

Wanted: Who Gave You Permission?

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It's bluebell season in England apparently, but our nature-loving photographer looked askance when asked when they would appear in Russia.

"The snow has to melt in the woods first," he said.

Winter has retreated outside of the woods, at least, although there was a stubborn bit of ice near my street. It was made of part dirt, part ice — ice that had malevolently evolved for hotter weather — and was still lurking there a few days ago.

Walking around the city is like returning after a long journey: Things seem different. No bluebells yet, but new sights out from the winter dark.

The homeless seem to have come to town for a spring convention. The bench by 35MM cinema is packed as usual with a multi-generational collection. Solo members stand not far off blinking in the sun as if they have just been unwillingly teleported down from the Star Trek Enterprise.

On one wall just behind Kursky Station somebody has written a cri de coeur in large letters: “Kto Razreshil?” or “Who gave you permission?”

A bit further on, and somebody had painstakingly painted “F ____ You” onto a wall just in front of a shiny new building going up as a hostel for trainee police officers. I think there is no connection. Yet.

Opposite is the road that leads to the Winzavod arts center. A brick block of flats comes first, just before the road that leads to the old factory, and up on the wall near the street are four characters of an Asian language in small letters. Whoever wrote it was either really tall or very steady when on a ladder.

If you then go along Ulitsa Kazakova you can see the walls of the Razumovsky mansion looking spicked-and-spanned.

There is a security guard and a booth at the main entrance — the complex is part of the sports ministry now — but a quick walk and a glance straight ahead gets you through.

Part of the courtyard is quiet, pleasant with benches and the quiet that invades Moscow on a weekend.

Walking further in and you reach a football pitch with a small stand on the left-hand side. To your right is the wreck of the first part of the mansion. Built at the start of the 19th century, it survived Napoleon and the Soviets but was not so capable when handed over to Zurab Tsereteli in the 1990s. The stone lions are probably still in place around the facade, but security zooms up in a van and orders the intruder out.

It’s a grand building and would make a great place to collect a football trophy from after a game on that pitch, but although it has survived another winter, nothing has really changed.

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