

Praise for *Stray Dog Winter*

'Elegantly written and grippingly suspenseful, David Francis's *Stray Dog Winter* takes readers right into the heart of Graham Green country.'
– JANET FITCH, author of *White Oleander* and *Paint it Black*

'David Francis has a surgeon's cold eye and a poet's heart; his prose is powerful, masterful.' – SAMANTHA DUNN, author of *Failing Paris* and *Faith in Carlos Gomez*

'This is a wonderful book, the work of a full-fledged talent who deserves to be read widely and well.' – DARIN STRAUSS, author of *More Than it Hurts You* and *Chang and Eng*

'Moscow, with its icy splendour and bald brutality, is seductively evoked in the pages of *Stray Dog Winter*. David Francis has created a credible, parallel universe in which nobody, particularly those with whom his protagonist is the most intimate, is what he or she seems. His hero, Darcy, is vulnerable and unfailingly sympathetic; a gay, antipodean answer to Arkady Renko.'
– GABY NAHER, author of *The Truth About My Fathers*

'Permeated with a brooding unease, powerfully matched by the palpable cold of winter in Moscow . . . sinister, suspenseful and beautifully written.'
– DEBORAH ADELAIDE, author of *The Household Guide to Dying*

'Francis' gorgeous prose is passionate and pressure filled. His masterful writing delivers a rare kind of delicious suspense, the kind that's only found in the most riveting of novels.' – Yannick Murphy, author of *Sea of Trees* and *Matahari*

'If Alan Furst and Edmund White were ever to collaborate, the result would be something like *Stray Dog Winter*. Written with style and intrigue, David Francis's new novel is a genuine Cold War thriller, and a work of art.' – David Ebershoff, author *The 19th Wife* and *The Danish Girl*

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FRANCIS

Stray Dog Winter


ALLEN & UNWIN

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He arrived in winter on a sleeper from Prague and the sound of the train went *boogedy boogedy*—*what do you want, Darcy Bright? Darcy Bright, what do you want?* He pressed his open hand against the shivering window and the edges of the sky seemed unnaturally close. A figure trudging alone in a snow-beaded field with a scythe. A scarved woman behind a wooden fence shaded her face as if there was sunlight. A row of sheets hung flat behind her, mute as teeth, and a pair of what looked like silver foxes capered in the snow. Darcy pulled up his Pentax and snapped a quick shot, feeling foreign, unaccountable. I could paint that, he thought, then he noticed the food-seller watching from the dark and noisy space between compartments. Darcy lowered the camera, smiled. *The meaningless incidents present the most danger*, that's what Dostoyevsky said. Fodor's *Moscow & Leningrad* just said *don't take photos of anything strategic*.

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He pulled his faux-fur Kenzo coat about himself and leaned back against the cold metal railing, trying to appear unconcerned. He was accustomed to being noticed, his skin paper-thin, his sculpted lips. He was too pretty for this train. Men often wondered, at first glance, if he were a man, while others knew intuitively and still they stared. But men here stared for different reasons; afraid of themselves, suspicious of everyone. The weight of it sat in their faces.

It was morning and Darcy was somewhere outside Kiev, wondering at being in an alien place so quickly, three weeks since the crackle of Fin's first telephone call. Amid the echoes she'd told him how Moscow felt weird and great, but she was lonely. He'd thought of her as many things but never that, not lonely.

The train shunted through a town. Prefab tenements shaped like horseshoes, smoke gushing up from a towering Ukrainian chimney merged with a tattletale sky. Darcy took a pull from his Polish cigarette and felt the warm smoke curl inside him, imagined his throat staining dark. He slid the icy window down and flicked his half-done *Popularne* onto the tracks. One cigarette and a hot nudge of wind could burn a million acres where he came from, but the ground was frozen here.

Fin had left Melbourne unexpectedly in late September, just over four months earlier. A commission to paint the industrial landscapes of Moscow, announced as though people often did that. But Darcy was the one with the painterly hand; she'd only done abstracts and that political installation she'd called *The Burning of the Witch-Hunt Manuals*. Books in an incinerator. Some at the opening seemed incensed, but she'd tried to convince them it was just about *The Malleus Maleficarum*. It was a book, she said, but Darcy'd never heard of it.

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The corridor rattled around him. A horse-drawn hay cart waited at a muddy level crossing, the horse unfazed, its nose just metres from the train. Darcy opened the window a slit for relief from the smell of onions and the breath of an Albanian who boarded in Warsaw in the middle of the night and kept putting on more socks beneath his sandals then guarding his bag on the seat. He'd shown Darcy where he'd travelled from, rimy fingers on a tiny scrunched-up map. A country south of Yugoslavia.

From the corridor, Darcy now snapped a picture through the bobbing doorway, the Albanian from his knees down, the wrinkled bottoms of his pants. Darcy imagined a photo essay—'Cold War Feet'—then felt a chill and cinched his coat, aware of the leather money belt girthed against his groin: a calfskin cover with a pocket for passport and cash. It had arrived at his flat in St Kilda, delivered with the tickets inside: Qantas to London, Lufthansa from Heathrow to Prague. Fin had kept phoning him, asked if he'd received his birthday present, but she knew he wasn't born in December. There was no card.

Why the money belt? he'd asked.

Just bring it with you, she'd told him through the echo, an insistence in her voice.

Don't have me packing treats, he'd said. It was their nickname for hallucinogens. But there was no special sleeve in it, no space for anything secret.

Trust me, she'd told him. He'd always been leery of those two words, but if he didn't trust her he didn't trust anyone. He explained how he'd just been accepted for the fine arts course at Sydney Uni, the graduate program beginning in March, but she'd persuaded him to defer, seduced him as usual. Come paint here, she'd said, I need you . . . we'll have fun. Then she'd hung up. And Darcy knew he would go as much as he knew he shouldn't;

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he'd been plotting his escape since he was nine and there in his hands was a free ticket out, to a place without the new gay cancer, with barely a capitalist, barely an Australian. A place you weren't supposed to go, where there would be unfamiliar vistas to paint; *tramontane*, was that the word? And anyway, for Fin he would have gone anywhere.

The train slipped into a tunnel and Darcy glimpsed himself in the window, his epicene features chequered by the blur of stones that passed in the dark. Don't be paranoid or even inconspicuous, she'd said. It only works against you. Spike your hair and be yourself.

His hair had grown in fair already, no dark streaks from where she'd dyed it; his pierced nostril healed over since she'd been gone. She'd taken him to Brunswick Street to have his nose pierced while they were still at Monash Uni, the day she announced she'd changed her name to Dobrolyubova, by statutory declaration, so their names were suddenly different. The surname of some dead Russian intellectual she'd told him, while Darcy was who he'd always been. But now, on this train panting north through the white-flurried snow, he couldn't wait to be back in her orbit; that sense of entitlement that came with their parallel youth and allure, how they looked oddly alike, and how, together, they moved through the world with a false imperviousness, gliding on tracks of their own.

She'd advised him to carry something obvious for the guards to confiscate. It's good to be naïve, she'd said. At the Soviet border an inspector tore up Darcy's *Newsweek* with Reagan on the cover, but they also took his Turgenev, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*. It had made him more nervous than he'd imagined. He thought they'd be pleased he was reading a Russian, but English was as foreign to that inspector as the Cyrillic signs thrumming by on

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the railway platforms were to Darcy. Small stone houses, side by side. It could have been a hundred years earlier. Darcy didn't need Turgenev—he was seeing it live.

The food-seller in his pinstriped waistcoat wedged the trolley against a door. On his cart stood Polish vodka, chunks of cheese and crackers in plastic, something like Saltines. A shot of vodka held a certain promise, but he'd given up drinking after Fin had left. It had been easier than expected. It was encounters with strangers that rattled him still, compelled him. In Prague men mostly watched the ground, living behind their eyes, but as he'd waited alone on a bench in the railway station, a strong-jawed Slavic boy in uniform caught his eye square on, so knowingly, and Darcy found himself following. Darcy who'd promised Fin he'd abstain, who'd promised himself, but the uniform had triggered him somehow, its crispness, and all he could manage was to keep the money belt hidden as the young man rested his military cap on the cistern and kneeled. Darcy pressed his fingers into the thick wheaten hair, abandoned himself to the crud-covered ceiling, imagined it as a porcelain sky.

The sound of a siren at a crossing. The Albanian buying soup from the food-seller's cart and, unhurried, sipping it direct from the bowl, his face ruttled as a quarry. But for his fez, it could have been the face of an Australian farmer. A silver ring embedded on his swollen wedding finger. Darcy pictured a stark Albanian life, eking out an existence there, problems that seemed an epoch from his own.

The vendor pushed the trolley past with an expression that bore the blankness of obedience. Darcy's underarms ached in the cold, his nerve endings raw. And this was supposed to be one of the mildest Soviet winters on record.

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Fin had advised him to get out of Melbourne quietly and he'd left without telling a soul, not even his mother. That part was easy—he rarely told anyone much—but now the train guard, not the food-seller, observed him from between compartments, balancing where the carriages shifted on their couplings; the guard who still held Darcy's passport because there'd been no transit stamp for Poland. Who knew Poland would appear in the night between Prague and Moscow? Fin had never mentioned this. It made him wonder if she knew what she was doing. Tell them you're staying with me, she'd said, let them think I'm your girlfriend. They'd always been lovers of a kind, their spirit collusive, incestuous. The way she'd cleaved their family apart had somehow sewn the two of them inexorably closer. And still the train guard, unkempt and woolly in the fashion of Trotsky, stared.

Darcy breathed out a misty flute of air and stepped back inside the compartment. He prayed for Fin's bright face at the station, enveloped in fur, her red karakul coat a flame in the crowd.

Mount Eliza

Autumn 1972

Darcy heard tyres on the gravel the afternoon Fin first arrived in Mount Eliza; a taxi edging up the drive. He watched through the sitting-room window, from between the high-backed chairs, as a girl emerged in an African print dress. Darcy recognised the woman she was with from photos—Aunt Merran, his mother’s younger sister, the one who’d gone back to live on the orange grove near Montecito, somewhere in California, where Darcy’s mother grew up.

Out on the drive, where the gumnuts fell on the gravel and you could smell the eucalyptus, Aunt Merran gave Darcy’s father a quick peck on the cheek, but his father didn’t move his face towards it. The girl observed Darcy in the window, a frozen moment, his feet stuck to the carpet. She looked like him, but her ears were pierced with glinting silver studs—like a gypsy, his mother would have said, but luckily she wasn’t home, just the girl presenting his father with a small wooden carving from the pocket

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of her dress. A gift received awkwardly, his father glancing back at the window, his free hand around the back of his neck as he saw Darcy watching, squinting through the glare.

Aunt Merran kissed the girl's hair and jumped back in the taxi before his father could stop her. She waved through the back window as the girl stood stunned and then came to life, chasing the car to the gate. Darcy's handsome flummoxed father hurried behind her as the taxi turned onto Baden Powell Drive. His father's arm about the girl and then he was kneeling, consoling her, his big hands on her small shoulders like calipers, holding her there.

Aunt Merran's taxi was gone, back to Humphries Road, towards Frankston and the suburbs, a knapsack left in the gravel like a small dead animal. While his father comforted the girl near the gate, Darcy crept out and collected it. The smell was stale and sweet. A pair of sandals, washed so the dust had yellowed them, a sweatshirt that had *Banana Slugs* written across it in yellow and a T-shirt that said *Big Sur*. In the front pocket was a blue American passport with an eagle in the coat of arms. Los Angeles Passport Agency and a photo of the girl with her hair loose. Finola Bright, the same last name as Darcy's. Born 13 June 1960. A year before him. She was eleven and he was ten. He blinked to himself as the fact of it crystallised in him. Their mothers were sisters. Their father was the same.

As Darcy looked up, he saw the girl's narrow shape at the end of the drive beside his crouching father. The sun was getting red as it lowered in the gum trees behind them. A secret had been delivered.