



*Fictions*

# **Table for Two**

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**A Gentleman in Moscow**

ALSO BY AMOR TOWLES

*The Lincoln Highway*

*A Gentleman in Moscow*

*Rules of Civility*

**TABLE**

*for*

**TWO**



FICTIONS

*Amor Towles*

VIKING

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The following two stories previously published in slightly different form: “The Line” in *Granta* (2019) and “The Didomenico Fragment” as an Audible Original (2021). The novella “Eve in Hollywood” first published in significantly different form as an ebook original by Penguin Books (2013) and as a print edition by the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Towles, Amor, author.

Title: Table for two : fictions / Amor Towles.

Description: [New York] : Viking, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023049039 (print) | LCCN 2023049040 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593296370 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593296387 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593831236 (international edition)

Subjects: LCGFT: Short stories. | Novellas.

Classification: LCC PS3620.O945 T33 2024 (print) | LCC PS3620.O945 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231023

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023049039>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023049040>

Cover design: Nayon Cho

Cover photograph: TopFoto

*Designed by Amanda Dewey, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen*

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pid\_prh\_6.3\_146653741\_c0\_r0

*In Memory of My Father*  
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**NEW YORK**



## *The Line*

1.

During the last days of the last Tsar, there lived a peasant named Pushkin in a small village one hundred miles from Moscow. Though Pushkin and his wife, Irina, had not been blessed with children, they had been blessed with a cozy two-room cottage and a few square acres that they farmed with the patience and persistence appropriate to their lot. Row by row they would till their soil, sow their seeds, and harvest their crops—moving back and forth across the land like a shuttle through a loom. And when their workday was done, they would journey home to dine on cabbage soup at their little wooden table, then succumb to the holy sleep of the countryside.

Though the peasant Pushkin did not share his namesake's facility with words, he was something of a poet in his soul—and when he witnessed the leaves sprouting on the birch trees, or the thunderstorms of summer, or the golden hues of autumn, he would feel in his heart that theirs was a satisfactory life. In fact, so satisfactory was their life, had Pushkin uncovered an old bronze lantern while tilling the fields and unleashed from it an ancient genie with three wishes to grant, Pushkin wouldn't have known what to wish for.

And we all know exactly where that sort of happiness leads.

2.



Like many of Russia's peasants, Pushkin and his wife belonged to a *mir*—a cooperative that leased the land, allocated the acres, and shared expenses at the mill. On occasion, the members of the *mir* would gather to discuss some matter of mutual concern. At one such meeting in the spring of 1916, a young man who had traveled all the way from Moscow took to the podium in order to explain the injustice of a country in which 10 percent of the people owned 90 percent of the land. In some detail, he described the means by which Capital had sweetened its own tea and feathered its own nest. In conclusion, he encouraged all assembled to wake from their slumbers and join him in the march toward the inevitable victory of the international proletariat over the forces of repression.

Pushkin was not a political man, or even a particularly educated man. So, he did not grasp the significance of everything this Muscovite had to say. But the visitor spoke with such enthusiasm and made use of so many colorful expressions that Pushkin took pleasure in watching the young man's words float past as one would the banners of an Easter Day procession.

That night, as Pushkin and his wife walked home, they were both quiet. This struck Pushkin as perfectly appropriate given the hour and the delicate breeze and the chorus of crickets singing in the grass. But if Irina was quiet, she was quiet the way a heated skillet is quiet—in the moments before you drop in the fat. For while Pushkin had enjoyed watching the young man's words float past, Irina's consciousness had closed upon them like the jaws of a trap. With an audible snap, she had taken hold and had no intention of letting go. In fact, so tight was her grip on the young man's arguments, should he ever want them back, he would have to gnaw through his own phrases the way a wolf in a trap gnaws through its ankle.

3.

The wisdom of the peasant is founded on one essential axiom: While wars may come and go, statesmen rise and fall, and popular attitudes wax and wane, when all is said and done a furrow remains a furrow. Thus, Pushkin witnessed the war years, the collapse of the monarchy, and the rise of

Bolshevism with the judicious perspective of Methuselah. And once the hammer and sickle were flapping over Mother Russia, he was ready to pick up his plow and resume the work of life. So, he was utterly unprepared for the news his wife delivered in May 1918—that they were moving to Moscow.

“Moving to Moscow,” said Pushkin. “But why on earth would we be moving to Moscow?”

“Why?” demanded Irina with a stamp of the foot. “Why? Because the time has come!”

In the pages of nineteenth-century novels, it was not uncommon for the lovely young ladies raised in the countryside to long for a life in the capital. After all, that is where the latest fashions could be seen, the latest dance steps learned, and the latest romantic intrigues discussed *sotto voce*. In a similar manner, Irina longed to live in Moscow because that’s where the factory workers swung their hammers in unison and the songs of the proletariat could be heard from every kitchen door.

“No one pushes a monarch over a cliff to celebrate the way things were,” proclaimed Irina. “Once and for all, the time has come for Russians to lay the foundations of the future—shoulder to shoulder and stone by stone!”

When Irina articulated her position to her husband, using all these words and many more, did Pushkin argue? Did he give voice to the first thoughts of hesitation that leapt into his head? He did not. Instead, he began carefully, thoughtfully formulating a rebuttal.

Interestingly, as Pushkin’s position began to take shape, it drew upon the very same words that Irina had used: *The time has come*. For he was no stranger to this phrase. In fact, he was practically its closest relative. Since Pushkin was a boy, the phrase had roused him in the morning and tucked him in at night. “The time has come to sow,” it would say in spring, as it raised the blinds to let in the light. “The time has come to reap,” it would say in fall, as it lit the fire in the stove. The time has come to milk the cows, or bale the hay, or snuff the candles. That is, the time has come—not once and for all, but once again—to do that which one has always done in the manner of the sun, the moon, and the stars.

This was the rebuttal that Pushkin began formulating that first night when he climbed into bed. He continued formulating it the next morning when he walked with his wife through the dewy grass on their way to the fields. And he was formulating it still in the fall of that year when they loaded their wagon with all their possessions and set out for Moscow.

4.

On the eighth of October, the couple arrived in the capital after five days on the road. As they rattled their way along the thoroughfares, we need not belabor their every impression: their first sight of a streetcar, of streetlamps, of a six-story building; of bustling crowds and expansive shops; of fabled landmarks like the Bolshoi and the Kremlin. We needn't belabor any of that. It is enough to state that their impressions of these sights were diametrically opposed. For while in Irina they stirred a sense of purpose, urgency, and excitement, in Pushkin they only stirred dismay.

Having reached the city center, Irina didn't waste a minute to recover from their journey. Telling Pushkin to stay where he was, she quickly got her bearings and disappeared into the crowd. By the end of the first day, she had secured them a one-room apartment in the Arbat, where, in place of a portrait of the Tsar, she hung a photograph of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in a brand-new frame. By the end of the second day, she had unpacked their belongings and sold their horse and wagon. And by the end of the third, she had secured them both a job at the Red Star Biscuit Collective.

Formerly owned by Crawford's & Co. of Edinburgh (bakers to the Queen since 1813), the Red Star Biscuit Collective was housed in a fifty-thousand-square-foot facility with five hundred employees. Behind its gates it boasted two silos of grain and its own flour mill. It had mixing rooms with giant mixers, baking rooms with giant ovens, and packing rooms with conveyor belts that carried the boxes of biscuits right into the backs of the idling trucks.

Irina was initially assigned as an assistant to one of the bakers. But when an oven door came loose, Irina proved herself so adept with a monkey wrench that she was immediately transferred to the in-house engineers.

Within a matter of days, it was commonly said that Irina could tighten the bolts of the conveyors as they rolled along without interruption.

Meanwhile, Pushkin was assigned to the mixing room, where the biscuit batter was blended by paddles that clanged against the sides of large metal bowls. Pushkin's job was to add the vanilla to each batch of biscuits whenever a green light flashed. But having carefully dispensed the vanilla into the appropriate measuring cup, the noise of the machinery was so deafening and the motion of the paddles so hypnotic, Pushkin simply forgot to pour the flavoring in.

At four o'clock, when the official taster came to taste, he didn't even need to take a bite to know that something was amiss. He could tell from the aroma. "What good is a vanilla biscuit that has no taste of vanilla?" he inquired of Pushkin rhetorically, before sending an entire day's output to the dogs. And as for Pushkin, he was reassigned to the sweeping crew.

On his first day with the sweepers, Pushkin was sent with his broom to the cavernous warehouse where the sacks of flour were stacked in towering rows. In all his life, Pushkin had never *seen* so much flour. Of course, a peasant prays for an ample harvest with enough grain to last the winter, and maybe a bit left over to protect against a drought. But the sacks of flour in the warehouse were so large and piled so high, Pushkin felt like a character in a folktale who finds himself in the kitchen of a giant, where mortal men are dropped into the pie.

However daunting the environment, Pushkin's job was simple enough. He was to sweep up any flour that had spilled on the floor when the dollies were whisked to the mixing room.

Perhaps it was the general sense of agitation that Pushkin had been feeling since his arrival in the city; perhaps it was the memory of swinging a scythe, a motion that Pushkin had happily performed since his youth; or perhaps it was a congenital muscular disorder that had yet to be diagnosed. Who can say? But whenever Pushkin attempted to sweep the flour that had fallen to the floor, rather than push it into the pan, his motion would kick it into the air. Up it would go in a large white billow settling like a dusting of snow on his shoulders and hair.

“No, no!” his foreman would insist, as he grabbed the broom from Pushkin’s hands. “Like this!” And in a few quick strokes the foreman would clear four square feet of flooring without setting a single mote of flour into flight.

A man who was eager to please, Pushkin watched his foreman’s technique with the attention of a surgical apprentice. But as soon as the foreman had turned his back and Pushkin had set his broom in motion, up into the air the flour went. Such that after three days on sweeping detail, Pushkin was dismissed from the Red Star Biscuit Collective altogether.

“Dismissed!” shouted Irina that night in their little apartment. “How does one get fired from Communism!”

In the days that followed, Irina might have tried to answer this question, but there were gears to be adjusted and screws to be tightened. What’s more, she had already been elected to the workers’ committee at the factory—where she was known to boost the morale of her comrades by quoting from *The Communist Manifesto* at the drop of a hat. In other words, she was a Bolshevik through and through.

And Pushkin? He rolled about the city like a marble on a chessboard.

5.

With the ratification of the new Constitution in 1918, it was the dawn of the Proletarian Age. It was also a period of the rounding up of enemies, the forced procurement of agricultural output, the prohibition of private trade, and the rationing of essentials. Well, what did you expect? A frosted cake and your pillows fluffed by a housemaid?

Between her twelve-hour shift at the plant and her duties on the workers’ committee, Irina hadn’t a minute to spare. So, as she headed off one morning, she thrust the ration cards for bread, milk, and sugar into her idle husband’s hands and told him, in no uncertain terms, to replenish the cupboards before she returned at ten o’clock that night. Then she pulled the door shut with such force that Vladimir Ilyich swung on his hook.

As Irina's shoes sounded down the stairs, our hero stood where she had left him, staring wide-eyed at the door. Without moving, he listened to her exit the building and walk to the trolley. He listened to the trolley clatter through the city and the sound of the whistle as Irina marched through the gates of the collective. Only when he heard the conveyor belts beginning to roll did it occur to Pushkin to utter the phrase "Yes, dear." Then, with the ration cards firmly in hand, he donned his cap and ventured out into the streets.

As he walked along, Pushkin anticipated his task with a certain amount of dread. In his mind's eye, he could see a crowded shop where Muscovites pointed, shouted, and shoved. He could see a wall of shelves lined with brightly colored boxes and a counterman who asked what you wanted, told you to be quick about it, then set the wrong thing down on the counter with a definitive thump before shouting: *Next!*

Imagine Pushkin's surprise when he arrived at the bakery on Battleship Potemkin Street—his first scheduled stop—and found the setting as quiet as a crèche. In place of the pointing, shouting, and shoving there was a line, an orderly line. Composed mostly of women between the ages of thirty and eighty, it stretched gracefully from the doorway and made its way politely around the bend.

"Is this the line for the bakery?" he asked an older woman.

Before she could answer, another standing nearby gestured forcibly with her thumb. "The end of the line is at the end of the line, comrade. In the back of the back."

Offering his thanks, Pushkin turned the corner and followed the line three whole blocks to the back of the back. Having dutifully taken his place, Pushkin learned from the two women in front of him that the bakery offered each customer only one product: a loaf of black bread. While the women reported this bit of news in annoyance, Pushkin was heartened by it. If there was only one loaf of black bread per customer, there wouldn't have to be any squinting or selecting or thumping down of items. Pushkin would wait in line, receive his loaf, and bring it home, just like he'd been instructed.

As Pushkin was having this thought, a young woman appeared at his side.

“Is this the end of the line?” she asked.

“It is!” exclaimed Pushkin with a smile, glad to have the chance to be of service.



In the next two hours, Pushkin advanced as many blocks.

For some of us, maybe most of us, the ticking of these minutes would have sounded like the drip from a faucet in the middle of the night. But not for Pushkin. His time in the line made him no more anxious than would the wait for a seedling to sprout or the hay to change hue. Besides, while he waited he could engage the women around him in one of his favorite conversations.

“Isn’t it a beautiful day?” he said to the four of them. “The sun could not be shining more brightly, nor the sky a bluer shade of blue. Although, in the afternoon, I suspect we may be in for a bit of rain. . . .”

*The weather!* I hear you exclaim with a roll of the eyes. *This is one of his favorite conversations!?*

Yes, yes, I know. When God the Father is smiling on a nation, when average incomes are on the rise, food is plentiful, and soldiers are biding their time with card games in their barracks, nothing seems worthier of condescension than a discussion of the weather. At dinner parties and afternoon teas, those who routinely turn to the topic are deemed boring, even insufferable. The possibility of precipitation seems worthy as a topic only to those without the imagination or intelligence to speak of the latest literature, the cinema, and the international situation—or, in short, the times. But when a society is in turmoil, a discussion of the weather doesn’t seem quite so unwelcome. . . .

“Why, yes,” agreed one of the women with a smile. “It is a beautiful day.”

“Though,” observed another, “it does seem from the clouds behind the cathedral that you might be right about the rain.”

And just like that, the time seemed to pass a little more quickly.



At 1:00 that afternoon (with his loaf of bread tucked under his coat), Pushkin made his way to Maxim Gorky Street, where he had been instructed to obtain the sugar. Once again, he felt a flash of anxiety as he neared the shop, though this time the anxiety was countered by the slightest hint of hope. And what did he find when he arrived at his destination? By the grace of God, another line!

Naturally, as it was later in the day, the line at the grocer was longer than the one at the bakery had been. But the brief rain, which, in fact, had fallen on Moscow from 12:15 to 12:45, had cooled the streets and freshened the air. And as Pushkin approached, two women he had met in the bread line gave him a friendly wave. So, he took his place with a general sense of well-being.

Across the street from where Pushkin was standing happened to be the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, as fine an example of neoclassical architecture as existed in all of Russia.

“Isn’t that building delightful,” Pushkin said to an old woman who had joined him at the end of the line. “Just look at those scrolly things at the top of the columns, and the little statues tucked beneath the eaves.” And she, who had lived in the neighborhood for over forty years and who had passed the building a thousand times without giving it a second thought, had to admit, upon closer consideration, that it was, indeed, nothing short of delightful.

Thus, time in the grocery line also began to pass a little more quickly. In fact, it passed so quickly that Pushkin hardly noticed the afternoon slipping away. . . .



That night when Irina returned home, Pushkin was standing by the door in such a state of trepidation that the second she saw him she let out an anticipatory sigh.

“What has happened now?” she demanded.

Having the good sense not to mention the fine weather, or the architecture of the conservatory, or the friendly women whom he’d met, Pushkin explained to his wife that the lines for bread and sugar had been so long there hadn’t been time to wait in the line for milk.



When Pushkin held out the bread and sugar as evidence of his best intentions, he could see his wife clench her jaw, lower her eyebrows, and close her fists. But even as Pushkin prepared for the worst, he saw his wife's eyeballs begin to shift. Suddenly, she found herself wrestling with her husband's failure to complete three simple tasks on the one hand, and the implied shortcomings of Communism on the other. Were she to express her anger at Pushkin, wouldn't that in some way suggest her acknowledgment of the unacceptability of having to wait in line for one's bread and sugar and milk? Were she to cuff him on the head, wouldn't she to some degree be cuffing the Revolution? Sometimes, one plus one does not so easily sum to two.

"Very good, husband," she said at last. "You can get the milk tomorrow."

And in that moment, Pushkin felt a great sense of joy. For to serve the ones we love and receive their approval in return, need life be any more complicated than that?

6.

It didn't take long for the citizens of Moscow to realize that if you had no choice but to stand in line, then Pushkin was the man to stand next to. Graced with a gentle disposition, he was never boorish or condescending, neither full of opinions nor full of himself. Once he had commented on the fineness of the weather or the beauty of a building, he was most likely to ask about your children. And so sincere was his interest that his eyes would brighten with satisfaction at the first suggestion of a success, and cloud with tears at any hint of a setback.

While for his part, Pushkin had settled into city life with a growing sense of contentment. Waking in the mornings, he would take a glance at the calendar and think, *Ah, it is Tuesday. The time has come to wait in line for bread. Or Is it already the twenty-eighth? Once again, the time has come to go to Yakusky Street to wait in line for tea.* And thus, the months would have run into years and the years into decades without cause for remark, but for an unanticipated occurrence in the winter of 1921.

On the afternoon in question, after waiting three hours for a head of cabbage, Pushkin was about to proceed to a small department store on Tverskaya Street to wait for two spools of thread, when an acquaintance hailed him from the back of the cabbage line. A thirty-year-old mother of four, she was clearly in a state of distress.

“Nadezhda!” our hero proclaimed. “What is it?”

“It is my youngest,” she replied. “He has a fever of one hundred and two. And while I need to pick up a head of cabbage for my family’s soup, I fear that where I should be standing is in the line at the pharmacy.” Pushkin’s expression reflected all the anxiety in this poor woman’s heart. He looked to the sky and noted from the position of the sun—which was dipping behind the rooftops—that while Nadezhda would have time for one line or the other, she would never have time for both. Without a second thought, Pushkin looked to the eight women behind Nadezhda (who had all been leaning forward to hear the exchange).

“Perhaps these fine ladies wouldn’t mind if I were to hold your place while you visited the pharmacy. As it is Tuesday, the line there shouldn’t be too long. And once you’ve obtained Sasha’s medicine, you could hurry back and resume your spot.”

Now, were you or I to have had made this simple suggestion, it would almost certainly have been met with looks of disdain and a reminder that a line is a line, not a carousel that you can hop on and off to your heart’s content! But at one time or another, all these women had waited with Pushkin and experienced his gentleness of spirit. So, without objection, they made room for him as the young mother hurried away.

Just as Pushkin had anticipated, the line at the pharmacy was only thirty people long. So, when Nadezhda reached the cash register with the medication in hand, feeling a burst of goodwill she splurged on a bag of brightly colored candy sticks. And when she resumed her place in the cabbage line, she overcame Pushkin’s objections and insisted that he take a handful of the confections as a token of her gratitude.

7.

Times of upheaval throw off orphans like sparks. Wherever the grinder meets the metal, they shoot in the air in dazzling arcs, then either bounce once on the pavement and disappear, or settle in the hay and smolder. On a morning in 1923, one such castoff—a boy named Petya—sat on the cold stone steps of a decommissioned church with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his palms as he aimlessly watched the bread line across the street.

To the uninitiated, a bread line might seem a promising spot for an urchin. After all, most of those waiting were women who had cared for offspring of their own—an experience that was almost certain to trigger feelings of compassion toward a motherless child. Well, maybe so. But as Petya could tell you from experience, young lads who approached the women in the bread line with their hands outstretched received a twist of the ear.

On this particular morning, while Petya eyed the progress of the women with the watchful resignation of a well-trained dog, something extraordinary caught his attention. As a man near the front of the line was chatting amiably with the women at his side, a young wife in a yellow kerchief appeared from around the corner with a bag in her arms. When she approached, the man doffed his cap, greeted her warmly, and stepped out of the line in order to give her his place.

Now, if the mothers in the bread line were prone to twist the ear of an orphan, they were sure to give a line-cutter a dressing-down she'd not soon forget. But the women didn't shout or shake their fists. They made room for the newcomer. Then, as the man in the cap bid them all goodbye, the young wife reached into her bag and offered him a link of dried sausage. Upon seeing it, the man assured her that this gesture was unnecessary. But when the young wife insisted (insisted, mind you!), he accepted the sausage with his humble thanks and another doff of the cap.

Petya, who was now sitting upright, watched the man in the cap get summoned by a woman farther back in the line. As she pointed this way and that, the man listened with apparent sympathy. Then, when he nodded his head, she darted off, and he assumed her place without incident.

Petya ended up spending the rest of the day on the church's steps, and during those hours he saw the man in the cap go through the line three separate times on behalf of three separate women, receiving the link of sausage, a can of beans, and two cups of sugar!

When at last the baker latched his door and the man headed home, Petya followed in hot pursuit.

"Hey, doffer," he called.

Turning in some surprise, Pushkin looked down at the boy.

"Are you calling to me, young man?"

"You and nobody else. Listen. I've been around this town all my life. And I've seen my share of smooth-talking schemes. But what sort of racket is this?"

"Racket?" asked Pushkin.

With the narrowed eyes of the worldly, Petya was about to press his point, when a fifty-year-old apparatchik approached, out of breath. From the manner in which this fellow's belly strained against his vest, you could tell that his bread came buttered on both sides. Yet, he addressed the doffer with an unmistakable air of respect.

"Pushkin! Thank goodness! I was worried I might have missed you!"

Noticing Petya, Mr. Bread-and-Butter put an arm over Pushkin's shoulders, turned him ninety degrees, and continued in a lowered voice.

"I have it on good authority, my friend, that a shipment of electric lamps will be arriving in the illumination department of GUM tomorrow afternoon. Needless to say, I am in meetings most of the day. Do you think you might have time to hold a place for me until I can get there?"

Standing on his toes and leaning to his right, Petya could see that this Pushkin, who was listening with the utmost attention, was suddenly overcome with regret.

"Comrade Krakovitz, I am afraid that I have already promised Marya Borevna that I will stand in line for her at the butcher's while she is at Gastronome Number Four getting figs in honor of her husband's name day."

Kravovitz dropped his shoulders with such disappointment he nearly burst his buttons. But when he turned to go, Petya piped up.