; they travel to Chile once a year, on their son's footsteps. There are several rumors pointing to La Colonia as the place where Maarten would have been abducted and killed, under the suspicion that he was a spy. Just like with Boris, though, no conclusive proof was ever found, and all hypotheses are still pending. Pascale looks at me: “That book you are writing is going to be a book about mystery. You must track every hypothesis, every rumor, and go as far as you can.”

Pascale is writing a book on Rodrigo Rojas, a young photographer of Chilean descent who had been in exile in the USA since he was 10. His mother was an activist who had been arrested and sentenced to exile. Rodrigo returned to Chile in 1986. Six weeks after his arrival, on July 2nd, he took part in a demonstration with his friends. He took pictures. When the troops stepped in, the group scattered, but Rodrigo and his friend Carmen got beat up, then doused with gasoline and burnt alive. The military drove Carmen and Rodrigo thirty kilometers away from the city, and left them for dead on the roadside. A farmer found them and called the local police who had them taken to a hospital. His friend survived, with lifelong consequences, but Rodrigo died after four days of agony. The truth and justice about this case were only revealed after over twenty years of struggle. In March of this year, i.e., 2019, the trial of the three servicemen accused of having killed him, will reach its close. The truth has long been crystal clear. But it has taken years for it to be officially recognized.

I'm searching
for whatever I'm searching
as I'm searching for you
as I get to know you a little bit better
as I get closer to these places where you were alive
as I approach the various hypotheses of your death
I feel close to you.