The sky looked like a pond at dawn when the first rays of light suffuse the surface with a glow that floats weightlessly there, soft and new, as if drifting somewhere between heaven and earth.

Except this wasn’t a pond at dawn—it was the horizon just after midnight, and the sun refused to set. It had dipped to its lowest point in the west and was still wholly visible, imbuing the wispy clouds with a peach-gold radiance. It
would hover like that, motionless, until 4 a.m. and then rouse itself once more as if from a little beauty sleep, and begin to rise again. The night would be no darker than right now.

Taking their cue from the odd, persistent light, people milled about, indulging in marzipan at the candy emporium, grabbing a cherry cordial after a late dinner or strolling along the Moika River savoring gelato while folks on jet skis churned past, carving up a sculptural wake.

Anything you could do during the day in June at the 60th parallel you could do at night, because night was in effect day. Something in the silvery spectral light made opening one more bottle of champagne absolutely critical. It would be nothing to dash to the corner bodega and grab just one more. And the cold case in the bodega did its part to maintain the illusion that it would never run out of champagne.

Might run out of milk. Might run out of orange juice. But not the bubbly, never the bubbly.

Given Saint Petersburg, given summer, it was impossible ever to run out of champagne—mathematically impossible, latitudinally impossible, fizzaliciously impossible.

The boundless light appealed to the child in me—and everybody else, I noticed, watching the jet skis skim past: the child who longs to stay awake forever. Blowing right through bedtime would be no problem now—and not just one bedtime, but many. Lots of bedtimes that just wouldn’t happen. During the white nights, Saint Petersburg encouraged a negligence that bordered on the irresponsible.
I had to keep checking my watch, because time appeared to stand still, as if holding its breath, while that drowsing sun ball lollygagged in the west, catching 40 winks. The actual day, those conventionally countable by-the-clock for-real daylight hours, looked the same as they did anywhere: 2 pm looked like 2 pm. Only the night was different.

The opera ended at 11 p.m., and after having sat in the Mariinsky Theatre’s dark magic for a production of Borodin’s “Prince Igor” I found it strange to walk out and see flaring at the horizon a sunset as brilliant as early evening. It was as if we’d all been given extra hours in our day, in our lives, as if the three-hour opera had been a freebie, a little something on the side that wouldn’t count against anything else, icing on the cake of yesterday. Maybe Daylight Savings Time had run amok—or there was a glitch in the way time zones got calculated. We didn’t just have one more hour but a boatload of hours, so many more hours.

And nothing would take them away.

This wasn’t going to be like that time the bank made an error in my favor and I saw the balance in my account late one evening when I was online, and thought, Whoah! but then the auditors went back in overnight to deduct that amount—and although I ended up having exactly the same balance as before the error, no more, no less, absolutely the correct amount down to the last penny, it seemed nonetheless far smaller than what I’d begun with, as if I’d lost something in the process. Lost happiness, not just money. Lost hope. Lost love.

Saint Petersburg didn’t do stuff like that. When Saint Petersburg gave something, it stayed given.

Saint Petersburg was straight up fire.
Moving with the opera crowd in evening attire, I traced my way back to the hotel, walking along the Moika River, which was more a canal than a river. An elegant granite embankment controlled the water’s course through the city, and the dense stone radiated back the stored heat of the day. Like a mirror, the river reflected subtle, muted colors in the clouds above it—robin’s egg blue, lavender, violet. A peculiar liquid light saturated the sky. No wonder so many operas got written here, I thought, watching the pageant of color wash by. Glinka, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Prokofiev, Shostakovich. I felt dazzled not only with my evening at the Mariinsky but also the city’s enchanting alchemy. It was as if the river and sky, in trying to change places with each other, had confused their identities in a crescendo of light.

A miniature fireworks display all at once seemed to ignite at my solar plexus. I had never written an opera before, but bathed in this odd effervescence I zinged with a brimming optimism about my prospects. Roman candles, trailing comets, chrysanthemum bursts and pagodas, crackles and tails. Nay—this was not brimming optimism.

This was megalomania.

It showered down on me the sparkling confidence to write an opera first thing in the morning. Someone on a jet ski performed a 360 degree McTwist on the glassy Moika River, as if etching the water with the machine, and I stared. *Why wait until morning?* Why not start right now? Folded in my pocket was the playbill from “Prince Igor.” I pulled it out, took a pencil from my jacket, and using the granite embankment as a desk began jotting down ideas for the libretto.
Saint Petersburg was like an endless prescription of Prednisone—for which you did not need a prescription. Shake the bottle. Hear the click of tablets? This was a magical pill bottle that would never run out. I felt like a figure in a fairy tale: beanstalk, beans, meds. Once, on Prednisone, I moved a tree. I dug it up. I wrapped the root ball. I grasped it by the trunk, and I lifted. This was my John Henry self. My Paul Bunyan self. And when the Prednisone ran out, that was it. I didn’t look at a tree again with the intent of lifting it, certainly not carrying it anywhere. I was a mere mortal once more.

Saint Petersburg was not reliant on anything so finite as pharmaceuticals, however. The place was Prednisone backed by nature, as dependable as summer’s tidal wave of light. Not even global warming could crater this. No human activity would ever alter the rotational tilt of the earth on its axis. No human interference could change the solstices, the equinoxes, the build up to summer’s long days. Saint Petersburg didn’t merely promise immortality—it guaranteed it.

Even the gardens seemed to have gotten the memo: their flowers would bloom forever. Blue hydrangeas luxuriated in a lengthy extended season, as did lilacs—wave after wave billowing endlessly forth. The little shrubs themselves seemed surprised at the abundance that poured out of them. The most negligible of spindly little unpromising branches pumped out a gorgeous explosion of petals. Walking Saint Petersburg’s streets was like touring a Russian fable devoted to high-spirited excess.

Neoclassical buildings of pastel stucco lined the Moika River—onetime palaces and mansions turned into hotels and apartment houses. These were the architectural wonders Catherine the Great had commissioned from Italian
masters like Rastrelli and Rinaldi and then bestowed upon her favorites as romantic baubles. These had been her gifts of love. I noted the absence of graffiti on the smooth stucco facades and reckoned that the never ending daylight this time of year probably cramped the style of anyone hoping under cover of darkness to spray a surreptitious tag or execute a blockbuster. Illicit public inscriptions weren’t possible here, no matter how tempting that blank canvas of pale stucco might be. When night never happened, nocturnal mischief didn’t either.

The Biblical quote came to me—“Men love the darkness, for their sins are evil,” John 3:19.

Those men would have to leave Saint Petersburg—travel to the southern hemisphere maybe—because there would be no darkness for them to love, no darkness at all right now. Their evil acts would have to bear the full-wattage scrutiny of high noon—with no prayer of hiding the evil, no prayer of disguising it or denying its existence. Using the granite embankment as a writing desk once more, I jotted these ideas on the “Prince Igor” playbill.

My libretto.

Oh, yeah.

It was taking shape. Something about obliterating evil, the triumph of goodness and whimsy. Something about abundance. Yada-yada intoxication. I felt expectant, like I was awaiting something grand, something on the verge of happening. People across the Moika from me came out of an oyster bar, a couple of them gripping uncorked champagne bottles. Jet skis had chopped up the river’s flow, and tour boats plowed on through.

Night.
That was what I expected. The night that was about to happen. Except it wasn’t. No constellations. No planets. No satellites placidly navigating a path among the stars. No beacons from the red-eye flight to Sochi as it gained altitude over the airport. No conventional night here until August. The sun that would rise over my intense opera-writing success still rode the horizon, circling there, and its rays warmed my back as I jotted these ideas. There was plenty of time, plenty of time to work through the plot details, the score, the chords and tonality—plenty of time to adjust the ratio of recitative passages to arias. I watched the water. I watched the light. I wrote.

When I’d gone to Peterhof on Tuesday it was early enough in the morning that the fountains had not yet begun. The gold statues stood in anticipation of the water that would spray down on them and fill the grand cascade. Discus throwers. Demeter. Artemis. Fleet of foot Hermes. Samson was tearing the lion’s jaw open. But without the glory of sparkling water to animate his feat, it somehow did not feel official quite yet, more like the dress rehearsal version, not the main event. Everything was frozen, immobilized in a kind of torpor.

Peterhof, literally “Peter’s yard”, was on the Gulf of Finland, 40 minutes from Saint Petersburg by hydrofoil, an hour away by car. It had been the summer palace of Peter the Great, and he had ordered the Samson fountain built to commemorate his defeat of Sweden, the lion being the national emblem of the Swedes.

Peterhof had seen a lot of Russian history. Consequential acts had centered on it. The coup that swept Catherine the Great to power began at Peterhof. A week after she seized the throne assassins took out the deposed tsar.
there—Peter III, Catherine’s husband. The place had earned every ounce of its gold.

From a rich unblinking stasis, before the water gushed forth, Peterhof seemed to hint that it was ready, willing and able to be consequential once more. Russia had seen a lot of history—and there was even more to come, lots more. History was a deal here. It was not merely a record of events or a factual timeline of dates and wars. History appeared to possess its own material properties and weight, a specific gravity chemists could measure molecularly, atomically, as if it were a physical substance. When filtered through Russia, history practically warranted a number on the Periodic Table of Elements. It was beyond uranium. Peterhof had seen this. Peterhof could testify. And it was ready for more. Bring it, Peterhof said.

On any given day, then, before the fountains jetted up for the first time, Peterhof had a moment. It seemed very admiring of its golden self, its youth, its Apollonian beauty. Free of the fizz and foam of distracting water, it could assert its unadorned worth. Depending upon how brilliantly the morning sun shone down on the golden muscles of these statues, these titans of mythology, an edge of haughtiness might creep into Peterhof’s self-admiration. Yes, diamond-shattered water drops were special. Yes, the bubbling, the splashing, yes. All the complex hydro-engineering, of course.

But a gold goddess was a gold goddess.

Gold did not compete with water, not here. In the midst of its paralytic splendor, Peterhof engaged in some trash talk. Do not put water in a head to head match against gold, it smugly warned the world, because water will lose every time.
I took my place with other visitors along the dramatic sea canal into which
the fountains would spill, and we looked at the quiet scene. It was as if we were
part of a vigil that had played out over eons, a religious observance of Old
Believers, everyone waiting for the water.

People had their cellphones out, sometimes toggling between the camera
on the phone and also the clock, getting ready. But for the most part we waited
breathlessly by, in a lull, as unmoving as the statues. I could feel a desire in all of
us to be one of them, to stand stock-still in gleaming glory, to gaze upon the
same tableau eternally, to simplify things for ourselves, life was so hard, even if it
meant being a witness to history, should history place Peterhof once more at its
epicenter. And if history didn’t—well, what of it? Gold was still gold, wet or
dry.

That was Peterhof.

That was Tuesday.

On the hydrofoil ride back across the Gulf of Finland to Saint Petersburg,
I fell asleep. It was a thick, afternoon-type sleep, as if I were distilling my dreams
in heavy syrup, preserving them as we preserve strawberries and peaches in
sugar, dreams for later. My head kept nodding forward, and I kept jolting it
back upright but without ever really waking. If the hydrofoil had been sinking I
could not have awakened. I was already drowning in sleep. How much worse
could the sea be? A small bar stood at the front of the main cabin just behind the
engines, and in the midst of my lassitude I heard the bartender pop the cork on a
champagne bottle. The whole trip back to Saint Petersburg was a blur.

Yeah. Tuesday.
Standing here at the embankment, jotting notes for my libretto, I realized I had not slept since then. I glanced at my watch. It was 1 a.m. Friday morning, and I had not slept since Tuesday on the hydrofoil. I had returned to my hotel room, of course, had showered, cleaned up, and then lounged on the bed eating caviar and crackers while trying to decipher the news of the day on Russian TV. But I had not lain down in that bed, had not so much as even pulled the coverlet back. Ditto for Wednesday. Ditto for Thursday.

Sleep no longer seemed part of my repertoire.

The maid cleaned my room each of those days and refreshed things. New soap and shampoo appeared on the little frosted amenity tray in the bathroom. They helped me mark time. The maid’s bed-making consisted of smoothing the wrinkles on the coverlet, and nothing seemed strange in this very minimal engagement of her services. It was as if she had seen this a lot, the hotel patrons who used their beds for a variety of activities but who no longer lay down and slept in them, because they no longer slept.

It was as if I were becoming something else, still identifiably human but transcending this aspect of humanness. I had stepped across some kind of line. Sleep, which consumed 33% of anyone’s time here on earth, was something from which I’d now been exempted. Even tomatoes slept, for Pete’s sake. Botanists had studied this. Living things, I reasoned. All living things slept. Tomatoes, people. And I no longer did.

If I no longer had to sleep, it could mean just one thing. Immortality was coming on me. Sleep would be the first ballast tossed overboard on the voyage to immortality. It all made sense. Sleep was a kind of death, after all, let’s not forget, a death to the day, a ritualized way to finish it off—brushing the teeth,
saying bedtime prayers, head on the pillow. Sleep, which so resembled death that we used it as a way to describe someone peacefully passing away—sleep had become optional for me. Saint Petersburg had done this. Saint Petersburg was making me golden.

A little spark lit up within me—like the final shooting trail of that last whistling rocket once the fireworks finale subsides and the smoke begins to drift away. Before I could orbit on this sensation, however, I crashed back down to earth. Even if I were immortal, I could not overstay my Russian visa. I might live forever, but the Russian consulate still held sway. And no one would want to spend eternity like that—locked away.

Depressing.

A reminder that there’s always something, no matter how long the days, how lustrous the light. A ripple of rosy color shivered along the surface of the Moika. My time here had to end. The champagne would not run out, but I would. A date stamped into my passport made obvious that I’d have to leave all this endlness. I’d have to return to night. I was nothing more than a pretender to immortality, even in the heart of Saint Petersburg, just like everybody else around me—the guy on the jet ski, the woman with the marzipan candy, the opera crowd who had the “Prince Igor” cadenzas playing again and again in their heads.

When I returned to my mortality in the U.S. Midwest, the sun would set each evening and the dark night would descend all around, surrounding me with glittering celestial bodies—so many stars for hours on end, like the scattered water drops of a spurting fountain. The U.S. Midwest had the occasional fountain—sometimes in front of a bank building, sometimes in front of a
courthouse, sometimes as part of the cooling system for the big sprawling
corporate headquarters of a seed corn company. Fountain-wise, what the U.S.
Midwest lacked on its street corners and in its parks it made up for in the black
lucid firmament arching above it.

    We had gods and goddesses, too.

    No, they were not gold—but fashioned from the clear, clean light of stars.
They didn’t frolic in a diamond spray of splashing water so much as they sailed
across the dome of heaven. Orion. Cassiopeia the Queen. Hercules. Cold white
wonder filling the darkness each night. Other mythological companions
completed the view: Jupiter, Saturn, the red smudge of Mars barely visible in the
east.

    Of course, those things orbited Saint Petersburg, too, but all the summer
light eclipsed them. They were up there, however. It took effort to remember
that—so much easier to forget about planets and stars because the glossy
burning sky obliterated them. A romantic soul among us might stand in an
everlasting summer like this and long for the stars, pine for those planets, maybe
even compose a nostalgic couple of lines of poetry on the back of a cocktail
napkin—but still never choose night.

    Night was when the buzz wore off—no matter how much champagne
you’d drunk.

    Night was when you sobered up.

    It was leveling. The darkness nailed you. There might be a headache
then. Perhaps the dry mouth of dehydration. Embarrassment over that
unbridled remark: did I really say that? Of course, night had its place. It served a
purpose. Your sins might not be so numerous, and probably none of them were
evil at all—but the darkness was there and the darkness was where you could reckon with them or close your eyes to them with neither guilt nor care.

The “Prince Igor” playbill lay on the granite embankment before me, and I had been staring fixedly at it for several minutes, my pencil paused in mid-jot. The last word I’d written was “wow.” Its cursive ‘w’s swam before my eyes, and all at once I felt a strange sensation like I wanted to yawn. Sometimes people yawned when they were experiencing hypothermia. Was this hypothermia?

From across the Moika, a woman’s melodic laughter tumbled into the moment, and I lifted my gaze. Magenta cloud-streaks fired themselves energetically across the sky only to fade in seconds, ribbon by ribbon. Something like hammered gold peeked out from an otherwise pearly little nimbus and shot a bright dart into my optic nerve.

No, this was not hypothermia.

My body was tired.

Regardless of what the sky showed me, regardless of what the sky told me, regardless of an oh-so-obvious immortality, it was bedtime.