

"Ticket to Eternity"

by

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P gets up and, singing to himself, goes to have a shower. Whilst the steam grows, he reaches through to the tiled wall out of range of the TV eye, pretending to grab the soap. Instead he removes a tile and makes an entry into a secret diary, which he does more to retain his sanity than record any particular event. Still humming to himself, he dresses and outside a church bell can be heard. Feeling peckish, he tries to contact someone for breakfast on the TV, but only receives a 'Gone to Church' sign flashed on the screen. P, realising how quiet the village seems, looks out of the window and can see no one in sight.

On the large screen, No.2 sees P leave his apartment and walk in the direction of the citadel. P arrives in time to see the last few villagers entering its precincts. The bells stop and the main door closes. P marches up and pulls a door bell, whereupon a shuttered window is drawn back revealing the stern features of a bearded man, who questions P in Russian. P makes signs that he would like to join the throng.

The door creaks open, and the man dressed in the habit of a Russian Orthodox priest motions P in. A strong smell of incense flares P's nostrils and he follows the priest along a winding corridor, passing doors marked 'eternity wards'. The sound of low chanting increases in volume as they reach the entrance to the inner temple. The priest draws back the curtains revealing a crowd of worshippers lying flat on their backs gazing stolidly up at a twinkling ceiling. It's the most weird sight of mock religion that P has ever seen. A line of bearded Russian priests chant, and swing incense as they walk round the perimeter of the mesmerised congregation. P is motioned to lie down likewise.

The priests halt in their tracks and signal for one of the congregation to follow them up to a dias, where a church altar would normally have been. But in its stead stands a small curtained-off entrance, above which hangs a large illuminated ring, not unlike an oversized halo. The chosen villager's face is wreathed in smiles as the strange procession walks through the curtains, and the congregation rises, chanting, 'Blessed is he, who has been chosen'. At this point P can stand no more, and moves back the way he was brought, finding his own way along the twisting corridors. Suddenly the voice of No.2 calls him and leads him to a room, where he ~~explains~~ explains the Russians' presence, as the ritual is continued on a large BP screen. (No.2 is also dressed in priest's garb, sporting a huge black beard).

The Russians most closely guarded secret, which the village was able to discover, was the ability to give a living mortal eternal life - the final rational answer to religion. This gift is handed out like a school prize to the best prisoners surrendering the most vital secrets - the greatest bribe known to man. P, quite naturally is sceptical, but as they again both walk down the corridors No.2 invites him to peep through the glass panels of the eternity wards. Within each P can see previous experiments, i.e. a ward full of children, and another full of babies, where the process was accidentally reversed.

Cynically P realises, when the bribe is also offered to him, it's bound to be a complete confidence trick. He declares that he has no intention of taking the plunge unless he has proof that the process will not backfire. No.2 will join him in it, as it is now completely safe. They both don special clothes for the occasion and the first experiment is to prove to him that it is worth his while exchanging his secrets for the eternal experience.

As they return to the inner temple, they hear ecstatic cries from P's predecessor, who has just returned from his shattering experience. He appears so joyful that he is led away through another door, so as not to excite the congregation too much. Soon the temple returns to its former scene, and P joins the worshippers once again lying on his back.

He becomes the chosen one, by appointment, and accompanies No.2 through the curtains, a corridor and into yet another temple, where on a rostrum stands a small cabin, not unlike those used in space. No.2 and he sit down in two comfortable dentist-type chairs and are strapped in. The windows of the cabin, are then closed, whilst jokes fly around about last wills and testaments.

The whole cabin appears to revolve, - lights flash, tingling electricity runs up and down their arms. No.2 is not alarmed but smiles and nods. The interior light changes colour, and from the exterior we see the cabin is commencing to rise and fall. P appears to fall into a coma.

They wake up, and No.2 opens the main cabin shutter. If the experiment has worked, they should have gone forward in time. Only darkness greets them, except for one speck of light.

They discover they are in a cave, but soon exit and encounter the familiar scene of the village. However, now it is not so familiar, as it is in a sad and decaying condition, obviously years older. The sky is overcast, cold and wintry, the trees are bare.

P wants to see his old house. He finds it is still as he knew it, but a wall has collapsed and the interior is dark and musty. However, still in slight disbelief, he makes for the bathroom, full of cobwebs and rust. He pokes into the cubby hole, he had secretly made, and extracts the tattered remains of the diary. He quickly looks for his last entry, which reads... finally let them know all, It was really worth it. Met No.1 - not such a bad bloke - Good bye to all my readers'. P is stunned. Either he is the subject of a very clever hoax, or all is as they say.

P decides to play along, saying he is happy about the experiment, but wants to explore further afield. No.2 states that there is no time. No time? There is an eternity. They need to report back first, and if he wants to explore further he has only to pass over a few secrets. P wants to see now and starts walking further on. No.2 shouts, he will leave him there and returns to the caves.

P reaches a cliff top, but nothing can be seen. He becomes a little uncertain, and decides to make a hasty retreat. He enters the cave, but cannot find his way back to the cabin. Panic begins to grip him. He shouts and begins to get hysterical. Suddenly the full beam of the main cabin arc lights hits him - he was only a few yards away.

No.2 gives him his last chance of handing over his secrets. As the duologue of pleading and threatening goes on like cat and mouse, P spies a good size rock near the cabin. He falls to his knees in mock despair, deftly picks up the rock and speedily sends it smashing through the main glass panel. He tries to follow it through, but a vicious No.2 beats him back. As one punch sends him sprawling almost under the cabin, his hand touches a smooth crack, ^{in the cave surface} His eyes register a sudden realization. The crack runs in an exact circle round the cabin. In a fit of loathing, he leaps up and through the shattered panel, and is soon grappling murderously with No.2. In overwhelming panic No.2 gives the final game away, by switching over to an emergency radio switch saying, 'Get us down, quickly'. From the exterior we can see the cabin lowering into the floor of the cave carrying the pair of fighters.

Soon P is dragged out of the cabin, swearing next time he takes a trip to eternity he will make sure it is not hell first.
