

# Krasnagorsk-2

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**P**APA JOE BOUGHT THE MOVIE CAMERA ON THE BLACK MARKET IN MOSCOW IN 1973. It came in a green plastic case with a handle, he carried it with him wherever he went, and when they found his body he was clutching it to his chest. No one was quite sure what killed him, but he was three days gone by the time his brothers went into the house, and one of his legs was rotted up to the knee and smelled even worse than the rest of him.

The house was a mess. There were piles of old newspapers six feet high, as if he were building pillars to nowhere. The kitchen ceiling was crisscrossed with strings tacked to the walls like crooked rigging. Hanging from them were tiny squares of paper on which Papa Joe had recorded, day by day, the things he'd drunk and eaten; the side effects of the pills he was taking for his heart, blood pressure, arthritis; and how often he'd taken a piss or a shit.

Hidden everywhere—in the back issues of newspapers, the old books so heavy the shelves sagged under them, the cardboard boxes stacked in the kitchen—were family heirlooms: a secessionist locket that opened on a picture of a young woman; a letter from the painter, Munkácsy, to some long-lost Dutch relative; a silver mortar and pestle used by his mother to grind herbs a century ago.

It wasn't until day three that János, András, and Henrik found the porno movies their older brother had made.

Even after he'd come to Canada—was forced to come, he insisted—Papa Joe continued to introduce himself the old-world way, last name first, first name last: “Papp, Joseph.” It hadn't taken them long at the photo-developing lab where he worked to change that to “Papa Joe,” but he didn't object, not even when they started calling him that in the family. In the days after his death, the name would become a cypher for his perversity.

The brothers found the films in a series of canisters, each marked with a Roman numeral, seventy-four in all, filed in numeric order in a large pile of boxes in the basement. The ones holding the pornography were conspicuously dust free. The brothers watched the films that night on Papa Joe's screen, the click and whirr and strobe of the old projector churning up memories of family picnics, car trips to the Rockies, summer vacations on return trips to Hungary, the cool villas of Lake Balaton. The images were static, a little too fast, women and children moving in and out of the frame, men waist deep in water, smoking cigarettes, clowning in the summer haze.

Then they came to canister thirty-one. Henrik flipped the switch, and a ghostly image floated on the wall, black and white, dust motes drifting in the beam.

She was naked, so pale it looked as if she'd covered herself in powder. Maybe that was why she was so blurred, tiny clouds rising whenever she shifted a hip or an arm. As they watched the slow gyrations they couldn't even be certain she was a woman, or a young man, and only when her breasts came momentarily into focus, or when she bent over, did the impression of sexlessness lift. As for Papa Joe, he wasn't there, neither as a presence nor a voice. The camera never moved, never shifted perspective, never panned back or zoomed. The woman wasn't concerned with it, moving slowly, as if seeing her own body for the first time, entranced by the tilt of a leg, trying to peer over her shoulder, down along the spine, bending over, running fingers up the backs of her thighs, teasing the camera to come closer. It never did. It sat unwavering. She twisted in front of it like a sheet unwinding in a river. In the background, under the whirr of the projector, Henrik thought he could hear something like a broken music box, playing the same four bars of the same tune over and over.

No one spoke after it ended. The tail of the film

slapped the desk, going round and round before Henrik reached over, took off the reel, feeling oddly tranquil, almost sedated, by what he'd seen. It was a feeling he'd not often had, maybe once in a while from a piece of music or a book. It was as if the swaying woman had taken him out of place, to a world no longer bound by his way of perceiving it.

"Well," said András, the oldest remaining brother. "Well."

"I can't believe that Papa Joe—the eternal virgin—managed to get a woman to strip naked," said János. "It means that anything—anything—is possible in this world."

"But what kind of woman," asked András, "would help Papa Joe make pornos?"

"One he paid," said János. "But if you ask me this isn't pornography. It's not even that other crappy stuff. What do they call it? 'Erotica?' It's not even that." He kicked the box of canisters lightly with a toe.

Henrik, the youngest brother, stared at the floor. "We shouldn't watch any more." He put his hand into the light from the lens. "Do you think she was Papa Joe's girlfriend?"

János laughed. "I'd bet my pension against it. Papa Joe loved to watch women. But the thought of being touched by one of them, that terrified him."

Their childhood had been filled with countless examples of how fussy Papa Joe had always been, even as a boy. He washed his hands a hundred times a day, until the skin on them was like paper. He refused to clean out the stalls on the family farm in Nyírabrány. He didn't like the push and pull, the dirt, of soccer, handball, even hide-and-seek. He was bullied so badly in school he'd been put in a class with the girls. The only time he got dirty was when he was drawing, with pencil, charcoal, chalk, whatever he could use to make a mark, on whatever surface was available, it didn't matter if it was an old newspaper, a book fished out

of the trash, a burned wall. Later, he always had his camera, and talked incessantly about whatever he was reading—histories of Dada or Surrealism, treatises on photography, pamphlets on political movements that were abhorred in the family, Marxist aesthetics, Lettrisme, situationism. He was the only one of the brothers who'd loved communism—but not the communism of the Soviets, he always made that clear—and had been sorry to leave it behind.

A day later, they found the will, stuffed into the green case that held the Krasnagorsk-2. It was the last place they looked, András flipping the buckles and prying it open. The whole thing was a single paragraph, written in Hungarian, in that ornate cursive Papa Joe had perfected in grade two. “I leave all of my worldly possessions to my nephew and godson, Joseph Papp,” it began. András and János glared at Henrik, wishing for one second they'd had the foresight to give Papa Joe what he'd asked of all of them: a god-child named after him. Henrik was the only one who'd agreed, feeling most acutely the debt they owed Papa Joe. András continued reading: “May the Krasnagorsk-2 bring him the pleasure it brought me.” The three men looked at each other and rolled their eyes, then went back to the last sentence. “It is my godson who is best placed to prevent any unwanted attention, or trouble, as a result of my possessions.”

Henrik grabbed the paper. “Why would he leave everything to Joey?”

“Because he was Papa Joe's one and only godson,” said András, with enough bitterness that both Henrik and János could taste it.

“He never trusted us,” said András. “Not since we forced him to leave Hungary.”

Henrik looked at both of them. “You are not to show this to Joey. This is not his problem. I don't want him to inherit Papa Joe's . . . ‘unwanted attention.’”

János shrugged, looked at András, who frowned but nodded. “He's your son. And Papa Joe is dead; I'm sure he couldn't care less about any of this now.”

“Who cares what Papa Joe wanted—” replied Henrik, regretting the words even before he said them, “dead or alive.”

The women of the family agreed. They sat around in Henrik and Irén's kitchen, picking through the secret Papa Joe had left them.

Irén remembered how Papa Joe had always avoided kisses. “He'd always lean back, turning his head side to side, like he couldn't stand us.”

“Well, I don't know about that,” said Henrik. He looked around the room. Everyone was waiting, and for a second he thought that if he inhaled deeply he could suck back the words he'd spoken. “I got a call once,” he began. He stopped, tugged on each of his shirtsleeves. “It was Rudy DeLoi, down at The Golden Horn. He'd caught Papa Joe filming the strippers through the back window.”

“Bullshit,” said András. “Papa Joe wouldn't have gone near that place.”

“It only happened one time,” said Henrik. “Four or five years after we got here.”

“How come we never heard about it?” said János.

“I don't know why Papa Joe told Rudy to call me.” continued Henrik. “Maybe because I'm the baby.” He shrugged. “I was so ashamed. Rudy was livid. Papa Joe just kept mumbling about ‘blue light,’ how the strippers needed to ‘see themselves.’ I had to apologize for him. After we left, he begged me not to tell anyone. When I wouldn't promise he started shouting that it was all our fault. He couldn't meet anyone here, he said. I think he meant women.” Henrik tugged on his sleeves again. “I guess he figured out a way.”

János whistled. “Wow. Our own brother.”

“He was alone,” said Henrik. “But I don't think

I realized how alone until that night.” He looked at his brothers. “What? We had wives, children. He had nothing!”

“That was his choice,” said András. “We didn’t ask him to be weird.”

“You wouldn’t even let him be a godfather to your kids! After everything he did for us.” Henrik reached for his sleeves again, stopped, sat on his hands.

“He was always hiding something from us,” shrugged János.

In the weeks that followed, the woman danced in Henrik’s mind. He wondered if Papa Joe had asked her to pretend she was moving in slow motion or had actually filmed it that way. Who was she? Why had she let Papa Joe film her? How long ago? Papa Joe had owned the camera for several years before he and András and János had forced him into that horse trailer bound for Austria. Henrik smiled thinking of the stories they’d made up, telling the children of their escape, dressed in horse costumes, two brothers per horse, trying to keep on their feet as the truck bounced through the ruts and potholes of western Hungary.

He traced Papa Joe’s long decay, from the pictures shortly before his death, pants belted up under his armpits—over three hundred pounds from a diet of *zsíros kenyér*, beer, chicken cracklings, onions spooned over with salt—back in time to when he was thin, smiling, at the height of whatever promise life held. He was not an ugly man back then, though still odd, head too big for his narrow shoulders, standing in a tailored suit in an orchard, tripod in hand, while everyone else was in shorts and t-shirts. He wore the shy smile of a victim, his eyes filled with disappointment.

After a while, Henrik came back around to watching the videos again, alone this time, going through them one by one in the hope of figuring out who the women were, what threat they posed. The women

turned slowly in the flickering light, as if unaware that he was watching them, their movements falling between the beats of the ticking projector. Every day that passed since the discovery of the will was another day in which Henrik regretted the funeral announcement in the paper, the black and white picture of Papa Joe, the news spreading further and further.

He would visit his son, Joey, looking for signs that he knew. But the truth was, he and Joey had never had much to talk about. There was the occasional phone call, visits once a month, on Christmas and Easter and birthdays, but the conversation was always thin, no real content, empty of whatever might be happening in his son’s world. Joey’s younger brother Frank was more compatible with Henrik. He was arrogant, a loudmouth, always advertising himself in one way or another.

Henrik looked around Joey’s apartment. There was an expensive racing bike mounted on the wall, a chin-up bar in the doorframe to the kitchen. The floor was clean; the furniture minimal, angular; the books not dissimilar from what Papa Joe might have read. There was an old upright piano. No television. No stereo.

Joey was taller than Henrik, over six feet, sinewy from fanatical workouts, thousands of miles on the bike, triathlons. Unlike Frank, he was unmarried, no kids, his relationships infrequent and brief and the women less and less suitable every year. He’d grown quiet in the years since he was an open, trusting child, turned into an observer, always at the edges of groups, never giving away his politics, and Henrik sensed in him the sad fatalism of someone who believed that none of it—no string of logic, no airtight refutation, no list of facts—mattered in the long run anyway.

Henrik settled into a chair, rubbing his hands along his thighs. “Well, we’ve discovered some . . . strange things at Papa Joe’s house.” When Joey said nothing, Henrik continued. “There are some videos.”

He paused, then dove in. “Naked women.”

Joe nodded thoughtfully. “What are you going to do with them?”

It was not the question Henrik had expected. “I don’t know. I’ve watched them—a few only—and they’re completely anonymous. That’s what worries me. I don’t know who these people are. They could appear any time, come at us from anywhere. Lawsuits, police, anything. Did Papa Joe ever hint at this stuff?” But before Joey could answer, Henrik cut him off. “I’m sorry. This is not your problem. It’s not fair of me to ask.”

Joey jerked himself off the wall, and walked a few steps closer to his father. “Why did you saddle me with Papa Joe in the first place?”

Henrik hadn’t been expecting this either. He picked the first answer that came to him. “Papa Joe wanted to be your godfather when you were born. He asked me personally. After what he did when we were kids, he really looked out for us, and then forcing him to come out here, I couldn’t say no.”

Joey nodded. “So I got saddled with your guilt?”

“He treated you better than anyone. You got all the presents. Everything.”

“Presents!” said Joey. “Every time Canada Post issued another set of commemorative stamps I got the whole set. I didn’t care! What about the time he brought me every color of Parker jotter pen available? Black, red, blue, green, yellow. I was twelve. Who needs that many pens? You know how many stationery stores we went to to find them all? It took weeks!”

“Okay. You got presents you didn’t like. Big deal.”

“I didn’t want to be his favorite. The last few years, I’d go over for dinner, and he’d sit and explain to me why he had to wash his hands thirty times a day. Infinitesimal detail. He wouldn’t let me use his toilet because he said that when anyone else used it, even just to piss, he had to spend hours cleaning it. We’d go

to a restaurant and he’d order two entrees. Everyone would be staring at us. It was like nothing was enough for him, you know? He always needed more. More newspapers, more books, more photographs, more food, more booze. Not one single other kid, not even Frank, had to go through that. It was always me.”

“I know, I know,” said Henrik, angry now.

“He would tell me about his tests in politics in *gimnázium* back in Hungary. The whole oral exam. Blow by blow. Must have told me a thousand times. Proudest moment of his life. I could repeat it word for word: Defied the teacher. Told him what they called communism in Hungary was anything but. They’d wrapped the whole country in lies and propaganda. He really believed all that stuff—reawakening people to reality, helping them grasp their freedom, the systems that invade our brains and make us see things all wrong. He’d been working for true communism in Hungary, he said. But you guys forced him to leave. He never got over it. And he made sure I understood that—repeatedly.”

“There were a lot of things he never got over,” said Henrik. He looked at Joey, expecting him to understand, but his son was lost in private grievances—all of them next to nothing compared to what Papa Joe had gone through. But unlike his politics, Papa Joe had kept quiet about these things. So neither Joey nor Frank, nor any of their cousins, had heard of how Papa Joe had read to his brothers the letters their father sent from the front in 1943. Their mother sat off in another room, wanting and not wanting to hear the things those letters described, just far enough to make out the occasional word, piecing it together anyhow. When the last letter arrived, from Svoboda, Henrik remembered how Papa Joe’s hands shook as he read it—descriptions of Soviet artillery, the sheer numbers of the oncoming army, the bravery of the badly outnumbered and under-equipped Hungarian and Italian

soldiers. Papa Joe had looked up at the end of the letter: “You may not hear from me for a while, but believe that I have survived. I will not die in this war. I will come back to all of you. Your loving father, Jozsef.” Henrik, five years old at the time, had believed it, but he knew better now. Those were not the words that ended the letter. Papa Joe had made them all up. He was the only one who ever knew what had really been written there. Not once had he told them what it was. He’d been twelve.

A year later, their mother sent them to Budapest for safety. An aunt took them in. They lived in the cellar of her apartment building while the bombers rained explosives overhead. Afterwards, in April of 1945, when they went back to the farm, they found a charred building. Papa Joe told his three younger brothers to wait, and he’d gone inside. They stood there for an hour, scraping at the dirt with their shoes. When Papa Joe came out his clothes were black, his cheeks streaked with mud. Only his eyes were clean, as if he’d taken a rag and washed them. Without a word he gathered them up and they walked ten miles to a family friend, who stood at the door astonished, the questions dying on her lips with one look from Papa Joe, and then she’d smiled, opened her door fully, and taken them in. Judit Néni never asked a thing, never spoke about what had gone on at the farm, what happened to their mother, though in the years to come reports of what the Red Army had done in the villages and cities they conquered, especially to women, would arrive, as quickly remembered as shaken from the mind. During the next few weeks of that spring Papa Joe paid the farm a number of visits, forbidding his brothers to come along, gone for the better part of a day, dragging back what he could salvage in old trunks and suitcases, saying he’d put chalk on his hands to get a better grip, to ward off blisters, though the straps cut lines in them anyway. He was preparing for their

return to Budapest.

“I snuck after him once,” Henrik said, his eyes so wide, as if he was gazing into himself. “Followed him right to the farm. Watched him drawing pictures of our mother on the walls with chalk. He never saw me.”

When Henrik finally focused on the world in front of him again, he found Joey staring at him. “That’s not what I asked,” he said.

Henrik shrugged, no longer aware of what the question had been.

“What if I told you I knew what Papa Joe was doing with those women? What if I told you I made a promise never to tell anyone?”

Henrik sighed. He would have said his son was angry. He would have said he didn’t believe it. “I’d want you to tell me,” he lied. “I’d want to help.”

Joey shook his head. “What difference would it make? It’s too late anyhow.”

“Too late for what?”

“To stop Papa Joe.”

Later that night, Irén asked Henrik why he thought Joey was lying.

“Because there’s no way he loved or respected Papa Joe enough to keep his secret. He would have told us. He’s just saying it to piss me off.”

“I remember the look that would come over Joey’s face whenever Papa Joe came to take him to the circus or the amusement park,” Irén said. “It was the same look as when he had to set the table or mow the lawn. He hated it.”

Henrik nodded, remembering Joey’s face as he walked off with his uncle, glancing over his shoulder at his mother and father, begging to be saved from every wasted Sunday. It was like going to school six days a week when everyone else only had to go five.

At night, Henrik went back to the films, holding individual frames up to the light, trying to remem-

ber if he'd seen this or that woman's face before—in a supermarket, the local schools, church—but they were all a wash. Papa Joe had made sure to put enough make-up on them, and to adjust his filter so that they seemed to have left their identities behind, drifting free of who they'd been. Henrik counted the days since the funeral, marked them off on the calendar, every day a little more relieved that no one had called, that the police hadn't shown up at the door, that a friend or neighbor hadn't asked if it was true about his brother being a pornographer.

Three weeks after they'd laid Papa Joe to rest Lindy Collins knocked on his door. She was standing on the stoop. Her face looked like it had been taken apart and reassembled. The nose had the kind of zig-zag to it you saw on retired hockey players. There was a scar along her hairline, like someone had wrapped a tiny chain around her head, and a longer one, including suture marks, down her left jaw. Her hands were shaking, and she kept untucking nonexistent hair from the back of her collar.

"Mr. Papp," she said. It was not a question. She had a bag in her hand that jingled with change. "I'm wondering if you'd like to buy a ticket to the Pentecostal Church Annual Raffle. The winner gets a new Pontiac."

"Uh, no—" He didn't know how to refuse. He was thinking of mentioning that he was Catholic, and didn't like the thought of giving money to Pentecostals, all those jabbering, spasming, speaking-in-tongues lunatics.

"I used to teach music class to your boys," she said. The admission made her even more nervous, and she jumped, literally, when someone sounded a car horn, at length, in Henrik's driveway. Henrik peered at the windshield, but couldn't make out who was inside. "Is it true?" she asked. "Is Papa Joe really dead?"

"Papa Joe?" Henrik looked at her. "Yes, he died.

He..."

"The films." She interrupted him. "What about the films?" Henrik nodded as the car horn sounded again, twice this time, held longer on the second than the first. Lindy looked behind her. Henrik thought she was going to burst into tears. "Oh, can't you wait? Just this once? Can't I have this time?" Henrik realized she was not speaking to him. "Papa Joe promised me he'd never show them to anyone," she said.

Henrik shook his head. "No, of course not. You can have it if you like."

She went back to picking the nonexistent hair out of her collar. "No, no," she said. "If he found it . . . no. Sometimes I'm happy to know that . . . that it's out there," she said. "That I was like that once. Papa Joe said that it would make me feel free. Oh, he offered me money, but that's not why I did it."

"Free?" Henrik didn't understand. "He filmed you naked."

"I filmed myself," she said. "Papa Joe just held the camera. And that sweet boy, he came in with that backpack full of lights, he helped set them up, he promised he'd look away, and he did. I was nervous because I recognized him from my class. Oh, he was older then! But he kept his word. He didn't look."

"Boy? What boy? Are you talking about Joey?"

She said something to that, but the horn sounded again, and it went on and on and on for what seemed minutes, and Henrik never heard what it was. Then there was a man's voice, hollering at Lindy to hurry the fuck up, he didn't have all day, and Lindy's eyes squeezed shut with tears. It was the face of a dog that didn't want to get hit again.

"Joey was there?" Henrik asked again. "Are you sure it was him?"

"Please," she said. "Buy a raffle ticket? Five dollars for one. Ten for three. I'll get the money back to you." Henrik stared at her, reaching uncertainly into his

pocket. "Please hurry." He gave Lindy the first bill he pulled out, a ten. She handed him three tickets with his name and address already written on them, then turned without a word and hobbled down the steps, faster than her sixty-five-year-old legs would go, off-balance and rickety, and whatever questions Henrik still had vanished as the car pulled out of the driveway and he saw the driver, at least sixty-five himself, hair shaved to the scalp, arm thick and tattooed and dangling a cigarette out the window, his gaze as final as death.

During the night that followed, Henrik tried to find her film, but if it was there, then the woman dancing across the screen was not the Lindy he'd seen that afternoon. It was someone else, a woman who, in stepping in front of the Krasnagorsk-2, had stepped out of herself, shedding name and history as easily as her clothes. As he switched reels, ever more frantically, he imagined Papa Joe behind the tripod, and Joey—how old had he been when these films were made?—turned with his face to the wall, like some naughty child forced to stand in the corner. That's what Henrik was really looking for—a shadow or flicker, some movement of the eyes to suggest only Papa Joe had been in the room with the dancers. At two in the morning Henrik ripped the reel off the machine and threw it against the wall, picked it up and threw it against the wall again, kicking it where it fell, the film unspooling, wrapping around his ankles, the legs of a table, until it was a celluloid tangle in the middle of the floor.

Henrik sat and put his head in his hands.

By morning he'd managed to wind the film back around the spool, though it was creased and folded and torn.

Then he got in the car and drove over to Joey's.

He caught his son getting on his bike in the con-

dominium parking lot, ready to pedal a hundred miles. His body was a strip of muscle in the tight jersey and shorts.

"I found out," said Henrik simply. He'd stopped in front of Joey, not even parking, one foot still inside the car, the other on the tarmac, the engine still running. "I knew they'd turn up eventually. That there'd be trouble. But not this," he said.

Joey didn't get off the bike. He looked at the ground. "You never noticed anything," he said. "You felt bad for Papa Joe. You let it happen."

"How old . . . ? How old were you?"

Joey looked up. "Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen. I stopped after that."

"You never told me."

"I made a promise." Joey's cycling shoes made a clicking and scraping on the pavement. "I didn't want trouble."

"You wouldn't have gotten in trouble!" said Henrik, coming around the car now to stand directly in front of his son. "You think I would have been mad at you for telling on Papa Joe!" But the look Joey gave him made Henrik step back.

"I didn't give a fuck about Papa Joe. Not then, not now. I don't know how he got to the women—maybe they came to the lab where he worked—but they were damaged, in trouble. Prostitutes, addicts, beat up housewives. They were all scared. Drunk when we arrived, or high, falling over themselves and him. I think they just liked their power over Papa Joe, this fat sheepish man with the movie camera and fifty dollars in his hand. They teased him. But then it became something else. They got lost in it, you know?"

Henrik nodded. There'd always been something almost sexless about Papa Joe. Irén had once joked about how he'd looked in his bathing suit. "He couldn't have sex if he wanted," she'd said. "It would be like trying to fuck a bucket with a toothpick."

“He made them laugh,” continued Joe. “There was all this stuff about his photography—his art, his politics. All that crap about freedom, stepping outside the world you know. He acted like carrying that camera was some doorway to heaven or something. I don’t think they understood a word he was saying.” Joe shifted his feet, the gravel scratching along the pavement.

“You should have told us.”

Joe shook his head. “I never peeked. I stood facing the wall, or sat in another room. But Papa Joe always did. He watched them—and they were too far gone to care.”

“Did you think . . . were you scared that we’d stop you if we found out?”

“I did it for them,” Joe hissed. “For the women. Do you know the kinds of places we went? The homes? What those women looked like under all that powder? He picked the most injured ones he could find.” Joe shook his head. “They were terrified that the films would be seen by someone else. But they were just as scared when Papa Joe offered to destroy them. He knew they couldn’t choose. He promised they’d be kept safe.”

Henrik nodded, remembering Lindy’s face, and the face of the driver glaring at him from the car. What would that man have done if he’d known about the videos? “It scared me, how much those women made me promise.” Joey shook his head at remembering, and Henrik stood there, thinking of the women with their bad teeth and whiskey breath and drug addled nerves, spitting at his son to swear, swear, swear he would never tell anyone or so help him God. He was still lost in it when Joey got on his bike and pedaled out to the road, leaving him to wonder at the fear the boy must have felt then, not his own but theirs, the women frightened to death of the life the Krasnagorsk-2 had taken them from, what Henrik himself had felt that day he’d followed Papa Joe to the farm, and seen everywhere the images his brother had chalked across the blackened walls of what had been their home. The same woman, over and over again, in poses Henrik also remembered—hanging laundry in front of the stove, kneading bread on the kitchen table, stretching as she emerged from her bedroom in the morning. They were all there, in luminous white, and if you followed them fast enough, from one image to the next, you could see her once more, dancing across the room.