Read Russia!: An Anthology of New Voices presents a new gift to American and English-speaking readers: thirty short works from Russia’s leading contemporary writers. This 448-page collection is weighty and substantial, yet is also just a taste of the stunning writing coming out of Russia today.

The land that gave us many of the greats of world literature presents these leading lights of Russian letters, with the help of expert translators worldwide:

Olga Slavnikova
Zakhar Prilepin
Alexander Kabakov
Ludmila Ulitskaya
Mikhail Shishkin
Yury Buida
Igor Sakhnovsky
Vladimir Sorokin
Sergey Kuznetsov
Margarita Khemlin
Maria Galina
Alexander Genis
Andrei Rubanov

Dina Rubina
Yuri Miloslavsky

Alexander Terekhov
Eduard Radzinsky
Dmitry Bykov
Sergei Shargunov
Dmitry Danilov
Vladimir Makanin
Yuri Poliakov
Roman Senchin
Anna Starobinets
Alisa Ganieva
Irina Bogatyrnova
Alexei Lukyanov
Igor Saveliev

The tradition continues!

Read deep. Read Russia!

#readrussia
readrussia2012.com

Compliments of Read Russia
Not for sale or resale
READ.RUSSIA!
READ.RUSSIA!
An Anthology of New Voices

Edited by Elena Shubina

Introduction by Antonina W. Bouis

Read Russia, Inc.
Contents

INTRODUCTION BY ANTONINA W. BOUIS 9

OLGA SLAVNIKOVA
Basileus 15
Translated by Andrew Bromfield

ZAKHAR PRILEPIN
Whatever Day of the Week It Happens to Be 61
Translated by Simon Patterson and Nina Chordas

ALEXANDER KABAKOV
Shelter 75
Translated by Daniel Jaffe

LUDMILA ULITSKAYA
Dauntless Women of the Russian Steppe 89
Translated by Arch Tait

MIKHAIL SHISHKIN
The Half-Belt Overcoat 105
Translated by Leo Shutin

YURY BUIDA
Sindbad the Sailor 119
Translated by Oliver Ready

IGOR SAKHNOVSKY
A Family of Monsters 125
Translated by Hugh Aplin

VLADIMIR SOROKIN
Hiroshima 141
Translated by Jamey Gambrell

SERGEY KUZNETSOV
Psycho’s One Night Stand 149
Translated by Andrew Bromfield
Margarita Khemlin
Basya Solomovna’s Third World War 163
Translated by Lisa Hayden Espenschade

Maria Galina
The Lizard 171
Translated by Deborah Hoffmann

Alexander Genis
Birds of a Feather 191
Translated by Daniel Genis

Andrei Rubanov
Gonzo 197
Translated by Polly Gannon

Dina Rubina
Monologue of a Life Model 205
Translated by Marian Schwartz

Yuri Miloslavsky
The Death of Manon 215
Translated by David Lapeza

Alexander Terekhov
The Stone Bridge (fragment) 225
Translated by Simon Patterson

Eduard Radzinsky
The Life and Death of Nicholas II 243
Translated by Marian Schwartz

Dmitry Bykov
Mozharovo 259
Translated by James Rann

Sergei Shargunov
Chechnya, to Chechnya 271
Translated by John Narins

Dmitry Danilov
More Elderly Person 287
Translated by Douglas Robinson
Vladimir Makanin
The One-Day War 295
Translated by Bela Shayevich

Yuri Polyakov
Verbal TNT 317
Translated by Leo Shtutin

Roman Senchin
Idzhim 329
Translated by Lisa Hayden Espenschade

Anna Starobinets
The Agency 341
Translated by Hugh Alpin

Alisa Ganieva
Shaitans 357
Translated by Marian Schwartz

Irina Bogatyreva
Stars over Lake Teleskoye 399
Translated by Arch Tait

Alexei Lukyanov
Strike the Iron While It’s Hot, Boys! 403
Translated by Michele Berdy

Igor Saveliev
The People’s Book 413
Translated by Amanda Love-Darragh

German Sadulaev
The Day When You Phone the Dead 421
Translated by Anna Gunin

Alexander Ilichevsky
The Sparrow 437
Translated by Benjamin Paloff

About the Editor 446
Credits 447
Hemingway acknowledged that he would not have known Leo Tolstoy and Fedor Dostoevsky if not for the translations of Constance Garnett. How could we learn about other cultures and civilizations without reading their literature? And how could we do that without translation, the most vital and underappreciated art?

While Russian literature provided the world with the gold standard for novels, it also gave us quintessential short stories, certainly by the acknowledged master Anton Chekhov (who was a dab hand at plays, as well), but also by Nikolai Gogol, Alexander Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Bunin, and Isaac Babel, among many others.

In the nineteenth century, Gogol’s stories created a new form within the genre. His tales of life in a Ukrainian village poked gentle fun at characters who are universal in their cares and concerns, and his stories about bureaucrats in St. Petersburg, the new capital built on swamps and the bones of the laborers, present the city in an eerie and phantasmagorical light. Pushkin, who is the most beloved writer in Russia to this day, Shakespeare and Byron rolled into one poetic genius who argued with tsars and died in a duel over love and honor in 1837, published Gogol’s stories in his literary magazine. He claimed that all Russian literature came out of the pocket of Gogol’s “The Overcoat.”

Most readers of this volume will have read some Russian literature in college or at a good high school. If scenes still dance in your heads of cavalry charges, aristocrats dancing and falling in love in brilliant ballrooms, rural gentry spending cozy evenings philosophizing, oppressed or luminous peasants ruminating in their muddy villages, passionate revolutionaries conspiring in underground cells, and miserable prisoners of the gulag going about their day, you are in for a surprise.
Today’s writers treat contemporary issues: the characters are oligarchs and drug addicts, policemen and soldiers, office workers and teachers, feral animals, as well as workers and farmers. You will also find greater diversity among the authors; the Russian classics were men from the two great cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg. In this anthology, about a fourth of the stories were written by women. Some of the writers are in their twenties and thirties. Some live far from the capital cities. Others are also television celebrities, former prisoners, poets, playwrights, and political activists. Some are famous, some are notorious. All have won serious literary prizes and critical acclaim.

There are “long short stories,” or novellas, by Olga Slavnikova and Vladimir Makarin in this volume; these popular writers are translated by the well-known Andrew Bromfield and the up-and-coming Bela Shayevich. Two pieces by Edvard Radzinsky and by Mikhail Shishkin, translated by Marian Schwartz and Leo Shtutin, represent writers already known in America. Alexander Kabakov’s story “Shelter,” sensitively translated by Daniel Jaffe, traces the life arc of many Russians, from semi-dissident posturing as students in the Soviet 1970s to success in the new capitalist Russia, with its spiritual emptiness. Ludmila Ulitskaya describes the age-old story of women loving the wrong men, but the setting is Queens, New York, when three old friends have a reunion, one of them on a business trip from Moscow, in “Dauntless Women of the Russian Steppe,” in Arch Tait’s fluent translation. The narrator of Andrei Rubanov’s “Gonzo” is a young drug addict, his language rendered into lively English by Polly Gannon. The narrator in Dina Rubin’s story is a life model (and former electrical engineer) living in Israel, and her weariness can be felt in Marian Schwartz’s translation. Dmitry Bykov tells a supernatural tale about journalists on a train passing through a creepy town, the mysterious dread convincingly conveyed by James Rann. Another Moscow journalist has an eye-opening experience in war-torn Grozny in Sergei Shargunov’s “Chechnya, To Chechnya!” deftly translated by John Narins. More exotic locales and experiences lie in store for the hikers in the Altai Mountains in Irina Bogatyreva’s “Stars over Lake Teletskoye,” another gem by Tait. The typical Soviet story about factory workers committed to meeting the work plan is turned on its head in Alexei Lukyanov’s “Strike the Iron While It’s Hot, Boys!” with its flow of swear words and puns, cunningly rendered into English by Michele A. Berdy.

And this brings us back to Hemingway’s point: you wouldn’t be reading these stories without their translators. This volume presents a wide range of Russian writers and of today’s translators in America and England. Some,
like Hugh Aplin, Andrew Bromfield, Jamey Gambrell, Arch Tait and Marion Schwartz, have a large body of work. Others are new to me. The publication of this volume of new short stories from some of the best writers in Russia today is an opportunity for me to praise the unheralded English-language translator. Other cultures value the skills and talents required in translation. There are schools, prizes, fame and glory (well, almost). But English-language readers seem not to be aware of the work that goes into delivering literature from another culture to them.

A good translation should be transparent and unobtrusive, and then, of course, like a good mobile phone connection, it is taken for granted. Strangely enough, not only is a good translation not credited with bringing an otherwise inaccessible work to light, but the blame for a bad translation somehow falls on the original text. Clumsy wording and awkward English grammar are attributed to the author, not the invisible translator. Some writers never get a second chance, having been introduced to readers in an inadequate translation and found lacking.

Americans read little in translation. We seem to consider books to be tools in the most pragmatic way. If there’s an enemy, we need to learn about him, as if we need to know another culture only when we fear it. The heyday of Russian literature in English translation was the Cold War. Today there are many volumes of Arabic literature, which is wonderful, for surely we all have much to learn, but why does it have to be out of fear?

Why not get to know friends better? Russia and America never fought against each other in a war. Russia sent battleships to aid Lincoln during our Civil War, Russian soldiers liberated Auschwitz and marched into Nazi Berlin in World War II, and the Russian president was the first world leader to call the White House to offer help on 9/11.

Russians and Americans have so much in common: a sense of manifest destiny with the pioneering spirit that led to the conquest of enormous tracts of land, the development of rich agriculture and industry, science and technology, and a long reign as the two superpowers who divided the globe between them. Both nations face a present with a multiethnic, multiconfessional populace that is coming to terms with the depression and confusion of being just one more pole in a multipolar world.

Russians pride themselves on being big readers. But if you look around, in subways and buses, on beach blankets and park benches, Americans are reading books and e-readers. So I don’t think Russians necessarily read more, but they are certainly more passionate about literature. American writers
were translated into Russian in Soviet times and the visits of John Steinbeck, Norman Mailer, William Styron, and Arthur Miller were major events, not only for the obvious political spin, but because people read and loved their books. Here’s an example of the passion and pride. A chambermaid at my Moscow hotel once asked for my autograph because she had seen the many books delivered to my room from my authors and had seen me drinking tea and vodka (ah, the clichés!) in the hotel restaurant with some of her favorite writers. She was pleased to know that Americans would be reading their works. I was flattered, of course, but I was even more interested in the cultural differences between the readers of our countries that this revealed. I doubt any American would be so thrilled by the prospect of Gore Vidal or E. L. Doctorow being brought to the Russian reading public that they would solicit a translator’s autograph.

Where do we look for an understanding of the human condition? Not in diet books or travel guides: we turn to fiction and poetry. Writers and poets describe and illuminate our souls. We can find similar but different approaches to our issues, which are universal, in the writing of Russian authors.

So I say, read the literature of your friends, and not only of your perceived enemies. “Like” Russia. “Friend” Russia. Read Russia!

—ANTONINA W. BOUIS
READ.RUSSIA!
Olga Slavnikova (born 1957, Ekaterinburg) first rose to prominence in her native Urals region before becoming one of Russia’s most celebrated authors. Her epic dystopian novel 2017, a beguiling mix of romance and realism, won the Russian Booker prize and has been translated into English. Her most recent novel, Lightheaded, praised by Andrei Nemzer as “a scorching, bitter story of a man’s desire for freedom,” was shortlisted for the Big Book prize and will also shortly be published in English.
The pretext for the relationship between Elizaveta Nikolaevna Rakitina and Pavel Ivanovich Ertel was a cat, a flop-eared pedigree Scottish Fold tom, who in his declining feline years resembled most of all a Russian peasant in a fur cap with earflaps and a thick sheepskin coat with its seams burst in places. Despite his venerable age, however, the cat’s copper-red eyes blazed with dangerous fire and anyone who reached out an uninvited hand to him was awarded a decoration of parallel bloody scratches. The cat’s name was Basileus.

About once a week, after first phoning and receiving an invitation, Ertel went to Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s place for tea. The tea at Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s place was reddish-black, with a distinct flavor of tap water, and when she handed a trembling cup to her guest, a puddle splashed out into the saucer. The old apartment loathed the sunlight. Every window here was a stage with a velvet curtain and its own depth; but when a shaft of light did surmount the friction of the glass and reach into a faintly glimmering room, the dust that started dancing in it was so dense and shaggy, it looked like the swaying of seaweed in the beam of a bathyscaphe’s searchlight. In the drawing room, which Ertel entered wearing an embarrassed smile and the large, rubberized slippers of the apartment’s former master (as if this place might really be flooded), a small chandelier of braided beads was always lit. By the glow of its little yellowish bonfire it was possible to make out the volutes and curlicues of the incredibly heavy, densely cluttered furniture, the broken shelves and the porcelain figurines that looked like melted portions of ice cream. Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s laptop looked strange in this outmoded inte-
rior: it was always switched on, casting a minty glow on scattered printouts and a framed photograph of a stout man with a guilty smile that seemed to have been daubed across the face of its owner, now four years deceased.

At these tea-drinking sessions, which Elizaveta Nikolaevna called consultations, the cat was invariably present. His mistress brought him in, dangling from her hands, and laid him in an armchair that was barely large enough for the king of the house to fit into.

“Pavel Ivanovich, what can we do about the fur? He’s molting so badly, his fur gets left behind on my hands,” Elizaveta Nikolaevna complained, offering her guest dry pretzels that tasted like wood.

“Try giving him vitamin injections,” Ertel advised her in a stifled voice, choking on crumbs.

“And the teeth, look at the teeth,” his hostess said anxiously. “Perhaps they should be treated with something to stop them crumbling?”

“We’ll have to put in false teeth,” Ertel said reasonably. “We’ll order them from Germany, that’s often done. It’s not too bad as yet. The hair loss is unpleasant, of course. You could try richer food, but how’s his stomach?”

Meanwhile the cat dozed or licked himself, leaving wet streaks in his clumped fur. He seemed to understand that the conversation concerned his own faded beauty and washed himself so assiduously with his tongue that he began to look as if he was painted in oil. What Basileus could not stand was when his mistress and the guest looked at him at the same time. He would tumble ponderously off the armchair onto the thick carpet, scattering a loose trail as if he was walking on snow, and creep under the furniture, where his favorite toy, a stuffed rat, was waiting for him.

Pavel Ivanovich Ertel was not a veterinarian. His profession was not even mentioned in the official Russian register of occupations. Ertel was a taxidermist—in other words, he made stuffed animals and birds.

As a child he had been astounded by a magpie’s feather that he found beside the fence of a dacha. Both delicate and compact, it had the noble form of a cold weapon and the shimmer of steel. The youthful Ertel started looking closely at birds. He was enraptured by how beautifully these cartoon-film creatures were clothed, but humankind somehow failed to see the downy shawls of an owl or the spruce military dandyism of a simple sparrow. Birds’ plumage, simultaneously lace and armor, disintegrated after a bird died, disappearing into nowhere, but the youthful Ertel wanted to preserve this splendor. When his class was taken to visit the local natural history
museum, with half of them scattering on the way there, he saw an entire room devoted to the motley feathered tribes of Russia's central region. There was an active study group there too.

At the age of forty Ertel was a lean, emphatically trim and tidy gentleman, rather colorless, as if water and various lotions had washed the natural coloring off his bony face; only his nose—thin, with a fine, inky veinlet running across its narrow crook—flooded with pink blood in the cold, and the tips of the fingers that the master craftsman used with such exceptional sensitivity to prepare his various delicate specimens were the same bright pink. The times were long since gone when biology faculty student Pasha Ertel mostly dined on the carcasses of partridges and woodcocks that he was commissioned to mount by a hunting and fishing shop. Now Pavel Ivanovich had his own workshop in Moscow, with fifteen employees—his own pupils—working in it; he had an established professional reputation, thanks to which museums of natural history, not only in Russia but across Europe, commissioned him to produce items for their collections. As he climbed into his Ford Mondeo, wearing his dark-gray cashmere coat and silk tie that shimmered like liquid silver, the workshop-owner could have been taken for a highly paid employee of some bank or the manager of some thriving company. Pavel Ertel was compared with the famous taxidermist and naturalist Fyodor Lorents, and it was predicted that his reputation in life would endure, like Lorents's, after death—if only because of the longevity of superlatively fabricated and systematized exhibits that could stand in museums for two hundred years or more.

Ertel's own personal passion was still birds. In drawing the stocking of skin and feathers over the flexible frame wrapped in elastic bandages, he could express a distinctive, habitual manner of extending a wing and convey the very ability to rise into the air. Feathered predators were the birds he did best. These noble knights of the air, armored in battle plumage reminiscent of fearsome swords and chain mail with holes rusted through it in places, aroused a species of rapturous battle frenzy in the taxidermist's soul. Because in actual fact he was the Baron von Ertel, the descendant of naval, artillery and guards officers who had served the Russian Empire honorably for ten generations. After the October coup, his family had contrived to pass themselves off as agricultural Volga Germans, an element of international labor. During the Second World War the von Ertels had been exiled, together with the Volga Germans, to the Chita region, and from there the family later began its slow return to urban civilization, studying in teacher-training col-
leges and on graduation working by assignment in remote Siberian regional centers with decapitated churches. Pavel Ivanovich was the first to reach the country’s original capital, now sanctified anew with double-snake-headed eagles that were more golden than ever. Ertel’s mounted eagles, falcons, kites and hawks also turned out like the emblems of nonexistent and therefore, in a certain sense, ideal states. If not for his God-given skill he would not, of course, have prospered in his revamped, entirely unrecognizable Fatherland: the concept of the ideal, as integral to Ertel as the glitter of his colorless but seemingly faceted eyes, prevented him from believing in the processes that were taking place and also, therefore, from finding his bearings in reality.

Even so, birds and museum commissions were by no means the enterprise’s main source of income. As they mastered the world, New Russians of various nationalities went hunting in its exotic corners for the large game that they had seen once upon a time in pictures and in zoos. The trophies were delivered to Ertel’s workshop. In this way a rather unexceptional provincial, one of the many who had “overrun the place” was granted unexpected access to the movers and shakers of this world. Men of politics and big business, looking unnaturally fresh, but with heavy lead under their dim eyes, arrived in motorcades with bodyguards who kept the menacing animal shadows within range of their peripheral vision—they seemed to come to life the moment you turned away from them. These gentlemen had a very hardheaded understanding of processes and seemed to possess the fundamental secret of the life of a country, the very existence of which was, in its turn, a secret. Ertel knew that under no circumstances could he mention the names of his highly placed clients, although there was absolutely nothing unlawful about the commissions or the hunting itself. This new secret must have become part of the very metabolism of the new order of grandees, it must be floating in their blood—and the mere naming of a client could expose that blood, causing damage which would mar irreparably a relationship that earned Ertel good money. In themselves—not on the television, but in the flesh—the movers and shakers of this world were strangely vulnerable. This was more than just the understandable danger of being caught in the sights of a hired sniper or the high-voltage embrace of some lunatic bearing a request for financial assistance or a plan for the rebuilding of Russia. It was the combination of extreme public exposure and extreme secrecy (with the revelatory memoirs of jaunty authoresses serving only to thicken the fog) that determined the complex balance of their dubious composition. It sometimes seemed to Ertel that the superiority of the new grandees over ordinary
people was the superiority of the blind in a room where the lamp has been shot out.

At the same time many of them, either by natural inclination or provoked by the spontaneous energy of flags, anthems and symbols of state, were tormented by an obscure yearning for feats of heroism. Their avocational combative belligerence, which drove them to hunt the very, very biggest that exists on the Earth, seemed rather naive to the hereditary Baron von Ertel. He found it touching when a young financier who had bagged an African rhinoceros took pride in the front tooth he had lost on safari (an implant by an expensive prosthodontist, immediately replaced by another superb copy). The rhinoceros itself, with its heavily armored head and low-set eyes, positioned almost like nostrils, was magnificent. Ertel personally fashioned the model for the dummy. He was the one best able to convey the movement and power of flayed muscles; the models that he made were like the dead animals’ ghosts, like three-dimensional negatives of their vanished vigor, and when the skin was pulled over the cast, it was as if the beasts had not entirely died.

Ertel was secretly a devotee of a pre-Darwinian or even pre-Linnaean picture of the world, from a time when it was believed that a precious stone might be found in the head of a frog, when the connecting links between the islets of natural-scientific knowledge were fundamentally different from now and a natural scientist could quite openly rely on information from a literary source. One day Ertel happened to come across the poem Jubilate Agno by the insane British poet Christopher Smart, a contemporary of Pope. Written in a madhouse, this poetical ark accommodated animals and birds, both real and fantastical, as well as characters from the Old Testament and Smart’s own publishers and benefactors, plus strangers, whose names the author took from newspapers. This all-inclusive principle for the composition of a choir singing the praises of the Creator somehow seemed to legitimize the connection between the hunter and the trophy, allocating the role of conciliator to the master taxidermist. Ertel’s work often gave him the feeling that the living forms he reproduced had been made by someone: repeating after the Creator, like some first grade pupil repeating after the teacher, he sometimes unintentionally thrust his hands into vibrant currents of life, in the way that people lower their hands into a stream. Literally translated, “Jubilate Agno” means “Cry out with joy to the Lamb,” in other words, “say baa-aa-aa.” In addition to the theological meanings of the lamb’s innocence, Ertel also perceived the meaning and mystery of his own work in the poem’s title. He
learned a lot of the poem off by heart and muttered it while he worked, with his hands and arms up to the elbows in organic matter and clay and his spectacles blazing on his pink nose.

Let Ithream rejoice with the great Owl,
who understandeth that which he professes.
Let Jonathan, David's nephew,
rejoice with Oripelargus [the Stork] who is noble by his ascent.
Let Bartimeus rejoice with the Quaviver—
God be gracious to the eyes of him, who prayeth for the blind.
Let Barkos rejoice with the Black Eagle,
which is the least of his species and the best-natured.
For nature is more various than observation,
tho' observers be innumerable.

You might ask: What does a cat have to do with all this? What interest did the prosperous Ertel have in languishing in the misery of the traffic jams as he dragged himself all the way across Moscow in order to spend hours observing a perfectly ordinary animal just like hundreds of others that were growing old in the apartments of the immense Stalin-era building and turning—just like Basileus—into clumps of straggly fur, like the family-heirloom caps and boas of the local population?

It was all a matter of the cat's mistress. On very close examination it became clear that Elizaveta Nikolaevna was not an old woman at all, but an extraordinary and wonderful woman with no age. She had lost her age when she cut off her gold-wire braids after the school graduation ball and married an old foreign trade functionary who was, in his turn, the very youngest member of a professional and family circle that gathered for decorous celebrations of the respective fiftieth anniversaries of their creative activity and other high-dignitary holidays. That was what she and Sergei Alexandrovich were called: the young folk. A photograph had survived showing the youthful Elizaveta Nikolaevna in a mideighties lady's hairstyle and long astrakhan fur coat, standing surrounded by grimming elders, with her little face making her look like a Soviet plastic doll. She was well brought-up and obedient: she accepted her husband's physical softness—the plump shoulders and sagging, graying stomach with no distinct signs of life below it—as gentleness of spirit, and found snug comfort in his boneless, almost sexless embraces and ecstatic snoring at night. Elizaveta Nikolaevna was pampered, the men vied to treat
her with sweets they had saved especially, sometimes badly frayed in their male pockets and smelling of tobacco. A female writer and multiple Stalin Prize winner, who was incised all over with fine wrinkles and covered in age spots that looked like blotches of washed-out blood, maintained a tenacious friendship with her. And then, in a space of three years, they all died, including her husband.

At all times, but especially in years of universal struggle for survival, inactive creatures like Elizaveta Nikolaevna arouse the indignation of their vulnerable fellow-citizens, who are obliged to trade at markets or kowtow to a capricious boss while doing his work as well as their own for a barely decent salary. But if Elizaveta Nikolaevna was protected by anything, it could only be the mercy of God. She seemed to be entirely a product of God's arbitrary will and that was why there was so much that was inexplicable about her. She was awkward—she often broke things, walked into a room at the wrong moment, said the wrong thing. But her ineptitudes suddenly triggered very long sequences of cause and effect—in the way that a single movement of a finger knocks over a single domino, setting an entire ribbon of dominos flowing, which releases a lever that sets water pouring and a heavy little ball rolling along a groove. When they associated with Elizaveta Nikolaevna the worthy old men vaguely sensed that they were located at the center of a toy designed with incredible accuracy and precision, something like a phantom child's railway set, and the sweetly humming little ball that was launched at the very end might just turn out to be a bomb. But it was not they who were the targets of the existence of this little woman who looked out at the world through such intensely blue eyes that everything around must have been tinted blue for her. And that was why one fine moment an invisible hand cleared the stage of everything superfluous.

Left completely alone, Elizaveta Nikolaevna fed herself for a while on the reserves of canned foods that she found in the house—the solid fat had a back-taste of candle wax. She tried eating fermented jam and even blocks of jelly that had been lying around in the cupboards under the ceiling. She had absolutely no understanding of money (when inflation distended the rows of noughts she genuinely thought that everyone had got rich), and so she sold the neighbors her Chopard watch, covered in quarter-carat diamonds like cross-stitching, and an old ruby brooch in the form of a dragonfly for what she thought was a large sum, but actually for mere pennies. She lived as if there was a war on, swapping things for food, and it was only by sheer good fortune that the silver-tongued realtors eager for Stalin-era real
estate didn’t stumble across her at that time. She cleaned the apartment as best she could when it turned dark as the light bulbs, one after another, burned out and burst. The traces of her cleaning were like the traces left by stormy weather. The cleaner Liuba, a shy, freckled beanstalk, who had started putting on thick makeup after Sergei Alexandrovich died, had scrounged Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s old astrakhan fur coat “in consideration of pay” when she left, folding it and wrapping it as if it was a rawhide tent. Life was gradually melting away like that.

Elizaveta Nikolaevna had found the cat in the entrance hall of the building, where he was sitting on the huge windowsill that was cracked lengthwise, with his plump front paws tucked into a tight furry ball, and it was not so much the woman he had followed as her shopping bag, which gave off a seductively foul odor of cheap boloney. After being forcibly subjected to a washing that removed some kind of suffocating tarry soot (under the warm shower his fur was like meat jelly, the basin was a raging storm) the cat proved to be a handsome thoroughbred; his eyes, like very sugary, golden grapes, squinted sweetly at this velvety domestic comfort. The poor creature must have been abandoned by victims of the realtors when they moved out to somewhere in Khimki; many of them, having outlived their time and turned gray and dishevelled in their communal-apartment corners, had abandoned the space to “Euro-standard” repairs. But not all of them reached their destination: some seemed to have dissolved into the murky, spectre-laden air of Moscow and disappeared from life, bypassing the stage of death. But the cat had not wished to dissolve. It was quite possible that he had walked here from his place of exile, making his way through the yards and alleys in a dotted line of fleeting appearances, like a reddish thread drawn by the pointing needle of a cat’s compass; at moments of danger he had probably also turned into a spectre, disguising himself in his dirty fur as automobile exhaust fumes. The vagrant life had left the cat with the souvenirs of dry scars on his striped head and a hole in his blinking left ear, into which an earring could have been inserted.

It wasn’t Elizaveta Nikolaevna who gave the stray tom his regal name. The little widow didn’t feel she had sufficient authority to give him any kind of titles or names. The cat was named by one of her husband’s old friends, whom she summoned out of nonexistence with the help of an old, tattered address book that had hangnail corners instead of an alphabet. This book, which had served Sergei Alexandrovich for many long years, was literally completely covered with scribble. It was populated by men and women from
a former life and a pre-former life. Some of the entries were half-erased, barely even showing through, best read against the light, like watermarks; others seemed fresh, literally made yesterday, and it was strange to see Sergei Alexandrovich’s cramped, looping writing—his hand, as they used to say—when there was no longer any way that that hand could scoop a spoonful of soup out of the plate or stroke Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s dry hair. Methodically, deciphering everything on each small page (some pages fell out, looking like pieces of thin suede leather with frayed, frilly edges or meticulously dressed mouse skins) the little widow dialled the unfamiliar numbers on the heavy black telephone. In most cases she turned out to be calling people who no longer existed. The book contained the contact details of more than three hundred deceased individuals, but a few isolated living ones turned up as if by accident. A couple of times, like music on the radio, she heard women’s voices that used to ask her to call Sergei Alexandrovich to the phone—at which Sergei Alexandrovich would get terribly embarrassed and wipe his sweaty hand on his trousers with an odd penguin-flipper movement. These voices doused the widow in thick benevolence, but they were absolutely useless to Elizaveta Nikolaevna. She was looking for men who could give her support.

And they were found. The letter “K” manifested a kind man who immediately came round and immediately made a zealous effort to help—with his square chin and turbulent, grayish peasant curls, he looked very much like his late father, the director of one of those Something-or-Other-of-October factories, whom Elizaveta Nikolaevna actually remembered from the old days. This K gave Elizaveta Nikolaevna the first job of her life. They brought her a laptop and she quite quickly learned to type, which turned out to be like knitting: stitch by stitch, row by row. The informational bulletins that the widow put together for K, making timid excursions into the Internet, were splendidly obtuse—they were the papers that rambled and rustled around the floor, like light toy boats all fluffy with dust. Another gentleman, from the letter “T,” stoop-shouldered, with wistful, transparent eyes that always squinted slightly inwards at the tip of his nose, also came and sat in an armchair for a while, wrapped in a spacious kidskin trench coat, following the ponderous flight of a dying autumn fly with a cool gaze—afterwards she started receiving very decent sums of money from him, plus backbreakingly heavy bags of groceries. There were another two or three who also helped her.

Ertel’s home number was entered on one of the book’s final pages—it
was gathered up into tight concertina folds and had survived by a miracle. Elizaveta Nikolaevna, whom he vaguely recognized, first inquired curiously what the word “taxidermist” meant (Ertel had once mounted a boar’s head for the stout foreign trade official, who had been a rather indifferent hunter, and now it protruded from the cracked wall of the drawing room, with tusks like a fop’s droopy mustache). Having received an explanation, the widow thought for a moment, wavering, and then told him that she would like to have her cat mounted—not now, naturally, but when Basileus died a natural death—because the cat was the only creature she had been close to since Sergei Alexandrovich died.

“Creatures like that should be shot to put them out of their misery,” the man in the kidskin trench coat said with a heavy sigh when Ertel was incautious enough to mention Elizaveta Nikolaevna in his presence.

He always wanted to mention Elizaveta Nikolaevna now, because he thought about her constantly. The gentleman with the wistful eyes, who had just bagged a superlative specimen of African buffalo with a beard like a professor, was also, by the way, an excellent shot, who derived ineffable satisfaction from the mathematically elegant smiting of his target, as if it had been born bearing his own personal mark.

“That person allows herself the liberty of being incapable, of not knowing how to do anything,” the client explained in response to Ertel’s mute amazement. “I understand that she’s a woman. But others make an effort, they take bookkeeping courses at least. No, don’t misunderstand me, I help her, what else can I do if Sergei Alexandrovich’s widow asks me for help? But I don’t like doing it. Because that little widow is a born parasite. Creatures like that emit vibrations to lure donors like you and me. You know how sweet it is to pamper them, much sweeter than pampering your own children, for instance. But for me there’s nothing more spine-chilling than the come-hither song of a parasite. You do heaps of good for them—and it’s all wasted, down the drain. And it makes you so tired, you’d be better off dragging rocks about. My advice to you is: Don’t go visiting her. Everyone there has fleeced her—the neighbors, the servant. So now she needs a lot. Spare yourself.”

He was very clever, this Mister T, in whose hands a Blaser rifle acquired hypnotic powers that could mesmerize the targeted trophy before any shot was made. He had broken into a big computer business from a decayed Moscow research institute, and he had broken into that institute from the ranks of star pupils in a rural secondary school that offered the profession of
tractor driver as a ticket to life. He had advanced on his own, in total indifference to his numerous kin, who had extorted backbreaking tribute from him when he was still sitting on a student’s bench in a lecture hall in Moscow, owing to their own inability to pay for medical treatment, funerals and other catastrophes of indigence, which arose suddenly and more than once every year. The gentleman with the wistful eyes hated helpless people. He had torn large chunks out of his own perfectly normal human heart to help them, but failed to make anyone happy. His own joy at his generous gifts was always disappointed and desecrated by the abject state into which his feckless, good-for-nothing relatives immediately relapsed the moment the effect of the money ceased. The warning given to the enamored Ertel possibly included a fatal dose of a supremely bitter truth of life.

Ertel himself could sense in Elizaveta Nikolaevna a strange, formless void with nothing in it at all. When she smiled hazily, suddenly allowing him a glimpse of that void, it left him, a grown man and scion of the nobility, feeling small and weak, as if he was facing an elemental force, some natural phenomenon incomensurably more powerful than a human being. Ertel’s very sinews, which seemed made out of twisted metal, literally slackened. She was so touching, this little girl-woman–old woman, with her trembling hands scratched by Basileus, her ancient pretzels in a salad bowl from a Kuznetsov dinner service, her dull-golden braid that had sprouted again during her widowhood, that gathered up the hair crookedly from the back of her head and looked like a tenaciously clinging lizard . . . To give her a gift was a supremely sweet temptation, a Christmas party. The joy frothed up in Ertel like champagne when he made the agitated ride up to her apartment in the barred cage of the old lift, fingerling in his pocket the thick little envelope that he always left discreetly on the sideboard, beside the ornate china clock the size of a lapdog. The result was always that he was poisoned by the festivity’s toxic products of decomposition. Ertel felt intuitively that the good deeds which Elizaveta Nikolaevna provoked and nudged men into performing did not actually become part of that genuine substrate of good, any addition to which, anywhere in the world, was beneficial to the whole of humanity. Nothing was actually added to it from all these sudden impulses of tender feeling. This was exhausting him, it was sucking him dry. There was no higher rationale to any of it, and he could only wonder at how much of everything a single human life, hanging by a thread, was capable of consuming.

Elizaveta Nikolaevna, however, must have been a genius of helplessness, and this inspired brilliance of hers rendered her irresistibly seductive. Not in
the erotic sense—although the triangular neckline of her modest, maidenly housedress sometimes permitted a glimpse of a shadow so tremulous that the demure Ertel’s mouth went dry. All the men who brought plump envelopes to Elizaveta Nikolaevna desired her with a lust of invincible power and absolutely distinctive quality. The little woman genuinely did use vibrations of some kind, a song sung by the thread on which she was suspended above the abyss, to infiltrate the subcortex of their brains, stimulating, chafing and caressing their pleasure centers. The pleasure came from their own magnanimity, from money that had become totally boring to them, and also from something universal, perhaps from the light of the Moscow skies suddenly slanting obliquely through the wet clouds. The passion, however, was not resolved through gratification. The envelopes from one donor would have sufficed for a perfectly decent life (as is always the case with passion, each of Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s benefactors wanted to be the only one). But the little widow still didn’t become any tastier or more satisfying: there were still the same old dresses with little round necks, still the same dried crusts and rock-hard sweets. It was still a mystery what she—with her saintly inability to understand what money was and how to use it—did with more than a thousand dollars. And even worse than that—the good deed of helping a widow did not exalt the benefactors themselves, seemingly quite the opposite—it drove them to sin. For instance, an orphan from Kharkov, a predatory blonde with the body of a killifish and a little diamond in her creamy navel, attached herself like a leech to the newly limp Mr. K and set about laying waste to his credit cards and bank accounts in earnest.

Ertel was aware that he was hooked more firmly than the others. But he couldn’t understand how it had happened. He recalled his excitement at the realization that Elizaveta Nikolaevna was perhaps the only woman of her generation who had never put on a pair of jeans. That had prompted Ertel to notice her other distinctive features: a very narrow and very white hand, on the palm of which moisture bled through in glimmering spangles of mica; a slim neck the color of melting snow; a small ear conch, burdened with a cluster of blind pearls. A rare specimen, a collector’s specimen. Ertel only realized what had happened when Elizaveta Nikolaevna matured completely within him and became a source of light against which the external light was powerless. With these bright rays inside him Ertel developed the habit of turning his eyes away from the person he was talking to and wrapping his clothes around himself more tightly. The movements of his bony hands as he molded the models for mounts became caresses, and something feminine
suddenly showed through in the animal carcasses; the currents of life washing over the taxidermic sculptor's hands had turned hot.

But even so, any union between Ertel and Elizaveta Nikolaevna was absolutely impossible. Pavel Ivanovich had been firmly married for a long time. He belonged to that high-tensile class of men who have to change themselves completely in order to change their life partner. He and Anna had lived in peace and harmony since their student days. In addition to large copper curls from which coins could have been minted and rosy-pink skin sprinkled with fine freckles, Anna Ertel also possessed an unassailable inner tranquillity and faith in the stability of all the circumstances and objects surrounding her. And although for a long time already the married couple's handshake-firm kisses had expressed an attachment of friendship rather than love, he couldn't possibly desecrate her faith. As imperturbably as she did everything in the world, Anna had borne Pavel Ivanovich two healthy, long-legged sons. Redheaded like their mother, each with an entire planetarium of freckles on his pink features, the boys loved their father ardently, dreamed of fabulous hunts in mysterious jungles and already helped in the workshop. And if Pavel Ivanovich had decided, nonetheless, to make the break, he would have had to abandon not only the boys, not only the large apartment in Izmailovo—his home sweet home, where white curtains breathed and white furniture stood on the floor like porcelain—not only that... He would have had to hand over all the memories of his youth to Anna for safekeeping: the way the two of them had watched a wedge of cranes receding into the distance, fluttering like a waving handkerchief; the way they had once lost their younger child, Kostya, at the Kazan railway station and found him, smeared all over with some kind of black candy and without his new jacket; and all the triumphs of his life, at which they used to rejoice together. In short, Ertel would have had to leave Anna almost all of himself, minus that part, the very existence of which would have completely changed her entire notion of how the world was arranged.

But even so Ertel couldn't help himself. He was jealous of Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s contacts with Mr. K and Mr. T, suspecting that, with her docile amenability and detachment, she was quite capable of complying with her sponsors’ wishes in her bare, flat widow’s bed. He was afraid to touch the tremulous whiteness of her fingers and instead he stroked the cat, who would present his velvet belly, only to sink his claws and teeth into the stranger’s hand and wind himself round it like a striped, muscular snake. As often happens with people in love, Ertel knew the overgrown yard of that cherished Stalin-era apartment block better than its residents did. Sometimes, even
after he had already got into his car, he couldn’t bring himself to set off. Like a pilot gazing at the moon, he gazed at Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s battered, pot-bellied balcony, on which she had probably never appeared since her husband’s death, or perhaps never in her life. Because he needed to lie so often, Ertel’s voice changed and Anna asked anxiously if he had caught a cold. In order to stifle the guilty remorse he felt for his family, Pavel Ivanovich became like Santa Claus: he gave the boys sophisticated motor scooters and delighted Anna by taking her to see her favorite opera, where the sounds of the instruments being tuned up gave him a headache. But as he haggled his purchases into the house, arranging his generous surprises with a forced smile, Ertel realized that even these good deeds of his, performed for people for whom he was supposed to do good, had changed their nature completely.

“Don’t worry, I’ll fix you, you’ll be standing there covered in dust,” Pavel Ivanovich told the cat while the cat’s mistress walked to the kitchen and back with a trembling tray.

The cat twitched his tail and his back nervously in reply, as if he was tugging up his trousers. He seemed to have guessed the plans that this pale man who came visiting was making and decided not to leave any of his beauty for the animal-stuffer, but use it all up himself while he was alive. For instance, he managed to tear his other ear as he tugged off a rhinestone-studded collar that was a present from one of the sponsors, and now that ear—an essential attribute of his breed!—resembled a used trolleybus ticket.

“Will you stitch that up somehow later?” Elizaveta Nikolaevna asked, gazing at Ertel with insistent hope.

“I’ll restore it,” he confirmed, thinking to himself that it was a very long time since any customer had presented him with such a badly damaged specimen and set him such difficult tasks.

Meanwhile the cat made haste to live life to the full. The stuffed rat bought for his indoor hunting was his wife. Completely ignoring the people, the cat would drag his bewhiskered spouse out into the middle of the drawing room and start making love to her. Since the rat was too small for Basileus, the process resembled some lanky individual careering about on a child’s tricycle. Nonetheless the cat did not turn his male attentions to the numerous embroidered cushions lying in plump heaps on the sofas, or to the other, larger rat, which could walk on its little felt-boot legs and flash its little green electrical eyes. Even though Elizaveta Nikolaevna was embarrassed and scandalized by Basileus’s wanton lewdness, the cat’s fidelity to his aging wife was so touching that she didn’t dare throw her out with the garbage.
However, the feline's fidelity to his wife was unconditional only within the confines of the apartment. The vivid smells of the outside world excited Basileus. Abandoning his spouse to sprawl at people's feet like a snotty child's mitten after their lovemaking, the cat jumped up ponderously onto the windowsill and from there into the frame of a small open window pane. Out there in the free world spring was shining, pigeons were clapping, the courtyard rubbish tip was thawing, blossoming in a rose of odors. Basileus trembled feverishly, letting the chill into his fur; his thick tail, graying at its mighty root, hammered impatiently on the windowpane.

Suddenly he started leaving acrid-smelling puddles around the flat: mingling with the dust, they set into salty lemon-drops. He did this absolutely everywhere he could position his broad rump that resembled a bicycle saddle. Of course, he tried not to get caught, scraping his paw through the air in tense passes to cover over his criminal offense on the quiet—but even so his claws could not help rasping, and Elizaveta Nikolaevna, distraught, came running with a rag. One day she didn't close the laptop and Basileus, after trampling about for a while on the sheets of paper and leaving them strewn with numerous crude hangnail tatters to incriminate himself, somehow managed to take a leak on the keyboard. Before his mistress realized what had happened, the salty goo had corroded the delicate insides of the elegant computer, which was still connected to the mains: it gave a terrible squeal and died.

What happened after that is not known for certain. Pavel Ivanovich, summoned by a desperate phone call at two in the morning, found Elizaveta Nikolaevna in the dark yard, enmeshed in dark springtime arboreal shadows as she rummaged through the bushes, dressed in a badly smeared raincoat and an absurd brown hat that snagged on the branches. Fortunately the fugitive criminal was quickly located: he was sitting growling under a wet iron roundabout, on which a little white cat, as elegant as a small harp, was perched with her eyes narrowed indifferently.

With the thick scruff of his neck gripped in Ertel's fingers, the cat wriggled and squirmed obstinately, rolling the round, bloodshot whites of his eyes. Upstairs they took stock of their losses. Elizaveta was stunned after the domestic battle and her hands were gouged and swollen, so that they looked like overboiled sausages. Basileus's condition was no better: he was limping and howling and blinking his left eye, which wouldn't open properly. He responded to his weeping mistress's attempts to stroke him with furious hissing. Ertel tactfully did not try to ascertain exactly how the cat had managed...
to get out of the apartment, which was secured with two locks and a bolt as hefty as a tram rail. As he poured drops of Corvolol into Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s glass (she stubbornly preferred old man’s medicines to modern remedies) he tried to calm himself by recalling Christopher Smart’s lines:

> For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry. 
> For he is the servant of the Living God, 
> duly and daily serving him. 
> For he will not do destruction, if he is well-fed, 
> neither will he spit without provocation. 
> For he purrs in thankfulness 
> when God tells him he’s a good Cat. 
> For he is an instrument for the children 
> to learn benevolence upon. 
> For every house is incomplete without him 
> and a blessing is lacking in the spirit.

The next morning Ertel drove the injured miscreant to a veterinary clinic. Elizaveta Nikolaevna didn’t go, remaining at home with an array of medicines long past their “discard after” date on the bedside locker and her terrible hands, with their yellow iodine streaks and arthritically gleaming filled-gold rings, lying on top of the blanket. Imprisoned in the travelling basket, the cat raged so furiously on the backseat, the sound was like someone playing soccer with a deflated ball. Distracted by this outrageous behavior from the complicated route that was shot through with the honking of horns and jangling of nerves, Ertel struggled against the temptation to have the cat put to sleep at the clinic and finally get started on matters that were his direct responsibility as the household taxidermist. He was saved from temptation by the sight of a boy sitting in the corridor of the clinic with a fat, silky daschund on his knees. The boy looked like his elder son, Peter: the same ginger hair and round, protruding ears with crimson rims—and a stranger’s eyes, clouded with tears. The daschund was obviously in a bad way: it was breathing with difficulty and its face looked like an old, squishy mushroom. There it was again, passionate love for a helpless creature unfitted for life. Ertel’s heart was suddenly smitten by various little details that had seen him on his way as he left Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s apartment: the bald rug in the hallway, the small, patched shoes, all black, the shabby glove on the mirror-stand, the battered parquet flooring.
In the doctor's surgery Basileus changed his tack: decanted onto the metal table, he clawed the standard sheet in under himself and huddled up into a furry bundle. The local Dr. Doolittle looked more like a plumber (the brown moustache reminiscent of a thin crust from a Borodinsky loaf had associations with the sniffing of dark rye bread after the drinking of vodka): the first thing he did was examine Ertel from head to foot, apparently remaining satisfied with his impressions. Nurses were summoned, smelling very strongly of very different perfumes and talking very loudly among themselves. First of all (with a terrible uproar of mewing and hissing) Basileus's dislocated joint was put back in; then, with the cat totally exhausted and too weak to resist, an entire syringe of thick, beastly blood that colored the test tube like oil was drawn out of him for analysis: then, pressing the cat down against the table, they did something else. Ertel paid. A nurse tapped the end of her shiny pen against her square front teeth and wrote out the bill, Ertel went to the cash desk and then, with his prescriptions, was directed to the veterinary pharmacy located right there, in an appendix of the corridor: it was permeated with a stupefying smell of dry cat foods and decorated with a round aquarium filled with sour liquid that resembled cabbage soup. On Ertel's return to the doctor's surgery an additional bill was waiting for him—and in order to carry out an ultrasound check, they had shaved generous areas of Basileus's belly and side, so that the cat looked like a gnawed corn cob. Ertel paid again, without bothering to count the change this time; he paid as if he was frozen to the bone and heating the stove with money. Meanwhile Basileus's shaved areas were painted with an antiseptic solution that stained the fur around the bald patches green with its chemical herb.

“He'll soon be as right as rain!” the vet declared when he saw how upset Ertel looked—Ertel had no idea how he was going to deal with this punkish green embellishment when the time came to mount the artifact.

Weighed down with a bag of medicines, a bag of dietetic foodstuff and Basileus himself, who peered out through the bars of the travelling basket with inkwell-wide eyes, Ertel walked out onto the porch. The April ultraviolet had bleached the concrete harshly and the steps looked sharp enough to slice open the sole of a shoe. The naked, calloused apple trees glinted like metal and sitting on the nearest one was a blue-back raven—the genuine article, solid-cast with fur trimming round its iron beak, God only knew how it had turned up in the center of Moscow. Lost in admiration, for a moment Ertel forgot about the cat. The raven picked its nose with its foot, extended its wings with a lazy movement, as if for a coat that had been held up behind it,
and took off toward the high, twiggy tree crowns with their dark tangles of half-ruined birds’ nest, above which feathered dots circled with a distant clamor.

“Never mind, I’ll piece you out with squirrel, nobody will even notice,” Ertel, feeling heartened, informed Basileus and gave the basket a friendly pat that drew a yap. His thoughts turned to the workshop, to an e-mail message received two days earlier from a colleague in the British Museum concerning an expedition to a lake on the Kuril Islands to study Steller’s sea eagle. At the same time he could tell that the twilight which had gradually accumulated in his soul had thickened a little more.

Ertel soon learned that the death of the laptop had had dramatic consequences. After pressing the “Enter” key about two hundred times and receiving only flashing and cheeping in reply, Elizaveta Nikolaevna called Mr. K. She was expecting K to come round immediately with a new computer. But he showed up annoyed, with a fine sprinkling of perspiration at the roots of his hair, where there was a silvery glimmer of gray. The day had gone badly for Mr. K: there had been unsuccessful negotiations with the bank and spring was oppressing him—in the harsh sunlight everything seemed black-and-white, strange, like photographic negatives. Of course, that did not justify the scandalous ordeal that K inflicted on the unfortunate widow.

“So,” he said, after rustling the fingers of hands with swollen veins over the dead keyboard. “Well, well . . .” He looked through the latest printouts and the rush of blood to his heavy head made fine red capillaries swell up on the paper, first in one spot, then another.

“I wasn’t able to work yesterday and the day before, Valerian Olegovich, I’m sorry,” the widow apologized as she brought in the teapot.

She was wearing a cotton print housecoat with faded ruffs and long satin gloves that concealed the iodine burns and black scratches. For her honored guest Elizaveta Nikolaevna had taken her dessert plates, frail and ossified with age, out of the sideboard and filled a small bowl with thick jam made from fat, wrinkled cherries. Mr. K’s visits had always been exceedingly pleasant.

“This is work? Are you joking?” Mr. K exclaimed without even turning round.

“Is there something wrong?”

Elizaveta Nikolaevna had not yet caught the whiff of danger. The flattened fingers of the ballroom gloves that had been lying in storage were too long and stuck out like feathers, so the widow handled the tableware rather
clumsily and was afraid that the hot teapot would slip out of her grip. But she should have been afraid of something quite different. Looking up, she saw the best friend of the house crumpling up her work with both of his red hands and tossing the scrunched-up balls onto the carpet.

“Have you any idea how much I demand from all my staff for a quarter of your pay?” Mr. K suddenly shrieked in a hoarse falsetto and stamped his foot.

“But I deliver the bulletins regularly . . .” Plonking the heavy teapot down on the tablecloth, Elizaveta Nikolaevna began nervously gathering her sheets of paper from all over the place, shaking off the pistachio shells and the apple seeds that had stuck to them.

“I asked you to prepare a press review, fuck it!” K screeched hoarsely, suddenly switching to a less respectful tone and a boorish obscenity that made the widow shudder. “But you didn’t do that! You just didn’t bother! You type a word into Yandex and just download everything that comes up. The diaries of some whores or other, chunks of novels—is that what I pay money for?”

“You didn’t complain about anything before,” Elizaveta Nikolaevna said through her nose. “Why are you being so rude and unpleasant now?”

“To get anything sensible out of you I had to hold your hand on the Internet with you, did I? Maybe I’ve got other things to be doing? Shall I tell you what work is? It’s when you flog yourself to death all week and then catch up on things at the weekend! When there’s no fucking way you can be ill, even if you’re dying! And your nerves won’t let you sleep at night! But you just piddle around here for five and a half grand, and I have to bring you a new computer chop-chop to replace the once that was pissed on?”

Elizaveta Nikolaevna slowly sank down into an armchair with her dumb-founded gaze fixed on Mr. K and her eyes filled with piercingly blue tears.

“You mean I’m fired?” she asked helplessly, folding her little satin hands on her tightly closed knees. “What shall I do now?”

“Do I have to answer that question?” K roared.

The drawing room seemed to shudder at his fury and a burgundy picture of some kind scraped its way down the wall in an arc and flopped onto a sofa. That triggered an orgy of destruction. Gazing round with a haunted look, K saw the little things surrounding him on all sides—pitiful, heartrending things no longer worth a kopeck, which could easily have been eliminated with the money from just one of his envelopes, but continued to exist. Grabbing a pile of dessert plates with both hands, he slammed them down with
relish, reducing them to a little heap that looked like the smashed skeleton of a small animal. He tore down the broken shelves that were only supported against the end of the sideboard: crumbling books came tumbling out and a bronze candlestick, green with age, was sent flying, losing its candle stumps.

“What do you need this for?” he demanded, brandishing a shopping bag with jangling clasps under Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s nose. “Didn’t I give you enough money? Can’t you buy something better? Don’t forget, I paid for all this!” He waved his arm at the destruction, which seemed entirely inadequate to him, despite all his efforts. “Why do you wear this stuff? Well?” he flung open the creaking door of the wardrobe and tore the first pink rag that came to hand off the hangers.

“Leave that alone, it was my mother’s dress,” Elizaveta Nikolaevna whispered haughtily, raising her slim eyebrows, leaden against her white, wrinkled forehead.

That flabby dress with the elongated sleeves was a terrible thing: Mr. K ripped it from the collar down, scattering decorative beads that had once been golden, but now looked like millet. He shattered the wardrobe mirror by pummelling it with the candlestick. He trampled all the hats and one—a round one with a dried rose—kept springing back and carried on breathing under his heel for a long time. Elizaveta Nikolaevna wept silently, with her chin trembling and her mouth swollen and wet, as if she was blowing tremulous kisses through the air. Mr. K had darkness in his eyes and a sharp pain in his side. And the more tired he became, the more clearly the broken and torn things acquired even more of that shrill, potent force of unhappiness that had toyed with his dark-red bull’s heart for so long. In the end that inspired helplessness had sucked it dry to the very last drop; the more mediocre he seemed to himself, the more significant seemed the small figure of the aggrieved woman sitting in the pose of a great actress. And then, as he panted for breath, K realized that the broken plates would be glued back together and someone would be served well-aired dessert on these pottery pancakes, that the hats would be straightened out and worn in their battered state, the dried rose that had come off would be sewn back on with a thread, and that thread would pierce someone’s inexperienced heart; that the shelves would be picked up and set in place, bound round with insulating tape in several places; that the burgundy picture would be hung back up on the same crooked nail, and the deep scratches left on it would become the most important element of the family-heirloom canvas.

And as soon as he realized what his labors would actually achieve, Eliza-
veta Nikolaevna got up out of her armchair with her wet face glittering. The strength of her blood and her rectitude was apparently so great that tapestry-scarlet spots bled through the satin gloves. At that unerringly divined and brilliantly enacted moment, she was so exceptionally, agonizingly lovely, that if Ertel could have seen her, he wouldn’t have been able to sleep for a week. Although of course, in the logic of things, just such a moment was being prepared for him in the future. But for now, with a satin index finger that looked like a goose’s beak, Elizaveta Nikolaevna directed Mr. K out of the ransacked drawing room into the hallway and from there out into the stairwell. There was nothing he could do but retreat, giving the cat that showed up under his feet a kick at the last moment.

After that K seemed to lose his soul. He immediately turned heavier, as if the very cells of his body had suddenly been packed tightly together and crumpled up, like berries in a jar, exuding lots of red juice. The very next day he threw the orphan from Kharkov out of the apartment rented for her, without even letting her pack her bags; her ejected wardrobe scattered in an avalanche across the wide stairway and the tearstained orphan, catching her high heels in her exclusive glad rags—which made her resemble a parachutist with his parachute dragging along behind him—hammered in vain on the closed door and swore in vain into her rhinestone-spangled mobile phone: her sponsor, who had ensconced himself in the kitchen to demolish the reserves of delicacies, didn’t come out. Soon the unrecognizable K stopped financing a sports team of handicapped children—on the very eve of a competition for which the young wheelchair users had been training for six months, bellowing with the effort. While making his position clear to the trainer—she was a big, powerful, yellow-haired woman who used to be a hammer-thrower and could literally carry her darling little children on her hands—Mr. K blurted out: “Their kind should be drowned at birth to put them out of their misery!” —and a journalist who happened to be close by recorded the fateful comment on his dictaphone. And thus ended, almost before it had begun, Mr. K’s campaign for election to the Moscow Duma.

But K didn’t stop there. The authors to whom he had long ago promised sponsorship for the publication of several books were treated to a postmodernist performance in the spirit of Dostoevsky. After inviting a delegation to his exclusive residence at Nikolina Gora, he received the eminent writers in the sunny, gilded drawing room, where a fire was blazing fiercely in the elegant fireplace, despite the warm June weather. As their skin drew tight across
their red faces and softened moistly like butter under their clothes, the authors’ intuitive sensitivity to the significance of details told them that this flame—which was semitransparent in the sunlight, making it look more like an electrical effect—had been kindled for a reason. And they were proved right. After meticulously checking the estimated budget, their gracious host at the villa brought in the money in cash, mouthwatering ten-thousand-dollar wads (something that no one had been expecting)—and for some reason in a copper coal bucket. The literati relaxed, setting down the coffee cups that had been sucked dry on a low table as they prepared to engage in the enjoyable financial procedure. But Mr. K, grinning with the left side of his yellowish teeth, flung first one plump wad into the fire, and then another. The third hit the front grille of the hearth and flopped down onto the carpet. The writers exchanged glances. The solid blocks of money kindled reluctantly, lying there like half-browned bricks and giving off wisps of suffocating smoke, like damp firewood. The only woman in the delegation, a poetess with a brown mouth that looked like liver, who was dressed in lacy, open-worked clothes that she had knitted herself, started applauding tragically. Mr. K took no notice of her. Leaning down ponderously, he picked up the little block with his finger and thumb and launched it after the others—into the bright flames that were barely distinguishable from the hot air radiating out through the drawing room in tremulous waves.

“Gentlemen, consider that the manuscripts have burned!” K declared.

“You could have burned your money without us,” growled an elderly novelist with a striped tie, clambering out of a deep armchair with his potbelly lolling over to one side.

“Without you—no way!” K retorted.

And so saying, he bowed, presenting to the writers’ gaze a fresh bald patch running right across his head, like a long lick from a cow’s tongue. The writers trooped out, feeling slightly insulted, but realizing nonetheless that this incident was of some professional concern to them. They travelled back to Moscow in pensive mood. The forest clearings flickered by so delightfully at the sides of the road and the poplar fluff, impregnated with low sunlight, drifted toward the car in such precise formation, like a galaxy in a Hollywood movie, that the elderly novelist became positively maudlin. He recalled his young days and how he had once burned money—a five-rouble note—to light his cigarette with a dashing flourish, and the long flaming torch had consumed his luxuriant forelock and reduced his Cossack curls to stubby roots. That evening and in the days that followed the writers told their
acquaintances and their acquaintances’ acquaintances the story of what had happened, and the story was liked rather than not. A group of performance artists sent a delegate, the well-known Vasya Sadov, to Mr. K to express their delighted admiration for the performance and invite him to burn dollars publicly in the Museum of Modern Art. Vasya was taken under his big white arms and flung out of the house onto the lawn.

Ertel met Mr. K in late autumn, at the private Rhinoceros Club, to which he was regularly invited as a guest by Mr. T, who had developed a liking for contemplating the contents of a vintage bottle in the company of the taciturn German. Mr. K joined them unexpectedly, as if he had materialized out of thin air. This materialization, however, was a substantial one that jolted the table, shifting the tableware along one place and setting the drinks in the glasses swaying.

“So what are you cooing about here, my long-nosed doves?” K said in greeting to his old acquaintances. “Fuck the lot of them!” he declared, punctuating his toast with a wave of the dolefully glugged carafe of vodka that he had brought with him.

K’s appearance had changed quite dramatically. He was now almost completely bald, but he had grown a beard that looked like the spongy roots of the curly thatch he had lost so suddenly. This relocation of his hair made his face look as if it had been turned upside down, and every now and then his red eyes were flooded with stressful tears—which did not, however, have anything to do with his feelings.

“Being charitable to the widow, are you? Eh, Vova? Come on, tell me about it, I’m interested!” said Mr. K, jabbing the melancholy T in the shoulder. “Take money to her, do you? Do you give her a lot?”

“That’s a commercial secret,” T replied imperturbably, polishing the stem of his glass with his flat fingers.

“A secret? So that’s how it is . . . But why do you go running round there, if that’s not a secret?”

“It’s easier for me that way,” T declared in an entirely transparent voice, leaning back on his chair and gazing up at the ceiling.

“Well, and how about you, mister knackerman?” asked K, turning to Ertel.

Ertel shrugged without saying anything. Mr. K seemed to have reached the state in which everyone can be spoken to familiarly. He was not a client of the workshop. The hunters said that he squeezed a shot out of a pistol with both hands, shooting down at his feet and jumping high in the air. Ertel
was merely on nodding terms with Mr. K and didn’t think he had spoken more than a couple of phrases to him in all the time they had been acquainted. Which made him even less inclined to chat with a man whose very name was enough to start Elizaveta Nikolaevna crying—with those blue, blue eyes of hers that looked like wet cornflowers clumped up in the rain: she mentioned K’s name more often than any other, claiming that she dreamed about him every night.

“Well long-noses? Long-noses, I’m talking to you! They just sit there saying nothing, like lords, looking in different directions, bah, so high and mighty . . .” Meticulously establishing contact between the carafe and the vodka glass, Mr. K poured himself a shot with a convex, bulging top and flung it into his throat without spilling a drop. “Well then, what does she say about me?” he asked, filching a translucent strip of Parma ham off T’s plate.

“She says you’re a scoundrel and a petty tyrant, that you mocked her with that job of yours and that no one has ever treated her like that before,” said Ertel, unable to restrain himself: he stared in loathing at one of K’s chocolate-colored jacket buttons in order not to look at K himself.

“A scoundrel? Ah no, only a good man could land up in that kind of shit!” K declared so loudly that even the highly trained waiters, who looked two-dimensional when they weren’t moving, all gazed at this VIP from their corners. “I am a man of many sins,” K continued with phoney Russian pathos. “Just like you, you sanctimonious pair, just like you. But it turns out that you’re good men too, doesn’t it? Now there’s an amusing thing . . . I would never have thought anything like that about you. And even less about myself. Don’t you pull that face, Vova. It’s not a matter of money. There’s no one really poor here. I could have afforded to pay a hundred widows like that, I could have given the money away and not even noticed. But she sucked me dry in some different way. The bitch, the lousy bitch, a roadside weed with the sting of a nettle. All that stuff I carted round there! I solved all her problems for her. And after that I’m a scoundrel!”

“Was she supposed to just put up with it, then?” Ertel asked indignantly.

“Why shouldn’t she?” K snarled. “I’ve got thirty people or more who put up with it! I give them the rough side of my tongue, but then I let them steal a bit. I don’t need completely honest people, let them filch just a little bit, that puts them deeper in my debt. But I gave her money, with my own hands. And I was happy! And why? For the sake of that late-departed man of hers? What’s he to me, the old knucklehead, may he rest easy. So what do you reckon, reverend fathers, how old is the widow?”
“Ladies hide that sort of thing,” Mr. T replied somnolently, still drifting somewhere close to the ceiling, in the azure expanses of pseudopalatial frescoes that led the eye up into radiant heavens shimmering in the light of the chandelier.

“Would you like to know?” asked Mr. K, staring wide-eyed at his opponent’s bloodless face that seemed painted in milk. “Well, listen anyway. She hides her age, only the other way round. She’s thirty-six! I know, because I registered her for the job. But dress her in different clothes and take her to a beauty parlor, and she wouldn’t look even twenty-six. Take a close look and it’s positively frightening how well-preserved she is! She’s in mint condition! But she makes out she’s an old woman. A pensioner! My Liuska from Kharkov was a hundred times more honest than her. She offered what she had and kept it all in good shape. Tore the hairs off her legs with plasters—and didn’t she yell! All the Little Liuskas do that, they want to marry rich men. And they’re right. The little widow could get herself into marketable condition too, and then who would ever turn her down? Ah, but no. She plays her little game with us. Have you noticed the way she drags her feet? That’s why her slippers are all tattered. Not worn, but torn, like old hot water bottles. Because she can run like a mountain goat! But she deliberately shuffles her feet along the ground. It’s a mystery to me why she doesn’t fall over at every step she takes!”

“She lived with old people for too long. Maybe she thinks that only old people have a right to loving care and peace,” said Ertel, panicking as he felt the pressure of imminent tears of tenderness for Elizaveta Nikolaevna increasing the weight of his nose to a kilogram.

“No, don’t you defend her,” the seriously inebriated K objected, raking his fingers through his unfamiliar beard. “Our little pensioner’s not that simple. She doesn’t pretend to be an old woman just so that people will pity her. It’s the way she stops time. Do you understand what I just said? Nothing changes at her place. Even the clocks in her apartment are all quiet, they just whisper. So, naturally, your first impulse is to go running to help, delighted to do it. You can’t spend all your time just raking in loot! And she cranks up that first impulse over and over again, like a record. Again and again. Everyone seems to be happy. Only a man can’t put up with that sort of thing for long. Of course, I behaved badly. But I broke free. And in the end you’ll do the same as I did. Or maybe one of you will actually kill her!” After saying that, he started laughing and prodded the other men in the ribs with his finger.
“So she’s a femme fatale. The Venus of Moscow,” T commented ironi-
cally, shifting himself and his chair away from K’s undue familiarity. “When
I read Pushkin’s Queen of Spades as a kid, I thought it was that young floozy,
the ward, dressing up as the old countess and pulling German’s leg. She was
called Liza too, as a matter of fact . . .”

“What harm did she ever do you?” Ertel exclaimed irritably, turning to
K. “She lives the best way she can! Don’t help her if you don’t want to, but
why kill her?”

“How should I know what she did to me? You just take a look at me!” said
K, squeezing his eyes shut to make it less awkward for Ertel to look, and con-
torting his face into a grimace of such agonized anticipation that Ertel could
immediately picture how pitiful and old K was in his sleep, when he couldn’t
see himself. “But I don’t want to help,” K declared, coming back to life. “Not
her or anyone else. It’s a vile business. So what if it costs me more that way!
When New Year comes round, I’ll order my lads to catch a Santa Claus and
I’ll beat his face to a pulp to teach him not to go around with a sack. As for
you, my long-nosed doves, you have my sympathy. You’re both such very
serious people, you’ve got everything under control. But you have no way of
predicting how your charitable romance will end, do you? You’re stuck,
right?”

“We’re stuck,” T readily agreed. “The best thing will be if all this ends in
nothing. Personally, I’m not clinging to anything and I don’t want anything
from Elizaveta Nikolaevna. I’m not even particularly keen to see her. If it all
fizzles out, then praise the Lord.”

“No chance! You’ll have your own finale,” K promised menacingly.

Clutching the neck of the carafe, he got up off his back-to-front chair
with a terrible grating sound and wandered off through the restaurant, as if
he was fording a raging torrent. He was immediately pursued by two impe-
cable tailor’s dummies in broad-shouldered gray suits, who had been standing
beside one of the golden unicorns which decorated the dining room and
which, in Ertel’s professional view, had more pronounced musculature than
a horse ought to have. Through the doorway they could see the dummies
pushing aside the elderly cloakroom attendant who looked like a goose and
helping their boss into a massively broad, hairy coat, and the boss floundering
about, unable to reach the bottom of the sleeves.

“It’s hard to believe that he’s an important man, a new manufacturer, the
darling of his ministry. But I did warn him not to keep going to see Elizaveta
Nikolaevna, I said no good would come of it,” T declared in a pedantic tone,
allowing a waiter with his hair slicked sideways across his head from ear to ear to clear away the almost untouched plates. “Charity should be kept at the level of bookkeeping and within the limits of policy. That’s the only way to conceal the fact that there’s nothing we can do. And, basically, nothing we really want to do . . .” he added indifferently, gazing into the hall, where several very famous faces were chewing, strangely plebianized by the act of feeding, and, as always, there were many free tables.

That ruined evening left a heavy residue in Ertel’s heart. K’s grimace in anticipation of pain appeared before his eyes again and again, as well as his bald patch with the skin stretched tautly over it, as if the brain beneath had been tied in a knot. He could understand now that for all their power, the movers and shakers of this world—or many of them, at least—were weak in the face of their own human feelings, and that was why they replaced those feelings with copies that could be circulated safely. Pavel Ivanovich himself had appreciated the convenience afforded by these certificates when he found to his own surprise that he had switched to using them himself.

One day he had suddenly admitted to himself that he no longer loved his wife. This stirred up a storm of such acute pity for Anna that he didn’t take his hands off her for a week. He kissed the dry parting of her hair, where the gray roots glinted silver, and at night he couldn’t wait for her to come out of the bathroom, looking like a magic lantern in her semitransparent nightdress, and turn out the light. With his newly heightened vision he saw spots of mustard where once there had been laughing freckles and noted that for a long time the crude copper of those still large, heavy curls had been dye. He formulated the wrenching feeling that he experienced like this: gray hair and wrinkles are the same thing for a woman as scars for a man—the marks left by life, worthy of respectful love and admiration. He was prepared to accept this new Anna he had suddenly seen because only he knew how much sublime patience and heroism life—life with him—had required from her.

Disastrously, Anna started avoiding him and crying quietly in secret: it was impossible to bear this muffled howling from a woman who had never cried before and the vivacious manner in which she turned her red, dry eyes away from her grief to her bewildered husband. Finally she asked, as if she was committing some shameful act, if Osip Borisovich had phoned (a doctor of that name, a fat man with dove-gray hair and the manners of a big boss, monitored the Ertels’ health under the terms of their family policy) and told him in secret that Anna had been diagnosed with cancer. That put an end to
it all. Ertel calmed his wife and assured her that she didn’t have any cancer and couldn’t possibly have. They spent a wonderful evening on a riverboat plodding unhurriedly along the silky-lilac River Moscow—a genial roadway between the heaped-up banks interlaced with sorrow, where church domes flashed with bright sunset gold like stars among the clouds. After that Ertel always presented Anna with a superbly crafted, scrupulously verified copy of everything that he used to feel for her before. This put her completely at her ease, except that occasionally she would suddenly prick up her ears and gaze around with the bewilderment of someone who has been woken by a strange sound in an unfamiliar place. It turned out that Anna’s sight had deteriorated, she had to get glasses, and despite all their efforts to select a frame in the very best salons, any glasses always made her look rather foolish. Pavel Ivanovich was very well aware, especially on those evenings when he went home from Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s place, that the woman waiting for him in that home, who polished every object in it with a special cleansing agent and read the latest fashionable novel with MaxMara spectacles on her large, helpless face, was the person with whom he was going to spend the rest of his life.

Nonetheless, Ertel started seeing Elizaveta Nikolaevna more and more often. He became insistent. Once, arriving very much later than the appointed time after trampling the downy softness of the first fall of snow outside the blank door of her entrance, he made an attempt to declare his feelings after all. Reduced completely to the beating of his heart and hands resting clumsily on the table, he appealed for help to his ancient, long-ago declaration to Anna—it was summer then at someone else’s creaking dacha: hobbled horses made angular chess moves across a smoky, dappled meadow with a dull jingle of harness bells—and the result was that, instead of declaring his feelings, Ertel invited Elizaveta Nikolaevna to go riding in Gorky Park. She declined with a smile of astonishment, complaining that she was afraid of horses and in general of all animals larger than a cat. In the hope that she would find what was frightening also rather interesting, Ertel invited her to the workshop, justifying the invitation by saying that if she wanted to have Basileus mounted, she really ought to take a look at the production process.

She arrived unexpectedly, delivered in an unknown car by an unknown man: as youthful as a schoolgirl, with her tresses set in clumsy coils that had already come uncurled, wearing a snowflake-spangled arctic-fox cap that suited her remarkably well. Excited, Ertel barely managed to rinse the dead fluids off his hands (he was preparing a moose’s head, which was hastily con-
cealed under a bloodsoaked rag) before he took her on a tour. The most interesting items in the workshop included a black caiman, frozen in the vigorous pose of an army-style push-up; a plump, rounded zebra, who looked as if she had been inflated and provoked an almost irresistible desire to slap her so that she would jump; an oryx antelope with a powerful bullish chest and straight ribbed horns; a huge polar bear that Ertel had set up on its hind legs. Elizaveta Nikolaevna touched the horns, the teeth, the mounds of coarse bear’s fur; she glanced into the beasts’ eyes—Ertel knew better than anyone else how to bring them alive, with a moist tear. There was no womanish pity for the poor animals in her, only childlike curiosity; Ertel had never seen her so animated before. After the tour, as if they were at the zoo, he treated her to hazelnut ice cream that was opportunely discovered in the refrigerator. Sitting in the cramped little staff kitchen (all the staff had discreetly sneaked off to various places with their grimy ashtrays and liter mugs of coffee), they chatted far more freely than in the plush drawing room. Elizaveta Nikolaevna suddenly started telling him about her granny, who was a famous flyer in the ‘30s and ‘40s, and her mother, whom she remembered only vaguely, just a voice and pale hands hovering above an embroidery frame. The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the stentorian media magnate who had commissioned the bear. Ertel departed from his usual practice by not dealing with the client himself but entrusting him to the care of his efficient assistants, while he drove Elizaveta Nikolaevna home through thick, obliquely drifting snow, along softened streets that seemed to have been spread with fluffy white sheets. He would never forget the way Elizaveta Nikolaevna waved to him from the steps of the porch—there was so much joy and youth in that gesture—and how the bracelet of her watch glinted between her sleeve and her glove.

She began changing, slowly and unevenly; one day she seemed like a young girl, grotesquely dressed but very pretty, with a pearly smile; another day she would turn into an old woman of seventy—a flabby, delicate maggot decorously arrayed in fine, crumpled lace. These changes were feverish and too rapid, as if grandmother and granddaughter were living by turns in the same cramped little body. All the indications were that when Elizaveta Nikolaevna was a teenager some catastrophe that occurred in her family had resulted in a total ban on being alive. A youthful creature, with no right to make mistakes, gazing straight ahead with strangely dull eyes—that is what diligent little girls become if they are deprived too early of loving care and guidance. Ertel was struck by that dull gaze in a seventh-grade photograph.
showing the future little widow, the smallest of all the still-figureless girls, sitting in the front row with her hands clasped in a familiar knot on her knees. Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s hands, which seemed to be covered in cigarette paper, were the wounded and clumsy hands of a stepdaughter—although Ertel couldn’t detect any visible evidence of a stepmother’s presence in the family. Apparently, instead of tempering the obedient schoolgirl’s will, the catastrophe had stunned her. And in this stunned condition she had come into the possession of her old husband, whose extra chins and timid manner of taking hold of a rifle by the barrel, as if it was a poker, Ertel now recalled with a strangely acrid despair.

But now the little woman seemed to be trying to pass back through that catastrophe to a place where the fatal talent of burning up all the reserves of goodness in a man was not yet a part of her. And she was inviting Ertel to participate in the change. Many times she showed him her family album—an entire copper-bound trunk covered in worn leather that barely fitted onto the knees of two people sitting close beside each other. The pilot-granny in the stiff old photos had a round peasant face with eyes as white as ash, and two medals on her black tunic looking like two iron hearts planted out in a row; in the photographs, just as in Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s memory, all that was left of the mother was a bright blur, in which it was possible to discern a terrible thinness of the kind that very ill people or heavy drinkers have. The photographs seemed to record the woman’s disappearance, her literal withdrawal into herself; in one that was more distinct than the others, it was possible to make out a feeble tress of hair dangling down onto a nose and something violinesque in the movement of a hand raising a needle.

“Mummy always sewed with very long threads,” said Elizaveta Nikolaevna, as if she was surprised at herself, and it was clear that she had completely forgotten about this and only just remembered.

Ertel waited for Elizaveta Nikolaevna to tell him about something else. But she only sighed and narrowed her eyes: her bony little hand rested in Ertel’s hand for long periods now and the pressure of that angular squeeze with the prickly rings remained with him in his deep, warm glove. He understood that change was precarious for Elizaveta Nikolaevna. As long as she remained a “little old pensioner,” by old people’s standards she had an immense amount of time in reserve, forty or fifty years; as an old woman she was almost immortal, in some complex, metaphysical fashion she was protected from death and serious illness. But if she went back to her adolescence and started from there, she was catastrophically short of time, because then
a large chunk of her life—the best chunk—had been stolen. But even so Elizaveta Nikolaevna was casting off the shackles of decrepit old age acquired in her youth. The old woman’s world, dangerously slippery and abounding in treacherous potholes and steep steps, was turning springy once again beneath her worn-out boots and the little widow was becoming bolder and bolder in her pedestrian forays, both alone and arm-in-arm with Ertel. As he helped his companion maintain her balance along a tall curb, Ertel seemed to be holding a faithless, fluttering happiness by the wing; Elizaveta Nikolaevna laughed and dropped her hot cap off her flattened curls as she jumped down onto the pavement.

Meanwhile the future was becoming more and more uncertain. Now Ertel had no idea at all what would become of him and the little widow. The usual uncertainty of tomorrow, into which a person steps without thinking, had suddenly acquired new volumes of space, and it seemed as if literally two steps ahead the ground would suddenly break off at a yawning abyss.

It started with the neighbors being robbed—the same neighbors who had bought Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s jewelry from her for a knock-down price. The thieves took the brooch and the watch—together with a frostbitten little brick of money hidden between the humpbacked chunks of meat in the refrigerator, as well as handfuls of high-metal-content gold jewelry with which the owner of the flat, a merited functionary of Soviet trade, had stuffed the pockets of her old coats. Elizaveta Nikolaevna felt alarmed and even went to look at the scene of the crime. The neighbor was sitting alongside her gaping wardrobe, swaying from side to side and no doubt feeling herself robbed many times over in all her plump tweeds and yellowed arctic-fox furs, hanging there with their pockets turned inside out and their sleeves flung up absurdly. In the kitchen, beside the refrigerator, a heap of reddish-brown meat was oozing watery blood, like a frozen mammoth thawing out, and the local militiaman, with an expression of habitual dissatisfaction on his snub-nosed face, was writing out a report.

Arriving several days later, Ertel noticed a new disorder in the apartment, a disorder that was horizontal as opposed to the usual vertical disorder resulting from the falling of objects and settling of dust. The sloppily reshuffled books and crookedly jammed drawers would immediately have told any thief from which old hiding place to which new one the flat’s owner had moved her money. Elizaveta Nikolaevna must have accumulated a substantial sum, and so far she had not felt at all concerned about what might happen
to her nest egg, but that was wrong; while she stayed at home, she was protected by the monumental bolt, but in her absence all she had to rely on were two rickety locks, as primitive and flimsy as children’s clockwork toys. Ertel spent the evening explaining to Elizaveta Nikolaevna what a bank was and how to open an account.

“To be honest, I’m afraid to go to them, what if they close down or move somewhere else, how will I find them then?” she said plaintively, giving Ertel a sullen look. “Or if they simply refuse to give the money back? It’s not exactly mine, as it were. They’ll ask where I got it from.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. We’ll go together and sort out all the problems,” Ertel said patiently, trying to persuade her. “In a bank, in a personal deposit account, the money becomes legally yours, no one else can get at it. Why don’t I take you there tomorrow?”

“No, no, I haven’t made my mind up yet,” Elizaveta Nikolaevna said, blushing as she obscured the pencil columns of figures and dividend totals with her elbow. “I’ll give it a bit more thought, perhaps it’s not worth going to all that bother . . .”

She seemed to be embarrassed about the accumulated sum, as if it was some kind of gumboil that had developed gradually and she feared a trip to the bank like a visit to the dentist. Ertel decided it was best not to insist and expose the extent of Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s prosperity, hoping that a rational decision would mature spontaneously. Meanwhile Basileus, gagging repulsively, vomited up an acrid puddle of stomach contents onto the carpet and slunk off behind the sofa with his low backside wagging. They spent the rest of the evening cleaning up after the cat and discussing a new trip to the vet. Basileus snoozed in an armchair, with his flop-eared, shapeless, withered dahlia of a head trembling, and they could see that the cat was already rounding out with the dense fat of old age and perhaps there was not long left now until the moment when the enamored taxidermist would pull his faded skin onto the plaster mount.

And then, without the slightest forewarning, the following happened.

On a dull winter morning the traffic was shambling round Moscow, shuffling its feet. The ice-crusted asphalt with its low-swirling, glittering snow and bleary white road markings was like an endless sequence of x-rays. The traffic jams glowed like Titanics; the pedestrians hurrying across the zebra-stripe crossing toward their faceted green light were like incorporeal shadows, elongated by the headlights of the conglomerated vehicles. Nobody took any notice of the old woman in the absurd brown hat who crept up out of the
damp metro with little bitty steps and also headed for the crossing, clutching a tattered shopping bag against herself as if it was some treasure of incredible value. Cautiously abandoning the pavement, the old granny set off on her tiny little feet, mincing across the wheel-polished ice that skewed her steps slantwise—and someone in the oncoming stream of pedestrians jostled her.

Afterwards many witnesses to the incident were haunted by the feeling that everything that happened had been arranged deliberately. Many of them had the impression that several seconds before the first squeal of brakes they had sensed a certain connection between the murky road surface, an advertisement billboard with an image of a gigantic mobile phone, a roofed-over planking walkway with the dark, stale brick crusts of buildings under demolition behind it, an orange worker in the little glass box of a hoist, repairing the vertical sign of a bank, and a kiosk selling fruit by the metro. The most sensitive among them said they had felt as if they were suddenly enclosed within a huge mechanical toy, like those in which a jolt sets beer-bottle caps tipping over in a long conveyor movement, little balls are released and a weight drops down. Everything had been calculated down to the last second and millimeter, the only thing missing was the old woman, who duly crept out onto the icebound stage with her dreadful hat, that seemed to have a faded and withered funeral wreath trembling feebly on it.

So, the old woman was jostled and the jolt sent the shopping bag hanging on her elbow flying to land prone on the ice. With her feet skittering, the old granny leaned down to retrieve her property, and just then the green pedestrian light changed to red. The cars waiting at the zebra slowly set off and slowly drove round her, swamping the doddering figure in headlights and angry honking, and in the interplay of bright rays, glassy wings seemed to sprout from its rounded back. As ill luck would have it, the bag was still squirming about on the slippery surface. Meanwhile the first batch of cars had ebbed away and a huge Jeep came roaring along the open roadway, grinning with its bumper as it sped downhill toward the green light.

At this point the old woman should have abandoned her baggage and made her escape. She had more than enough time to reach the pavement with her doddering little steps. But the half-witted granny carried on fumbling about in the middle of the road, as if she was washing the floor. The driver of the Jeep hadn’t expected this. Afterwards no one could grasp what was so valuable about the empty-bellied bag of cobbler’s imitation leather that was presented at the inquiry together with its contents, namely: a threadbare purse with two hundred and thirty roubles in cash; a little old cambric
handkerchief, as flimsy as blotting paper; a passport in the name of Elizaveta
Nikolaevna Rakitina, born 1969; a squashed tube of lipstick, like a boiled
sweet with a raspberry center; promotional leaflets for the Universal Bank,
whose sign was being repaired at the time by the worker in the orange hel-
met; a metro travel card for ten journeys; two crude apartment-door keys on
a wire ring. Certain people, including Ertel and Mr. K, who had withdrawn
into serial bouts of heavy drinking, could have suggested the approximate
sum of money that had disappeared from the bag, which had passed through
many hands before the official report was drawn up; the time would come
soon enough for them to be horrified at what had become of the sum total
of their generous envelopes—because no one found any money hidden in the
little widow’s apartment.

The old woman eventually managed to grab her bag by the little tail of
its zip fastener. She straightened up, holding her back, but it was too late. The
driving snow flew at her, ablaze with electricity, and through this brilliant
blizzard, through the cold lights that buffeted her like firemen’s high-pressure
hoses, trying to sweep her off the asphalt, she still had time to see the hazy
blotch of the driver’s face, looking like a full moon. Meanwhile the driver
(he was round-faced and pockmarked) swore vociferously at the old woman
and his bald tires; suddenly he saw her huge, reddish-brownish hat tumble
over backwards and in that same moment transparent wings fluttered and
trembled behind her back. The young woman performed flying maneuvers
in front of his bumper, raising the imitation leather bag into the air and laugh-
ing. Snarling obscenities, the driver swung the wheel hard round, sensing
that from that moment on his boss’s Grand Cherokee belonged to him and
him alone forever. Ahead of him, on the crowded pavement, he saw a gap as
empty as the collapse of reason; lurching sideways so that it dealt the golden-
haired angel a mere glancing blow, the immensely heavy Jeep hurtled
toward the gap, literally bounding into the air to smash into the rasping, grat-
ing base of the framework of the billboard.

The advertisement billboard began tilting over very slowly as a dozen
pigeons launched off it with creaking wings, and its corner cleaved through
the tin roof of the fruit kiosk. The warmly muffled saleswoman howled and
clambered out over the display, bright-colored fruit spurted out of boxes,
dancing like lottery balls, and one lucky orange rolled along precisely the
right line to end up under the feet of a droopy-lipped fellow who was pushing
a limping trolley with a tower of canned drinks to the nearest shop. The fel-
low got his short rabbit-legs tangled together around the orange and the
tower started jiggling about, fracturing into a tight honeycomb, and slid off
into the road. Loud pops rang out from under wheels, sweet foam swept
down the incline in a wave and cars dragging along crushed cans and scraps
of plastic spun into a waltz across both lanes of the road. Tinny old bangers
and thoroughbred foreign imports exchanged hard blows, trunk doors sprung
open, broken windscreens showered onto the road, passengers flitted about
inside cars like bats. A few seconds later a heap of crumpled metal slammed
straight into the plain face of the hydraulic hoist truck, which was already
trying to reverse and simultaneously lower the hoist with the little worker,
who was tugging frantically at scraping cables. But something had jammed
in the metallic joints: the sign jolted together with the truck and the hoist,
then it started sparking, with all the reddish brand-name lights of the Uni-
versal Bank flaring and flickering, and then it collapsed onto the roofed-over
walkway like a massive New Year tree. The flimsy planking structure, not de-
signated to withstand such a blow, teetered and started folding up with a loud
crash; falling toward the gates of the demolition site in a long wave full of run-
ing legs, it looked like a caterpillar having convulsions, pinned down by the
fading, half-demolished bank sign. A cautious open-platform truck trying to
creep in through the iron gates that had been opened for it was forced to
brake sharply for people darting out of the walkway.

In response to the sudden jolt, the load being delivered to the site, which
from a distance looked like some gigantic visual aid for teaching physics,
boomed and shuddered, and the final act of the mechanical tragedy began.
No doubt the cast-iron wrecking ball’s intended use was to destroy the brick-
work remains, which still bore accretions of human life on their inside—lines
of moldy, tattered wallpaper on each level, like the rings of organic matter left
behind in an empty soup pan—but now it smashed crudely through its tim-
ber frame and sidled down onto the asphalt, like a fat woman. Pitted with
rusty caverns and looking as if it had been scorched by cosmic temperatures,
it gathered speed as it trundled down that same infernal incline; it acquired
stripes, and the wet stripe round the middle, the stripe of trembling moisture
wound onto it by its own rotation, glinted coldly. Cooing tenderly and skip-
ning along, the iron mass careered toward a pearly-green BMW that had
avoided the main waltz but had still, to its owner’s annoyance, received two
crooked scratches on its pristine bonnet. The collision was head-on—the gri-
macing automobile seemed to gag on the sour iron and something like an
overripe melon, covered with bright cracks, swelled up on its windscreen—
and that was the end of it all.
In this unprecedented road traffic accident dozens of people were hurt, suffering injuries of varying severity. Fortunately, however, there were only three fatalities: the young woman who had dawdled on the crossing, the driver of the Jeep, whose ribcage was crushed by his steering wheel, and the owner of the BMW, who suffered a basal skull fracture. The death of the latter individual transformed this item of road transport news into a political sensation. By a strange coincidence, the dead man was the very same young financier who had vanquished the African rhinoceros, and his craving for heroics had made him a leader of shaven-headed youths with heads like pink rattles, on which they wore tattoos of a sign that had sprouted little roots and branches, but was still perfectly recognizable as a swastika. The organization, originally conceived as decorative and financed as such, had already ceased to be a mere steam-release whistle; the charisma of the leader, who adored the flapping of flags behind his back, had driven the youths into street protests reminiscent of invasions by swarms of locusts—and meanwhile the leader, having grown a dark rye-bread beard to improve his macho rating, was appearing ever more often on the pages of the glossies and willingly giving interviews. The salvos of liberal indignation only worked to his advantage. To the great annoyance of the political scriptwriters, he demonstrated the ability to feed off all forms of energy directed against him—and he was growing in stature before people’s eyes, forcing them to ponder seriously on what was written in his destiny. The iron wrecking ball broke off the leader’s career at a most unexpected point—and in the heat of the moment the deliberate intention which the most sensitive eyewitnesses had discerned in the deployment of the participants and sequence of events in this memorable road traffic accident was attributed to an entirely earthly agency. Naturally, those who thought this were mistaken.

As for the two other victims, there was practically nothing to say about them. The driver of the Jeep, a heavy, taciturn Ukrainian who was feeding two little children and a tearful unemployed wife on his Moscow earnings and dreaming of saving up enough for a new Zhiguli, was of no particular interest; if he could have informed anyone that he saw a golden-haired angel on the icy road, none of the eyewitnesses would have confirmed it. Generally speaking, the testimony of the stadium-size crowd of rubbernecks who gathered round the massacre on the icy road was rather less than precise. For instance, many of them stated that the hunchbacked old woman groped about in the bloody mess, found her precious bag and calmly hobbled away from the scene of the incident. In a certain sense that was what had actually happened. There
was no old woman on the road; lying there with her scattered hair frozen to the sticky surface was a beautiful woman of about thirty; her drowsy, half-closed eyes were lacy from flakes of light snow settling on her eyelashes, her padded coat had ridden up, exposing beautiful legs enclosed in cheap, old woman's stockings. The Jeep had not injured her fatally or even seriously. Elizaveta Nikolaevna Rakitina had died of a heart attack. Amazingly, not one of the screeching, battling, demented cars had even touched the spread-eagled body; it had been left unharmed, with a single bruise on one high, amphora-curve hip. The woman seemed simply to have withdrawn into herself—so deeply that a return to life had become impossible.

Naturally, no one informed Ertel of Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s death.

When he phoned from the workshop on the day they had agreed, he thought he must have dialed the wrong number. A colorless, gruff male voice answered, like someone repeatedly stepping on a cardboard box. An officer of court? You say she was buried yesterday? No, I’m not a relative. No, simply a friend. I’ll come straight round, if I may. After stumbling into a couple of colleagues, Ertel got himself tangled up in his coat, twisting it into a cashmere hump on his back, and retreated into the mirror-lined lift as if he were stepping through the looking glass.

He drove his car unthinkingly, floating in his pain like a specimen in formalin. Snow was falling, as heavy as white bread soaked in water. The whole of Moscow was quietly drowning in this nutritious deluge, the glassy massifs of the New Arbat were like dull stainless steel. Nothing of the world outside was reflected in the soul of the man driving the gray Ford. And yet somehow he managed to get there. All three of her windows overlooking the courtyard were lit with dull yellow electricity, he could see the little sparks of the chandelier trembling, small and wet, in the veil of snow. The wild hope that now everything would be cleared up and it would all be untrue sent Ertel dashing headlong into the entrance. He rang a long peal on the bell, with every electrified nerve in his body jangling, but no one answered. Then he quietly pushed open the unlocked door and walked in as if this were a dream.

The ransacked apartment was full of people. Voices called to each other from room to room. Ertel immediately ran into the young local militiaman. He was clutching his wrist, carrying his right hand in front of him as if it was an inanimate object; numerous bloody scratches made the hand look like an autumn maple leaf and the militiaman was hissing through his teeth as he stumbled over the scattered shoes that had aged another ten years.
“Was that you who called just now?” he asked, stopping Ertel. “Ah, I know you and your car. Can you tell me where I might find some iodine here?”

He waited for a moment, gazing into the visitor’s impassive face, then shrugged his shoulder straps and slouched into the kitchen. Ertel moved on. His tear glands were burning like hot coals, but his eyes weren’t even turning damp. The void that he had sensed in Elizaveta Nikolaevna seemed to have been set free and now it was hovering all around him, maintaining her presence. In the drawing room all the cupboards were standing wide open, looking like chicken coops; there were bulky people sitting sedately on the plush sofa—he thought one of them, with her glassy eyes goggling like buttons that simply wouldn’t fit through their buttonholes, was the neighbor who had been robbed. A little man with large features that seemed to grow on his angular face like mushrooms addressed them as “procedural witnesses.” Catching sight of Ertel, he got up from the sheets of paper covered with fine writing that were spread across the dining table.

“Was it you who called?” he asked, repeating the militiaman’s question, and Ertel recognized the colorless voice on the phone. “Officer of Court Kravchenko . . .”—an I.D. card with a photographic blob flashed in front of Ertel’s eyes. “So you’re definitely not a relative then?”

Ertel shook his head, which set the drawing room reeling, and it took some time to settle back into place. All the objects in the void were poorly secured, including the chair with the curved back that Ertel groped at like a blind man, but didn’t sit down on after all.

“Ms. Rakitina was a solitary woman,” the officer of court sighed gruffly, setting his threadbare elbows back down on his closely written-over sheets of paper. “Now we’ll draw up an inventory of property and the apartment will be sealed until the legal heirs come forward. But what exactly did you want?”

“I’d like to take the cat,” Ertel whispered, looking at the sideboard, where the Dutch roses he had brought the time before last were standing, looking dull and tinny now.

“By all means, be my guest, my dear man!” said the officer of court, brightening up and extending his mushroom lips into the semblance of a genial smile. “That will save us the trouble of registering the animal at the shelter. Valera!” he shouted into the corridor. “Someone’s come for the cat, where is it now?”

“Well then, it’s sitting in the stairwell,” the officer of court said in a placid
voice, shuffling his crumpled backside across the clinging plush. “It’s not going anywhere, it’s winter outside. And by the way, you could collect some Whiskas, there’s half a sack of it left in the kitchen.”

“No thanks, I’ll take this,” said Ertel, picking up the trampled stuffed rat, on which a boot had left a clear, almost chocolate-colored imprint.

The militiaman and the officer of court exchanged glances, communicating with gyratory movements of their eyebrows.

“Maybe we should give you some valerian drops?” the militiaman asked in a different voice, with a different expression in his eyes. “I found some medicines, a whole boxful. You shouldn’t drive yet. It happens—a sudden heart attack, and you smash into a column. It was the deceased’s heart too . . .”

“Thanks, I’m in good health,” Ertel interrupted.

The militiaman took a step back with a startled blink. Ertel had imagined many times how he would leave this apartment after receiving a firm “no” from Elizaveta Nikolaevna. Now he seemed to have fallen into his own imaginary scene. A sensation he had felt before, a familiar unsteadiness in his legs, made him stumble into the capricious coffee table, setting a pencil chattering as it rolled off it. Leaning down abruptly over the little shoes jumbled into a heap, Ertel realized that he didn’t have to put anything on, he was still wearing his shoes, so he put on his well-rehearsed smile and went out into the stairwell.

He spent an indefinite amount of time there. The stairwell, painted in thick ochre, was like a clay cave; time and again Ertel seemed to glimpse a cat’s tail flitting up or down the stairs or stealing in behind the iron elbow of a garbage chute. Investigating the garbage chutes and the radiators that smelled of burnt dust, he walked down into the empty hallway and glanced behind the concierge’s booth that was blanked off with a crumpled blue curtain. Several times he went outside, breathed in the damp frost and looked at the snowbound children’s play area that looked like small furniture under dust covers, and the iron roundabout bogged down in a slanting snowdrift. It all seemed to be in a different life. A badly smeared little raincoat. And then, fondling the brown banisters, he walked up to the trapdoor of the attic, with a padlock as heavy as a jam-full piggybank dangling from it. The moment came when Ertel found himself sitting on a windowsill in the middle of the blurred, stratified, vertical space of the stairwell, in which he thought he had touched everything. A mobile phone was trilling in one of his pockets. After locating it on his body, Ertel spoke briefly with Mr. T, who had already heard the news. Some time later the bright beams of several cars’ headlights
intersected at the entrance and Mr. T appeared out of the trick folding box of the lift like a circus artiste, immediately holding out a flask of cognac.

The following morning a full-scale search for Basileus was launched. Ertel redeployed virtually all the employees of the workshop to the courtyard of the Stalin-era apartment block that was rather less welcoming now. With the pedantic politeness of an answering machine, he called all his clients and warned them of a possible delay with their orders; every client who heard his calm voice on the phone felt something snap inside himself, as if he were about to learn of some disaster, and it took him a minute or so to realize that the conversation was about nothing more than a mounted animal. Mr. T sent a quartet of brawny, bullheaded types from his own security service people to help Ertel. At first these four ex-soldiers scoffed at the “operation,” sniggering into their upturned collars, but then they realized there was something they liked about this colorless man with the pink nose as transparent as a test tube, who had coolly divided up the residential district into a grid of squares for the search.

Under the direction of the brawny types the gawky, bespectacled laboratory technicians combed the courtyards. Inquiries were made at every apartment on Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s stairwell; unfortunately not a single apartment, whether fronted by a red-mouthed New Russian housewife or a moldering phantom of the Stalin era, had taken the fugitive in. The local militiaman was informed of the search; the sight of the money he was given made him blush bright red, the way a sated, undemanding little mosquito blushes, and he promised all the assistance he could give within the limits of his authority. The Tadjik yard keepers were also roped in. The small, quick-witted Tadjiks, with eyes like watermelon seeds in bloody-pink watermelon water, were valuable because they knew all the basements and attics, all the warm nooks and crannies into which a living creature could creep to take shelter in ten degrees Celsius below zero. And, in addition to all that, the entrance halls, posts and columns within a radius of two kilometers and all the shops, from the twenty-four-hour grocery kiosk to the jewelry boutique, were posted with notices about the search for Basileus. An impressive reward was offered. The greenish fur on his belly was mentioned as a distinguishing feature—the dyed clumps still hadn’t grown out after the memorable visit to the vet.

Ertel arrived first thing in the morning and stayed in the yard until dark. Without sparing a thought for his coat, he stumbled after Tadjik guides through basements where hot pipes that looked like wooden poles were crumbling into rust and the stale, muggy air glimmered like a moldering rag
when a switch found by fumbling fingers turned on a feeble lightbulb far ahead. He himself made the risky ten-meter passage across a gut-wrenching, icy roof to the snowbound snail shape of a dormer window from which he could hear guttural mewing—it was coming from a poor, earless creature as thin as a slipper, who trembled and urinated while he was being carried down. The militiaman, who kept revisiting the episode of the prize animal’s escape, every time embellishing it with new and bloodier details, set aside the finest cell in the militia’s fortified stronghold for Ertel to receive members of the local population with candidates for the role of Basileus. Who didn’t they bring in for that fifty-thousand-rouble reward! The cats that passed in front of Ertel were dirty-white, or as stripy and as flat as river perch, or as varicolored as if they were wearing small patchwork horsecloths. An old woman with a tall hairstyle as black as ink and an ash-gray mustache above a crimson-painted mouth came several times with a pregnant cat that she had caught in her entrance hall and offered to let them have it for just a thousand. There were even dogs—two lapdogs who turned up one after another, one with a fringe like Hitler’s and a vicious character that surpassed all his caricatures. The saleswoman from the grocery kiosk brought a trembling ginger kitten with a crumpled little rubber face, that had obviously only just opened its blue-gray eyes; the militiaman scratched some especially responsible bump on his head and took the kitten himself.

Ertel held firmly to the idea that he must find Basileus and take him in. It had almost nothing to do with Elizaveta Nikolaevna any longer—after all, where she was now, she couldn’t take comfort in the cat and his future effigy. The void that she had left behind was a natural phenomenon incomensurably more powerful than a human being; every now and then the void turned stormy and its magnitude threatened the obliteration of human reason—but a part of Ertel was glad that he could stop hovering, horror-struck, on the brink and grapple with things directly. The search for the cat was the only possible action in impossible circumstances and Ertel, realizing how bizarre it looked from the outside, persisted with it stubbornly and methodically, enduring his grief on his feet, the way people endure a serious illness. The search dragged on, and this threatened Ertel with the loss of two important clients willing to wait months for a trophy to be correctly mounted, but now stamping their feet in impatience in the final week before they received their new fluffy toys. Lying in the refrigerator was the frozen head of an African elephant, as huge as an armchair, which the owner, the CEO of a major TV channel, was planning to make the focal point of his office’s decor. Carelessly prepared by an outfitting company that
Ertel knew, the head had turned wet and lathery, the trophy needed to be rescued immediately. But Ertel didn’t take a single employee off the search; frozen stiff, with runny noses, they all ploughed up snowdrifts with cries of “Kitty-kitty-kitty!” and pasted up notices where they weren’t supposed to, like members of some underground organization.

Ertel’s employees, and the inhabitants of the apartment block who ambled by, and even the gold-toothed Tadjiks cast looks of wary curiosity at him, as if the German had suddenly gone gaga in front of their very eyes. They were probably not all that far wrong. While being of absolutely sound, indeed, crystal-clear mind, Ertel was battling elements through which only madmen journey. And once again his comrade was that childishly pasty-faced denizen of London’s Bedlam asylum and inmate of the debtors’ prison—Christopher Smart, with his cat Jeoffry:

> For the dexterity of his defense is an instance of the love of God to him exceedingly.  
> For he is the quickest to his mark of any creature.  
> For he is tenacious of his point.  
> For he is a mixture of gravity and waggery.  
> For he knows that God is his Savior.

In some way *Jubilate Agno* contained the reason why the search for Basileus could not be broken off. The cat had a ticket for the ark of beasts and birds that Ertel was creating with the same passion with which Christopher Smart, imprisoned in Bedlam for his incessant praying, had marshalled his universe, full of obvious proofs of the existence of God. Now the ark could not be full without Basileus, who was clearly involved in some heavenly design with which Ertel’s fate was linked.

> For he keeps the Lord’s watch in the night against the adversary.  
> For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.  
> For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.

After a day of frozen whiteness Ertel couldn’t go straight home to his cold, white, porcelain apartment that smelled of the perfumed bouquets of various cleansing agents. Mr. T took him to the club, where the long-nosed
duo studied and ordered from the wine list but, as before, rather than drink the elite alcohol, they contemplated it, which lent it an aura of enchantment. Metaphysical processes occurred in their untouched glasses. Words were pronounced over them in the seated men’s awareness, but only occasionally spoken out loud.

“We all exist conditionally,” Mr. T said in a low voice. “Any Petrov among us can easily be replaced by any Sidorov or Rabinovich. Every morning ten thousand Mercedeses have to drive out into the streets of Moscow, and someone has to sit in them. And that’s all. We are appendages of the state, and the state has one goal: its own existence. The state implements social programs, but it cannot reach out a helping hand to a concrete citizen, because it will be the hand of a phantom. It’s not possible to grab hold of it. And so we also have to develop a phantom identity for ourselves. We have made or stolen lots of money, we ought to be capable of making our nearest and dearest happy, but that is not the case. Our nearest and dearest will not be grateful to us and therefore will not experience happiness, although their financial difficulties will be eased. She . . .” Mr. T gently closed his colorless eyes to make clear whom he meant. “She was somehow able to rouse us and hold us until the third crowing of the cock. And even longer. She tempted us with happiness. It was dangerous, very dangerous . . .”

Ertel nodded, realizing that Mr. T was trying in this roundabout way to console him. He didn’t need consolation. Elizaveta Nikolaevna’s death had made him realize what stern stuff he was made of. He was already stealthily kneading the grief into a lump and glancing around stealthily in the changed, rarefied reality. He noted that, with the departure of the little widow, women—all of them, including poor Anna, who waited up for him until after midnight with watery, repeatedly warmed-over meatballs—had lost their charm, as if now they lacked some important piece of apparatus or lighting equipment that was essential for the beautiful illusions that the female world produces on a daily basis for the male one. Ertel saw people in a new way now and interacted with them differently. The presence of some intensified his heartache, others were neutral. He didn’t go to the cemetery, although the zealous militiaman obtained the address and the number of the burial plot for him. By all accounts Mr. K, who flew back urgently from London, had hidden everything there, literally burying the grave under an obscene haystack of bouquets and sumptuous funeral wreaths, and he had appointed his latest best friend, the performance artist Vasya Sadov, to smarten up the stack at his own creative discretion; but anyway, there was nothing under the haystack and the cross with which Ertel
could have talked. He did, however, feel he had been initiated into that unseen world in the name of which mirrors are hung in the home of someone who has died. Now he often remembered his father, Ivan Karlovich Ertel, as if a postal service had been established between them and it had become possible to exchange thoughts. His father's life, the life of a simple classified employee of the defense industry, had consisted of long, gruelling work assignments away from home, decades of struggle to build a little white house on a boggy standard plot of six hundred square meters of gardeners' association land, and his large, tough body's fight against an illness contracted during his youth, when the state wanted very badly to make atomic bombs and there was no medical provision for combating the effects of radiation. But when Ertel's father, defeated by the sickness that had finally found a way to switch off his exhausted kidneys, lay dying in a little regional hospital dappled with the light of apple trees, his final words were: “All's well that ends well.” Ertel's father was the last to go out of his graduating class from the radiation-drenched physics institutes of 1956; his almost Methuselah-like longevity had somehow created the impression that his son, Karl Ivanovich Ertel, now dwelt in a special dimension of relativity subject to its own laws, an ark of heraldic fauna where the lion, having dropped from two paws onto three, was regarded as a leopard and the coat of arms of the von Ertels hovered separately ahead of the vessel—a rose and wings.

Basileus was found on the twelfth day. Two Tadjiks, stepping cautiously with their little round-loaf feet, lugged in a black oilcloth sack and held it by the corners, as if they were spreading sand for a path, while they shook out a long, shaggy caterpillar in front of Ertel. Basileus had been lying in a basement for at least a week; the militiaman felt sick at the sight of the paper-gray skin showing through the dirty fur, at the sight of the eye twisted out of its socket, looking like a woman's nipple; the green clumps on the belly still showed through, they had turned the color of bay leaves. Basileus really had spent everything on himself and lived out his final days in dashing style, as testified by his numerous war wounds, possibly inflicted by the same ragged vagrants who had passed in front of the search party as a result of local trappers' efforts. But to do what Ertel had promised Elizaveta Nikolaevna had become almost impossible.

Nonetheless Ertel set about the task. Becoming a virtual hermit in his workshop, which had now returned to its normal life, he separated the half-rotten skin from the sticky carcass millimeter by millimeter, softening the
difficult spots with a solution of sodium arsenide from a pipette. The skin came apart and split, but the anatomist’s pink fingers had become uncannily sensitive, as if all the nerve impulses of his intent brain flowed into them. Many sections were almost hopeless; Ertel had experimented with acid-alkali mixtures and the results had made it possible, among other things, to save the head of the African giant, which was gradually smoothing out on a podium, like a gigantic mud-colored butterfly, studded with small glittering pins to secure the folds. Things did not go so well with Basileus. Ertel had to select similar fur, fox and squirrel, to replace the lost fragments, but he restored the cat patiently, as he would have restored the only example of *Pseudaelurus*, the forebear of modern-day felines, if it had been lying somewhere not just for one week, but an entire twenty million years. Begrudging neither money nor effort, Ertel sought out among the multitude of glass eyes the precise sugary-grape tone that plunged him hypnotically into the recent past; his method for preparing the resin to reproduce the moist, spongy texture of the animal’s nose could have served as the basis for a patent application. The employees muttered over their ashtrays about the boss’s lunacy, but Ertel knew that he would be rewarded. His hands exulted in the vibrant currents of vital energy as he molded the model for Basileus.

At last the mounted animal, a veritable triumph of professional skill, was ready. Basileus had turned out rather long and straggly, but even so this was not a corpse, but an absolutely alive cat. With his back arched, he seemed to be shooting electric sparks out of his brushed skin and his sugary-ginger eyes blazed with a vigilant flame. The plush rat—washed and restuffed with polyurethane—lived beside him on a shelf in Ertel’s work room. These two creatures had now become more equal, facsimiles of each other; now at last their union had been consummated. Ertel’s insanity ended at that. From henceforth, glancing at this youthful-looking, colorless man who wore his father’s face with dignity—a face that seemed to have been taken from a black-and-white photograph—no one would ever imagine that he was capable of acting irrationally. Sometimes, during a thick, shadowy snowfall, or on a rainy autumn evening, he would toy with the idea of how good it would be if he could somehow find himself in a place where he and Elizaveta Nikolaevna would be alike and equal, where they could at last have a talk.
Zakhar Prilepin (born 1975, near Ryazan) had a varied career before turning to writing, including time served in the Special Forces in Chechnya. He has come to public attention not only as one of the best writers of his generation—his novel Sin, recently translated into English, was chosen as the book of the decade by the Super National Bestseller Award—but also as a committed, and often controversial, political activist.
Zakhar Prilepin

Whatever Day of the Week
It Happens to Be

Translated by Simon Patterson and Nina Chordas

My heart was absent. Happiness is weightless, and its bearers are weightless. But the heart is heavy. I had no heart. She had no heart either, we were both heartless.

Everything around us had become wonderful; and this “everything” sometimes seemed to expand, and sometimes froze, so that we could enjoy it. We did enjoy it. Nothing could touch us to the extent that it evoked any other reaction but a good, light laughter.

Sometimes she went away, and I waited. Unable to sit waiting for her at home, I reduced the time before our meeting and the distance between us, and went out into the yard.

There were puppies running around in the yard, four of them. We gave them names: Brovkin—a tough tramp with a cheerful nature; Yaponka—a slanty-eyed, cunning, reddish puppy; Belyak—a white runt, who was constantly trying to compete with Brovkin and always failing; and finally, Grenlan—the origin of her name was a mystery, and it seemed very suitable for this princess with sorrowful eyes, who piddled out of fear or adoration the minute anyone called her.

I sat on the grass surrounded by the puppies. Brovkin was lounging around on the ground not far away, and every time I called him, he energetically nodded to me. “Hello,” he said. “It’s great, isn’t it?” Yaponka and Belyak fuss ed about, rubbing their noses in the grass. Grenlan was lying next to them. Every time I tried to pet her, she rolled on her back and squeaked: her entire appearance said that, although she had almost limitless trust in me, even revealing her pink belly, she was still so terrified, so terrified that she didn’t
I was seriously worried that her heart would burst from fear. “Hey, what’s wrong with you, darlin’!” I said to reassure her, looking with interest at her belly and everything that was arranged on it. “What a girl!”

I don’t know how the puppies got into our courtyard. One time in the morning, incredibly happy even while asleep, calmly holding in my hands the heavy, ripe adornments of my darling, who was sleeping with her back to me, I heard the ringing sound of puppies barking—as if the little dogs had made the inexplicable things inside me material, and had clearly expressed my mood with their voices. Although, when I was first awakened by the puppies’ noise, I was angry—they’d woken me up, and they could have woken up my Marysya too: but I soon realized that they were not barking just to bark, but were begging food from passersby—I heard their voices too. They usually yelled at them to go away: “I don’t have anything, get lost! Shoo! Get lost!”

I pulled on my jeans, that were lying around in the kitchen—we constantly got carried away and reeled around the apartment, until we were completely exhausted, and only in the morning, smiling rather foolishly, we traced our torrid paths by the pieces of furniture that we had displaced or knocked over, and by other inspired chaos—anyway, I pulled on my jeans and ran outside in the flip-flops which for some unknown reason I associated with my happiness, my love and my wonderful life.

The puppies, having failed to elicit any food from the succession of passers-by, tirelessly nosed around in the grass, digging up bits of rubbish, fighting over twigs and a piece of dry bone, time and again turning over an empty can—and naturally, this couldn’t fill them up. I whistled, and they came running over to me—oh, if only my happiness would come running to me like this throughout my life, with this furious readiness. And they circled me, incessantly nuzzling against me, but also sniffing at my hands: bring us something to eat, man, they said with their lively look.

“Right, folks!” I said and ran home.

I lunged at the fridge, opened it, knelt prayerfully before it. With my hand I tousled and stroked Marysya’s white knickers, which I had picked up from the floor in the entryway, without of course being surprised as to how they had got there. The knickers were soft; the fridge was empty. Marysya and I were not gluttons—we just never really cooked anything, we had a lot of other things on our minds. We didn’t want to be substantial like borsch, we fried large slabs of meat and immediately ate them, or, smearing and kissing each other, we whipped up eggnog and drank that straight away too. There was nothing in the fridge, just an egg, like a viewer who had fallen asleep, in the cinema, sur-
rounded by empty seats on both sides: above and below. I opened the freezer and was glad to discover a box of milk in it. With a crack, I ripped this box from its ancient resting place, rushed to the kitchen and was happy once again to find flour. A jar of sunflower oil stood peacefully on the windowsill. "I’ll make pancakes for you!"

Twenty minutes later I had made ten or so deformed specimens, raw in some places, burnt in others, but quite edible—I tried them myself and was satisfied. Jumping down two steps at a time, feeling in my hand the heat of the pancakes, which I had put in a plastic bag, I flew out of the building. While running down the stairs I worried that the puppies might have run away, but I was reassured as soon as I heard their voices.

“What wonderful pups you are!” I exclaimed. “Let’s try the pancakes!”

Out of the bag I extricated the first pancake, which was balled up like all the rest. All four puppies opened their young, hot mouths at once. Brovkin—who got this name later—was the first to take a hot mouthful, pushing the others aside. It burned his mouth and he immediately dropped it, but he didn’t leave it there, dragging it in several movements by half a meter into the grass, where he hurriedly bit it around the edges, then, shaking his head, swallowed it and came leaping back to me.

Waving the pancakes in the air to cool them down, I carefully gave each puppy a separate piece, though the mighty Brovkin managed to swallow both his own piece and to take pieces from his young relatives. However, he did this inoffensively, without humiliating anyone, as if he were fooling around. The puppy which we later called Grenlan got the fewest pancakes of all, and after a couple of minutes, when I’d learned to tell the puppies apart—they initially seemed indistinguishable—I started to shoo the pushy, fluffy-browed brothers and cunning red-furred sister away, so no one could snatch her sweet piece of pancake from this touching little creature, bashful even in her own family.

Thus, we became friends.

Every time I lied to myself shamelessly that a minute before my darling arrived, before she turned the corner, I could already sense her approach—something moved in the thickening blue air, somewhere an auto braked. I was already smiling like a fool, even when Marysya was still a long way off, 30 meters or so, and I couldn’t stop smiling, and commanded the puppies: “Right then, let’s meet my darling, quick! Do I feed you pancakes for nothing, you spongers!”

The puppies jumped up and, wagging their fluffy bodies, tripping from happiness, they ran to my darling, threatening to scratch her exquisite ankles.
Marysenka stepped over them and comically shooed the puppies away with her little black purse. Everything inside me was trembling and twirling, like puppy tails. Still fending them off with her purse, Marysenka wandered over to me, sat down with flawless elegance, and inclined her cool, fragrant, pebble-smooth neck, so that I could kiss it. In the instant that I kissed her, she moved away by a fraction of a millimeter, or rather shuddered—of course, I hadn't shaved. I hadn't found the time to do so all day—I was busy: I was waiting for her. I couldn't take my mind off her. Marysya took one of the puppies with both hands and looked it over, laughing. The puppy's belly showed pink, and three hairs stuck out, sometimes with a tiny white drop hanging from them.

"Their mouths smell of grass," Marysya said and added in a whisper: "green grass."

We left the puppies to play together, and went to the shop, where we bought cheap treats, annoying the saleswomen with the huge amount of spare change that Marysya dug out of her bag, and I took out of my jeans. Often, the irritated saleswomen didn't even count the change, but disdainfully scooped it up and poured it into the angular cavity of the cash register, not the section for the copper coins, but the "white" coins—the ones worth one kopeck and five kopecks, which had completely lost any purchasing power in our country, as it cheerfully slid into poverty. We laughed, no one's disdainful irritation could belittle us.

"Notice how today doesn't seem like a Tuesday," Marysya observed as we left the shop. "Today feels like Friday. On Tuesdays, there are far fewer children outdoors, the girls aren't dressed so brightly, the students are busier and the cars aren't so slow. Today time has definitely shifted. Tuesday has turned into Friday. What will tomorrow be, I wonder?"

I was amused at her intentionally bookish language—this was one of the things we did for fun, to talk like this. Later our speech became ordinary human speech—incorrect constructions, interjections, hints and laughter. None of this can be reproduced—because every phrase had a story behind it, every joke was so charming and fundamentally stupid that another repetition would kill it dead, as though it was born a fragile flower that immediately started to wilt. We spoke in the normal language of people who are in love and happy. They don't write like that in books. I can only single out a few individual phrases. For example this one:

"I visited Valies," Marysya said. "He proposed that I get married."

"To him?"

What a stupid question. Who else?
The actor Konstantin Lvovich Valies was an old, burly man with a heavy heart. His heart was probably no longer beating, but rather sinking.

His mournful Jewish eyes under heavy, caterpillarlike eyelids had completely lost their natural cunning. With me, as with a youth, he still kept his poise—he was bitterly ironic, as it seemed to him, and frowned patronizingly. With her, he could not conceal his vulnerability, and this vulnerability appeared as a bare white stomach under a badly tucked-in shirt.

Once, as someone who does anything to earn money as long it’s legal, including writing the stupid rubbish which usually serves to fill up newspapers, I asked Valies for an interview.

He invited me to his home.

I arrived a little earlier, and blissfully smoked on a bench by the house. I rose from the bench and went to the entranceway. Glancing at my watch, and seeing that I had another five minutes, I went back to the swings that I had just walked past, and touched them with my fingers, feeling the cold and roughness of the rusty iron bars. I sat on a swing and pushed off gently with my legs. The swing gave a light creaking noise. It seemed familiar to me, reminding me of something. I rocked on the swing again and heard quite clearly: “V-va . . . li . . . es . . .” I rocked on the swing again. “Va-li-es” the swing creaked. “Va-li-es.” I smiled and jumped off rather clumsily—at my back, the swing shrieked out something with an iron hiss, but I couldn’t tell what it was. The door of the entranceway muttered something in the same tone as the swing.

I forgot to say that Valies was a senior actor at the Comedy Theater in our town; otherwise there would have been no reason for me to visit him. No one asked me who I was through the door when I knocked—in the best of Soviet traditions, the door opened wide, and Konstantin Lvovich smiled.

“Are you the journalist? Come in . . .”

He was short and thickset, his abundantly wrinkled neck showed his age, but his impeccable actor’s voice still sounded rich and important.

Valies smoked, shaking off the ash with a swift movement, gesticulated, raised his eyebrows and kept them there just a tad longer than an ordinary person, who was no artist, could. But this all suited Konstantin Lvovich—the raised eyebrows, the glances, the pauses. As he talked, he deployed all of this skillfully and attractively. Like chess, in a definite order. And even his cough was artistic.

“Excuse me,” he always said when he coughed, and where the sound of the last syllable of “Excuse me” ended, the next phrase would immediately continue.
“So then . . . Zakhar, right? So then, Zakhar . . .”—he would say, carefully pronouncing my somewhat rare name, as if he were tasting it with his tongue, like a berry or a nut.

“Valies studied at the theatrical academy with Yevgeny Yevstigneev, they were friends!” I repeated to Marysenka that evening what Konstantin Lvovich himself had said to me. Yevstigneev in a dark little room with a portrait of Charlie Chaplin by his squashed bed; the young and already bald Yevstigneev, living with his mother who quietly fusses behind the plywood wall, and Valies paying him a visit, curly-haired, with bright Jewish eyes . . . I imagined all this vividly to myself—and in rich colors, as if I had seen it myself, I described it to my darling. I wanted to surprise her, I liked surprising her. And she enjoyed being surprised.

“Valies and Yevstigneev were the stars of their year, they were such a cheerful pair, two clowns, one with curly hair and the other bald, a Jew and a Russian, almost like Ilf and Petrov. Just fancy that . . .” I said to Marysya, looking into her laughing eyes.

“What happened after that?” Marysya asked.

After he graduated from the academy, Zhenya Yevstigneev wasn’t accepted into our Comedy Theater—they said that they didn’t need him. But Valies was accepted immediately. Also, he started to appear in films, at the same time as Yevstigneev, who moved to Moscow. In the space of a few years, Valies played the poet Alexander Pushkin three times and the revolutionary Yakov Sverdlov three times as well. The films were shown all over the country . . . Valies also played a harmless Jew in a war film, together with Shura Demyanenko, who was famous at the time. And then he played Judas in a film where Vladimir Vysotsky played Christ. Although, truth to say, work on this film was stopped before shooting ended. But on the whole, Valies’ acting career got off to a very lively start.

“. . . But then they stopped putting Valies into films,” I said to Marysya.

He waited for an invitation to appear in a film, but it never came. So he didn’t become a star, although in our town, of course, he was almost considered one. But theater productions came and went and were forgotten, and his less than bright films were also forgotten, and Valies got old.

In conversation, Valies was ill-tempered, and swore. It was good that way. It would have been very sad to look at an old man with a sinking heart . . . The smoke dispersed, and he lit another cigarette with a match, for some reason there was no lighter on the table.

His time was passing, and was almost gone. Somewhere, once, in some
distant day, he had been unable to latch on, to grasp something with his tena-
cious youthful fingers that would enable him to crawl out into that space
bathed in warm, beery sunshine, where everyone is granted fame during
their lifetime and promised love beyond the grave—perhaps not eternal love,
but such that you won’t be forgotten at least for the duration of a memorial
drinking party.

Valies crushed the next cigarette into the ashtray, waved his hands, and
the yellow tips of his fingers flashed by—he smoked a lot. He held in the
smoke, and as he slowly exhaled, he became lost in the smoke, not squinting
his eyes, throwing his head back. It was clear that everything was fading away,
and now the whites of eyes were shining amid the pink veins, and his big lips
were moving, and his heavy eyelids were trembling . . .

“Do you feel sorry for him, Marysenka?”

The next day I typed up the interview, read it over and took it to Valies.
I handed it over and scurried off. Valies saw me off tenderly. And rang me
up as soon as I was barely home. Perhaps he had started ringing earlier—the
call arrested me just as I entered the apartment. The actor’s voice was trem-
bbling. He was extremely angry.

“The interview can’t appear in this form!” he almost shrieked.
I was somewhat taken aback.
“All right then, it won’t,” I said as calmly as possible.
“Good-bye!” he said curtly, and slammed the receiver.
“What did I do wrong?” I wondered.

Every morning, we were woken by barking—the puppies continued to
beg for food from passersby on their way to work. The passersby cursed
them—the puppies dirtied their clothes with their paws.

But once on a deep morning that merged into noon, I did not hear the
puppies. I felt anxious while I was still asleep: something was obviously lacking
in the languid confusion of sounds and reflections that precede awakening. An
emptiness arose, it was like a funnel that was sucking away my sleepy peace.

“Marysenka! I can’t hear the puppies!” I said quietly, and with such horror
as if I couldn’t find the pulse on my wrist.

Marysenka was terrified herself.

“Quick, run outside!” she also whispered.

A few seconds later, I was jumping down the steps, thinking feverishly:
“Did a car run them over? What, all four of them? That can’t be . . .” I ran into
the sun and into the scent of warmed earth and grass, and the quiet noises
of a car around the corner, and whistled, and shouted, repeating the names
of the puppies one after another and then at random. I circled the untidy yard, overgrown with bushes. I looked under each bush but didn’t find anyone there.

I ran around our incredible building, incredible because on one side it had three stories, and on the other it had four. It was situated on a slope, and so the architects decided to make the building multileveled so that the roof would be even; the building could easily drive insane an alcoholic who was attempting to judge how far off he was from the D.T.s by counting the number of stories in this decrepit but still mighty “Stalin-era” building.

I thought about this briefly again as I walked around the building slowly, banging on the water pipes for some reason, and looking into the windows. There were no puppies, nor any traces of them.

Terribly upset, I returned home. Marysya immediately understood everything, but still asked:

“No?”
“No.”

“I heard someone calling them in the morning,” she said. “That’s right, I did. It was some guy with a hoarse voice.”

I looked at Marysya, my whole appearance demanding that she remember what he said, this guy, and how he talked. I would go and find him in the town by his voice, and ask him where my puppies were.

“The tramps probably took them,” Marysya said resignedly.

“What tramps?”

“A whole family of them lives not far from here, in a Khrushchev-era building. A few men and a woman. They often walk back past our home with rubbish bags. They probably lured the puppies to go with them.”

“Do you mean . . . they could eat them?”

“They eat anything.”

For a moment I pictured this all to myself—how my jolly friends were lured by deceit and thrown in a bag. How they squealed as they were carried. How happy they were when they were dumped out of the bag in the apartment, and at first the puppies even liked it: the delicious smell of tasty, rotting meat and . . . what’s that other smell? Stale alcohol . . .

Perhaps the tramps even played with the puppies a little—after all, they’re people too. They may have stroked their backs and tickled their tummies. But then came dinnertime. “They couldn’t have butchered them all at once?” I thought, almost crying. “Maybe two . . . maybe three.” I imagined these agonizing pictures, and I even started shaking.
“Where do they live?” I asked Marysenka.
“I don’t know.”
“Who does?”
“Maybe the neighbors do?”
Silently I put my shoes on, thinking what weapon to take with me. There wasn’t any weapon in the house apart from a kitchen knife, but I didn’t take it. “If I stab a tramp or all the tramps with this knife, then I’ll have to throw it away,” I thought gloomily. I went around the neighbors’ apartments, but most of them had already gone to work, and those who were at home were mainly elderly, and couldn’t understand what I wanted from them—something about puppies, something about tramps. Besides, they didn’t open their doors to me. I got sick of explaining things to the peepholes of wooden doors which I could knock down with three or so kicks. After calling one of the neighbors an “old moron,” I ran out of our building, and headed to the building where the tramps lived.

I reached the Khrushchev-era building, almost running, and as I approached it I tried to determine the ill-fated tramps’ den by looking at the windows. I couldn’t work it out; there were too many poor and dirty windows, and only two that were clean. I ran into the building and rang the doorbell of apartment 1.

“Where do the tramps live?” I asked.
“We’re tramps ourselves,” a man in his underpants replied sullenly, looking me over. “What do you want?”

I looked over his shoulder, foolishly hoping that Brovkin would jump out to meet me. Or the pitiful Grenlan would crawl out, dragging intestines behind her. The apartment was dark, and there was a bicycle in the entry. Twisted and dirty doormats lay on the floor. The door to apartment 2 was opened by a woman from the Caucasus, and several swarthy kids came running out. I didn’t bother explaining anything to them, although the woman immediately started talking a lot. I didn’t understand what she was talking about. I went up to the second floor.

“There’s an apartment with tramps living in it in your building,” I explained to a tidy-looking old woman, who was coming down the stairs. “They robbed me, and I’m looking for them.”

The old woman told me that the tramps lived in the next entranceway on the second floor.
“What did they steal?” she asked, as I was already going down the stairs.
“My bride,” I was going to joke, but I thought better of it.
“This one thing . . .”

I looked around outside—perhaps there was some blunt instrument I could take. There wasn’t any to be found, or I would have taken one. I didn’t try to break a branch off the American maple tree growing in the yard—you couldn’t break it if you tried, you could spend a whole week bending the soft, fragile branch, and it wouldn’t do any good. It’s a wretched, ugly tree, I thought vengefully and angrily, somehow linking the tramps with American maples and America itself, as if the tramps had been brought over from there. The second floor—where should I go? This door, probably. The one that looks the worst. As if people had been pissing on it for several years. And it’s splintered at the bottom, revealing the yellow wood.

I pressed the doorbell, stupidly. Yes, that’s right, it will ring out with a trill, just press it harder. For some reason I wiped my finger on my trousers, having touched a doorbell that had been silent for one hundred years, and didn’t even have wires attached to it. I listened to the noises behind the door, hoping of course to hear the puppies.

“Have you already devoured them, you skunks? I’ll show you . . .”

For an instant I contemplated what to hit the door with—my fist or my foot. I even raised my foot, but then hit it with my fist, not very hard, and then harder. The door opened with a hiss and a creak, just by a crack. I pushed the door with my hands—it dragged across the floor, over a worn track. I stepped into semidarkness and a nauseating smell, firing myself up with a bitterness that simply wilted from the stench.

“Hey!” I called, willing my voice to sound rough and harsh, but the call came out stifled.

“What should I call them? ‘Hey, people,’ ‘Hey, tramps?’” They’re not actually tramps, if they have a place of residence.

I examined the floor, for some reason convinced that I would put my foot into slimy filth if I took another step. I took a step. The floor was firm. The kitchen was to the left, and to the right was a room. I felt sick. I let a long line of spit, the precursor to vomit, out of my mouth. The line of spit swayed, fell and hung on the wall that was covered with wallpaper that was ripped in the form of a peak.

“Why is the wallpaper in these apartments always ripped? Do they rip it on purpose or something?”

“What are you spitting for?” a hoarse voice asked. “You’re in a house, you fuck.”

I couldn’t tell at first whether the voice was a man’s or a woman’s. And
where was it coming from—the room, or the kitchen? I wasn’t visible from the room, so it must be from the kitchen. It was also dark in the kitchen. As I looked in, I realized that the windows were covered with sheets of plywood. I took another step toward the kitchen, and saw a person sitting at the table. The sex of the person was still unclear. A lot of disheveled hair . . . Barefoot . . . Pants, or something like pants, which ended above the knees. It seemed that there was a wound on the person’s bare leg. And something was writhing in the wound, in a large quantity. Maybe I just imagined it in the dark.

There were a lot of bottles and cans on the table.

We were silent. The person wheezed, not looking at me. Suddenly, the person coughed, the table shook and the bottles chimed. The person coughed with all his insides, his lungs, bronchi, kidneys, stomach, nose, every pore. Everything inside him rumbled and seethed, spraying mucus, spit and bile around him. The sour air in the apartment slowly moved and thickened around me. I realized that if I took a single deep breath, I would catch several incurable diseases, which would in short order make me a complete invalid with pus-filled eyes and uncontrollable bloody diarrhea.

I stood to attention, without breathing, in front of the coughing tramp, as if he were a general giving me a dressing-down. The coughing gradually died down, and in conclusion, the tramp spat out a long trail of spit onto the floor, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Finally, I decided to go into the kitchen.

“I’ve come for the puppies!” I said loudly, almost choking, because as I opened my mouth, I did not breathe. My words sounded wooden. “Hey you, where are the puppies?” I asked with a last gasp; it was as if my shoulder had hit a pile of wood and several logs had rolled off it, dully thumping to the ground.

The person looked up at me and coughed again. I almost ran into the kitchen, scared that I would fall unconscious and would lie here, on the floor, and these vermin would think that I was one of them, and put me to lie with them. Marysenka would come and see me lying next to tramps. I kicked the bare legs of the tramp, that were in my way, and it looked as if several dozen little midges flew up off the wound on his ankle.

“Damn it!” I cursed, breathing heavily, no longer able to hold my breath. The person I had kicked swayed and fell over, taking the bottles on the table with him, and they fell on him, and the chair that he was sitting on also fell over, with two legs stuck in the air. And they were not positioned diagonally, but on the same side. “It couldn’t stand up! You can’t sit on it!” I thought, and shouted: “Where are the puppies, scum?!”
The person squirmed about on the floor. Something trickled under my shoes. I tore the plywood board from the window, and saw that the window was partially smashed, and so this was evidently why it had been covered over. In the window, between the partitions, there was a half-liter bottle containing a solitary limp pickle covered in a white beard of mold that Father Christmas could have envied.

“Damn it! Damn!” I cursed again, helplessly looking over the empty kitchen, in which lay several broken crates, in addition to the upside-down chair. There was no gas stove. A tap was leaking in the corner. In the sink lay a mound of half-rotten vegetables. All kinds of creatures with feelers or wings were crawling over the vegetables.

I jumped over the person lying on the floor and raced into the room, almost falling over the clothes piled on the floor—coats, jackets, rags. Perhaps someone was lying under the rags, huddled there. The room was empty, there was just an old television in the corner, with the picture tube intact. The window was also covered over with plywood boards.

“Who do you think you are!” the voice shouted to me from the kitchen. “I’m a boxer, asshole.”

“Where are the puppies, boxer-asshole?” I mocked him, but didn’t go back to the kitchen. Instead, overcoming my squeamishness, I opened the door to the toilet. There was no toilet bowl, just a gaping hole in the floor. In the bath, as yellow as lemonade, there were shards of glass and empty bottles.

“What puppies?” the voice shouted again, and added several dozen incomprehensible noises resembling either complaining or swearing.

The voice definitely belonged to a man.

“Did you take the puppies?” I shouted at him, leaving the toilet and looking for something in the corridor to hit him with. For some reason I thought there should be a crutch here, I thought I had seen one.

“Did you eat the puppies? Talk! Did you eat the puppies, you cannibals?” I screamed.

“You ate them yourself!” he shouted in reply.

I picked up a long-collapsed coat rack from the floor, threw it at the man lying in the kitchen and began to look for the crutch again.

“Sasha!” the tramp called to someone. He was still squirming, unable to stand up.

_Crack_! the bottle he threw at me clanked against the wall.

“Thief!” sobbed the man writhing on the floor, looking for something else to throw at me.
He had obviously cut himself on something—blood was streaming profusely from his hand.

He threw an iron mug at me, and another bottle. I managed to avoid the mug, and comically kicked the bottle away.

“OK, that’s enough. . . .” I thought and ran out of the apartment. In the entryway I checked to make sure that there was no slimy mud on me. It didn’t look like it. The air hit me from all sides—how wonderful and clean the air is in entryways, my God. A trail of murky and sour filth, almost visible, crawled toward me from the tramps’ den, and I ran down to the first floor, smiling madly about something.

I could hear shouts still coming from the apartment on the second floor.

“They were also children once,” Marysya said to me back home. “Imagine, they also ran around with pink stomachs.”

“They were,” I replied without thinking, not deciding for myself whether they were or not. I tried to remember the face of the man in the kitchen, but couldn’t.

I got into the bath and rubbed myself with a sponge for a long time, until my shoulders turned pink.

“They couldn’t have eaten them in one morning? They couldn’t, could they?” Marysenka asked me loudly from behind the door.

“No, they couldn’t!” I replied.

“Perhaps they were taken away by other tramps?” Marysy suggested.

“But they should have squealed,” I thought out loud. “Wouldn’t they have whined when they were thrown into the sack? We would have heard them.”

Marysenka fell silent, evidently thinking to herself.

“Why are you taking so long? Come to me!” she called, and by her voice I understood that she hadn’t reached any definite conclusion about the puppies’ fate.

“You come to me,” I replied.

I stood up in the bath, scattering foam from my hands onto the floor, and reached for the latch. Marysya stood by the door and looked at me with happy eyes.

For an hour we forgot about the puppies. I thought with surprise that we had been together for seven months, and every time—and we had probably done this several hundred times now—every time it was better than the last. Although the last time it seemed that it couldn’t be better.
ALEXANDER KABAKOV (born 1943) began to publish fiction in the late 1980s to great acclaim, with *The Guardian* newspaper remarking that “. . . for many people one of the biggest achievements of glasnost has been Kabakov’s recognition as an author.” His 1988 dystopian novella *No Return*, which anticipated many of the events leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union, was translated and published widely throughout Europe, America and Japan.
Alexander Kabakov

Shelter

Translated by Daniel Jaffe

The highway flew to the sky. Light clouds seemed to swim languidly in that sky, yet to tear along in a rush at the same time, continuously shifting color and shape. Genuine theater: turn away for a minute—you miss what's most important.

In the early ’70s his peers all went from being young research associates and senior engineers to elevator inspectors, furnace stokers, parking garage attendants and construction site watchmen, to mere social parasites with forged employment certifications obtained from some minor boss acquaintance in exchange for a foreign, dog-eared copy of Lolita or a scratched up Sergeant Pepper. And they each set out to write a great novel that deliberately would fail to pass the censors, or they covered canvases with ingenious abstract designs or fully concrete, ruthless insights—their contemporaries’ ugly mugs and the country’s gloomy landscapes. At night they drank “Kavkaz” and “Agdam” port in cellars or apartments reduced to dumps, strummed guitars and sang all kinds of harmless homemade dissidence.

And he felt afraid. Or not so much afraid—although he felt afraid—as much as he felt principled disapproval of this bombastic, idle way of living and the groundless belief in one’s own exceptionality. Nevertheless, he hung out with this crowd, drank the very same port—preferring vodka, but it was awkward to stand out—and chatted about free art, swore at the authorities, who held all decent people by the throat. As regards the authorities, he completely agreed, although his basis for disliking them was somewhat different than that of his friends; as for the value of free art, well, he had serious doubts on
that score as he examined the bundles of canvases on stretchers along the wall and listened to chapters being read of yet another immortal masterpiece.

One day these doubts of his led to a fight.

They were seeing off a certain unlucky graduate of the Surikov Art Institute who, having finished a full stint as trolley driver, and quietly, not having made any sort of scene in the Supreme Soviet’s lobby while the torture prescribed for departers was winding down, would be flying off to Vienna on an Israeli visa—and then, of course, to New York, the paradise of contemporary culture! Flying off tomorrow to freedom. The artist was planning to take with him canvases hastily smeared with primer on top of his own surrealism, and covered in three days’ worth of distorted, kitschy hackwork portraits of relatives. They primed them as a collective effort, but the departere did the portraits himself—from prewar photographs of girls in berets and men in quasi-military jackets. They were supposed to pass for family mementoes, but the plan was that once free, he’d wash off the nonsense and right away set up a sensation-making exhibit somewhere in Soho, oh, Soho! However, at the Tretyakov, the frowning, totally KGB-faced expert auntie, peering at the swindler with hatred, affixed a seal on the back of each picture with the stunning formulation, “Of no artistic value; ineligible for export.” Thus, the painter could hope neither for conveyance of his masterpieces beyond the borders of the socialist Motherland that had granted him a happy childhood and free education, nor for the sale of these same masterpieces to some domestic organization, not even to that impoverished palace of culture itself—of no artistic value . . . In short, those accompanying him each took one of the awe-inspiring portraits until better days—maybe they’d manage to send them off through Western diplomats. As for those canvases remaining unclaimed—in a fit of drunkenness and spite toward the authorities, the artist slashed them to pieces, hauled them out to the courtyard and flung them into the eternally putrefying rubbish heap, even splashing them with solvent just to make sure.

And no one showed up at the fire because back then everything was peaceful, there were no such things as real fires; as for a rubbish heap—hey, a trifle, let it burn.

Like everyone else, our hero—let’s call him, as might be expected, N.—wrapped the painting he got in newspapers, and puffed up with indignation at the savage, base way things were being handled. More precisely, he felt surprise: what the heck kind of idiots were these Communist leaders? They were just engendering their own enemies. What would happen if they permitted the poor guy to exhibit in some foyer or other? Or if even maybe some
gallery in his native Saratov—where he’d come from to make his way into the Surikov Institute—bought a couple of his clumsy de Chirico imitations and hung them in the hall of “Works by Our Native Sons”?! Nothing would really happen to their all-engrossing authority, nobody would die; those old fools would keep kissing each other on the cheek same as always, would join with the ogres of all countries in constructing their lousy rockets. And the guy wouldn’t leave for goodness knows where filled with hatred. They could peacefully manipulate artists in the Soviet Union by holding out the possibility of receiving new studio space, and when the opportunity arose, could demonstrate to foreign guests the Soviet Union’s freedom of art. Genuine idiots.

Meanwhile, by the middle of the night they’d all gotten seriously drunk, of course, and decided not to disband, but to go as a whole group to the airport in the morning—to say farewell through the fence’s metal bars as their friend crossed the field to the gangway leading straight to paradise. And to hell with them, let them snap photographs and file the photos in their shitty dossiers—enough being afraid of them. N. intended to go, too, although this would be more dangerous for him than the janitors and sanitation engineers; he, after all, a skilled worker in his thrice damned institute, could receive an unpleasant report from where it mattered, could unceremoniously see the institute suspend its protection or simply fire him during a lab staff reduction.

This, however, is where the conflict took place. Already beyond sobriety, a state to which he was always importunately inclined, N. caught the fresh traitor of the Motherland in a corner and, as if communicating final words of wisdom, uttered some mercilessly insulting things:

“You understand, chum,” N. said, staggering and slightly pinning his acquaintance to the wall, a completely unwelcome action, “everything’s as it should be, chum, life goes on, and ‘you’ve got to live it over there so as not to be tortured by wasted years.’”

Both grinned at the popular joke paraphrasing Ostrovsky’s patriotic novel—recently folks were leaving one after the other as if suddenly everybody had discovered a Jewish branch on the family tree. Actually, it would have been no problem for N. to receive, through friends, an invitation from some unknown aunt in Haifa—an ethnic Russian could have all sorts of aunts. In fact, barely half went to Israel, the rest wound their way through Austria and Italy to the States.

“. . . However, chum,” N. continued, not letting the pinned fellow off the wall even a smidge, “you understand, old man . . . you’ll never have a solo show here, I agree . . .”

They were all convinced they’d never have anything here.
“... but, old man,” at this point, fortunately, N. lowered his voice, or else he’d have been beaten up, perhaps, by the entire gang, justifiably so—“and if you don’t get one over there? Eh? It won’t be because of ideology, you understand, old man, but because of artistic merit. Over there everything’s on the up and up, right, chum? So if over there they tell you it’s no good... well, that’s because of artistic... you understand, old man! Just imagine! Then what do you do? Stick your neck in a noose?... You see, I’m not going...”

N. didn’t get to explain why he wasn’t going. He wanted to say it wasn’t because of his low-level security clearance that prohibited him from changing place of residence for a minimum of five years after leaving the job, if ever, although of course that was the primary reason, but right then N. wanted to explain the real point to be something else, the fact that he feared a place of freedom that would absolutely show who was, in fact, worth what, and that it was really terrifying to discover in a free place that you’re not worth a thing, whereas here there was consolation your whole life: it was the Communists who were guilty; so you’ve got to think it through another hundred times before tearing off to freedom, and so he, N., for example, wasn’t ready for such stock-taking. Here at the institute everyone knew he would have earned not just a master’s long ago, but a doctorate had he matriculated. Here he was an unrecognized genius, but there he might turn out to be a recognized no-talent. These were not foolish conclusions and it’s actually odd that N., not as cutting edge a worldly man as he thought himself to be, had arrived at them back then in ’72 rather than, say, in ’92 or ’96 when everyone was arriving at them—back then when many of that evening’s party participants who hadn’t left but stayed, together with old ladies in Young Pioneer ties and old men in district committee caps, were beginning to attend demonstrations against freedom. That N.’s mind was truly not all that big was corroborated by the fact that he decided to share these thoughts with a person who already had in his pocket a certificate depriving him of Soviet citizenship in connection with transference of permanent residence to the State of Israel.

And so, N. hadn’t managed to finish speaking when he received a weak, intelligentsia sort of blow from a not-as-tight-as-should-have-been fist. It was fortunate the blow turned out to be poor and unskillful because the artist’s hand was truly quite heavy. Nevertheless, blood flowed from N.’s nose, a fuss broke out, N. stood with a bespattered face, friends took to reconciling the men and nearly succeeded, with N. making up while tilting his head back. No one understood clearly what had happened; neither the artist nor N. tried explaining anything to anyone. When it came time to go to the airport, everybody began
rousing those who were dozing off, then drank up for courage and from grief at the impending eternal separation, then lugged suitcases, then tried to catch a rare morning car. Here N. reasonably decided that although they’d made up, it would be somehow strange after the fight to wave from behind the fence’s metal bars to this already former—after all, departure was final for everyone—this in any case, former friend. Therefore, N. simply shook his hand, the precise one he’d gotten in the face, took the canvas rolled up in a tube and calmly went to the just-opening metro in order to go home, compose himself after a difficult night and get to work on time. Emotional and agitated, the artist had made an extra handshake, most of all as another sign of reconciliation, but at the final moment of farewell, didn’t notice N.’s absence—the crush of the crowd, tears, silly cheerful jokes. As for the remaining gang—gradually over the course of about a year and a half, N. drifted away from them.

And as for the artist, N.—goodness—turned out to be right, but the unfortunate guy didn’t stick his neck in a noose, just set himself up well in Brighton Beach, renovating apartments for fellow countrymen who’d grown wealthy and were living quite well. There, on the wooden boardwalk, N. ran into him one day, being on important, albeit boring business in New York and having decided to spend an evening among relatively good Russian speakers. They embraced, went to celebrate the encounter in the famous “Odessa,” reminisced about their entire former life, not counting idiotic farewells, and the decorator kept trying to pay, taking out his gold American Express card.

Meanwhile the canvas N. had gotten was moving all these years from apartment to apartment together with their temporary owner, still rolled up in a tube. After his return from America, N. found it, unraveled it—immediately, all the paint crumbled off, both the camouflaging surface layer with its primer, and the hidden, original one. How disgusting paint materials had been under the Soviets.

Gradually the light clouds began to swell, transform into storm clouds filled with navy blue gloom; shredded filaments tore from their edges, disappeared into the void. But in the distance those storm clouds fell heavily onto the highway, which cut into the horizon with a fine blade, causing white splinters of lightning to scatter off.

Thirty years passed, everything changed, his prior life disappeared roughly halfway through those three decades and N. had practically no gripes toward his new one—at least not those he’d had toward his old one. Life could now be
lived as he pleased, including the way N. had always wished: to be able to earn lots of money by any means possible—he was naturally inclined to think up all sorts of such means. In the past, when he’d spend evenings drinking among friends with artistic inclinations, no such means could have led anywhere, backlit as they were by prison, which was why he joined his friends in cursing the authorities, but now cursing them was, in N.’s view, pointless, just an exercise in unprincipled pettiness. But his friends, per rumors reaching him, still cursed them a blue streak for the same things as before—there’s no freedom, and they’re surrounded by injustice, obtuseness, and boorishness. He essentially agreed with all this, but considered the list characteristic—to a greater or lesser extent, and this was the distinction—of any authority, confirmation of which assessment he found not only in the homeland’s own experience, but also in life abroad, which he’d learned quite a bit about in recent times. And if some other authority doesn’t come along, as he was accustomed to thinking offhandedly while standing in an endless, unflinching, impenetrable traffic jam, then why get into such a huff? Okay, those folks weren’t having much luck, but nobody was touching them, they were living as they chose and as well as they could. I, it turned out, can . . .

All sorts of things happened over the course of 30 years. N. had already forgotten nearly everything that had been, had forgotten completely, and if on occasion he encountered a reminder of a certain forgotten thing, he’d feel a passing surprise—he had to, so much had happened and continued to be happening, elbowing out of memory that left-behind life as if it had never been! So, for instance, his family had somehow disappeared, but exactly how—you don’t remember anymore. He and his wife never had children, they clawed at one another for long years, and then it all somehow faded away, dissolved amid days that disappeared in an instant, leaving only the foolish words “it didn’t work out.” But even then, as N. was already growing accustomed to those words, as “it didn’t work out” was also turning into forgotten past, nothing in his life was actually changing. He kept on hurrying just the same, earned a lot, spent, lost and made back, not for a single minute doubting that this was the only way to live, that there was no other life, just a more or less successful one like this.

For some reason he kept account of everything from that year of ’72 when he drew apart from his circle of friends. It was only that account that interrupted his existence for even a second, suddenly pestered him—after all, it’s been 15 years already . . . 20 . . . a quarter century, that’s wild . . . 30 . . . How that account genuinely pained him: for after all, the end would soon . . . soon . . . who knows when, but after all, it was ever closer . . .
One day at some conference or heaven knows what it was, the usual idle chatter with brief, but genuinely important conversations during breaks—these conversations were the reason everyone came—at an idiotic resort he’d long tired of, okay at a conference, during a wild evening when most were up to their ears in guzzled champagne, which he couldn’t abide—neither the “Soviet” brand that had disappeared from view nor its thousand-dollar equivalent—during that evening of the conference’s second day, N. was sitting in a function hall and chatting with one of those maidens brought by private plane for the event’s participants. The maiden was too much, outrageously pretty, needless to say, but, to N.’s surprise, was practically literate, spoke practically without foul language or provincial accent, sensibly, and for that matter, spoke properly in English, too, she at first not having identified N.’s own language. But her Russian was superseded by her evening gown, not at all mandatory for a cocktail reception, her garish makeup and overall manicured look, leaving no doubt of the fact that her primary occupation had to do with her own body.

“One wouldn’t think, sir, that you’re Russian at all,” she repeated, shaking her silvery mane in illustration of surprise. “Not from the way you look, and you speak English so well.”

“Nowadays everyone speaks English well.” He was flirting a little per the habit of the confirmed bachelor, a guy ready for anything, and he muttered as if irritated, as if annoyed, “if only they’d still learn Russian.”

“Well, after all you’re a man of maturity—” as usual, she used the idiotic contemporary euphemism for “older,” then stopped short and corrected herself: “a man of middle-age. We . . . you know, sir, studied English specially, but you . . .”

Here she grew genuinely embarrassed, apparently realizing that “we” and “sir” also underscored his age that was at least twice hers.

“So, where are you from? And what do you do here?” asked N. almost rudely, which was, to an extent, part of his image, but also, to an extent, sincere inasmuch as “man of maturity,” “we,” and “sir” all offended him.

“I’m basically from Volgograd myself,” she replied with unexpected simplicity, and N. again felt surprise at how simple this “premium” class, so-obvious professional was, “but I’ve been living in Moscow for two years already. They brought me here to be an interpreter.”

He gave a rather scornful laugh. “They’re in painful need of interpreters here, aren’t they, especially from English.”

“And I’ve got active German, too”—now she took offense—“and a little Spanish. So, you think if a girl’s interesting, it means she definitely has to be, well . . .”
He liked the fact that she didn’t utter the expected word. It was as if the girl hadn’t yet completely left her Volgograd where, as she managed to explain during the ensuing 15 minutes, she’d lived with her father, an engineer in a military factory, and mother, a teacher, had been graduated with distinction from the philology department or some such, had gone to Moscow for a visit to a girlfriend who’d already gotten settled, and then she simply stayed on, for the first half a year just studying how to say the “г” sound in a nonfricative way because in Volgograd they also spoke with a soft “г” just like in Ukraine, and finally she up and learned it, what do you think about that?

They’d already done a respectable bit of drinking. She drank, per the norms of her profession, champagne—no stories or mannerisms managed to convince N. that she was truly just an interpreter; he ordered shot after shot of cognac. Meanwhile the banquet quieted down somewhat, with only the most inveterate playboys continuing their rowdiness, with guffaws reaching in from the other room together with squeals from their girls, who were less cultured than his conversation partner. And for the first time in many years, he spoke as if with some normal person, even a close one, not fearful of anything, not expecting the conversation to result in any kind of practical benefit.

They decided to go off to their separate rooms, to change into more wintry clothes and meet on the central square to gaze at mountains and snow under moonlight. She, naturally, showed up in a ridiculously luxurious ski suit, whereas he’d merely taken off his dinner jacket in his room, and pulled on a sweater beneath his ordinary black coat. It was cold in thin-soled shoes.

“You’ll forgive me, of course,” she suddenly asked when, having had their fill of the beauty and having sipped decorously from his flask for warmth, they now planned to turn back, but had not yet agreed to whose room, “so, how old are you really?”

He took a swig not only because he didn’t wish to answer honestly, “54,” but because the question seemed too efficient. The girl was assessing what sort of night’s work lay ahead.

“Well, 54,” he answered loudly and too distinctly, “so, what’s the problem? Everything, tfoo tfoo, is in working order so far . . .”

He felt sickened by his own crudeness. But she acted as if not having heard his declaration.

“I want to ask you, as a mature man,” and here she again corrected herself, “as an already, I beg your pardon, of course, older person . . .”

He stopped and stared her straight in the face. In the night all shiny with snow, stars and storefront windows, that face struck him as totally childlike, as
if she weren’t at least 25, but about 10-12. He couldn’t imagine when she’d taken off her makeup.

“Okay, go ahead, child,” he said, for some reason instantly feeling a terrible melancholy; his heart even, as sometimes happened, stumbled then sped up. “Go ahead, ask. What do you want to know? If I’m married?”

She sighed.

“You still really consider me a whore for no reason”—this time, he thought she was using even a base word appropriately—“That’s not at all what I wanted to ask you . . .”

About three years had already passed from that February, but N. kept thinking about why her question affected him so, and about how the two most important conversations of his life had taken place while he was anything but sober, and about how he’d actually given so much time to those kinds of empty evenings, yet only two stuck in memory, and about why that proud and foolish klutz had marked him so strongly for decades with that fumbling slap in the face, and why that not so foolish but highly impertinent girlie had posed him the question he’s been trying to answer for so long now, yet couldn’t.

He didn’t see her again. He sometimes thought, in a crowd of others like her at banquets and receptions, that her face flickered past; he’d walk up to the smile—and apologize. Excuse me, I took you for a certain acquaintance . . .

“Haven’t you had your fill of fun yet?” That’s what she’d asked back then, and from that time forward, N. often asked himself the same question.

It was coming down in buckets. It seemed as if you were driving along the bottom of a turbulent river. About 20 meters ahead of the car highway merged with sky. Yellow, weak-sighted, oncoming headlights beamed through the water, red flickers of passing blinkers dissolved in the water—all were leaving him behind. He moved into the right lane, afraid of missing the turn in the dark. Finally, a narrow cutaway appeared in the black wall of forest, he turned and drove slower still on asphalt more even than the highway’s.

It wasn’t an intelligible articulated thought, nor could it be called a desire; a more appropriate word would be a “feeling.” That was how N. once and for all designated what he’d been experiencing these several years, what would, with increasing frequency, rise to the surface during some sort of empty, nonbusiness conversation with one of the few acquaintances who still remained, hadn’t yet vanished off the quickly passing—by hours, even minutes—timetable of his life.
He should go, he’d say, and the conversation would stumble, extinguish for a moment like the flame of a cigarette lighter from a sudden, light movement of breeze. After a brief pause, the surprised acquaintance, long accustomed to a dissolute life, would try to elaborate with a grin—like Tolstoy, right? Is that it? You’ve lost the meaning of life? By that point he’d already have managed to collect himself and answer, also with a grin—“Well of course like Lev Nicholaech, even to the point of reaching Astapovo station to die.” “There isn’t any such station anymore,” his acquaintance would say, continuing the joke, “there’s Lev Tolstoy station, so the place is occupied.”

But he wished to leave.

Yet not necessarily à la Tolstoy, from the world and family—N. had essentially left both one and the other long before. He’d detached himself, leaving on the borders of necessary words and customary actions a vigilant guard, having created within himself something akin to his own Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the negotiation of practical problems and a Ministry of Defense for protection of boundaries. At attempts to breach these boundaries, he’d answer with that most powerful of weapons for routing the enemy—“money,” which, in the past, as a rule, worked perfectly, he having succeeded in buying his way out from all aggressors—women, relatives, friends, partners. Thanks to this defensive capability of his, he begrudged himself nothing, spending all his forces in support of this monetary preparedness.

But this was no longer working—it became urgently necessary to leave his very own existence, for the forces guarding the border no longer sufficed. Especially since, in recent times, the defensive system was beginning to fail here and there, something in it had broken so that results turned out opposite the desired effect: people had grown accustomed to monetary carpet-bombings and responded with affection, sincere love, and even their own, now irreparable dependence on his help. It was this very dependence that was simply killing him. It somehow turned out that they weren’t depending on him, but he on them, he having become his own inner fifth column. This devastated his psychological security, and he more and more obstinately kept returning to the thought of the urgent necessity for more reliable protection, a kind of bunker—like some stupefied Capitalist in the ’50s building a deep, completely self-sufficient shelter from the Russian hydrogen bomb.

To leave . . . he had to leave, he repeated within himself or maybe aloud while even the irony of his fellow conversationalist failed to induce him to treat the conversation as a joke. For a joke was merely a weak, ineffective source of protection, and the only proper, reliable resolution was departure.
N. had found this place after having casually passed by several times. Because of traffic jams on the highway heading toward his out-of-town residence, everyone rode around the bridge being repaired; he followed suit, and spotted this wonderful place, and spotted it again, and one day he stepped on the brakes, moved to the side of the road. Back then the church still lacked any crosses; the inside stood empty but for shiny plastered walls and a pile of fresh beams. And in the middle of the empty space, a priest was sort of clumsily stomping around, tossing his gray head this way and that, tugging on his uneven beard—evidently caught up in construction meditations.

“You know,” he didn’t know how one was supposed to speak to a priest, so he decided to do so as ordinarily as possible, the way he’d speak to anyone troubled by problems involved in renovating a large building, “you probably know this yourself . . . It’s just that I happen to be aware because I recently did some construction myself . . . You should stock up on building materials ahead of time, as a reserve . . . Because they go up in price quicker than the work itself . . . There in the front yard—”

“In the enclosure,” the priest corrected.

“In the enclosure,” he hastily corrected himself, “maybe you could even suspend a tarp and store everything, that is, stack it up. You’d save a lot of money buying in advance, and then, once everything’s been bought, you could set to building . . . you’ve just got to check with the experts first to know how much you’ll need . . . And don’t use one of those Moldavian crews.”

“We have our own construction workers,” said the priest. “You’ll pardon me, but we have our own rules for handling this.”

Here, for some reason, N. felt that against this person whose long streamlined body in smooth, long clothes soiled with sawdust, a body swaying in continuous rhythm with eyes staring in attentive calm, against this person he needed no self-defense because, in contrast to all the other people N. knew, this one would never break through his defenses then consolidate his hold on the conquered beachhead; whether N.’s borders were open or closed didn’t matter to this man—apparently, borders didn’t exist for him at all.

He came once a week, then twice, gradually took on management of the whole renovation. Then he came up with a way to notify not only nearby old folks, but also several more or less conscientious Moscow collectors, that the church was open and in need of icons. Then he paid for the cupolas to be gilded . . .

Despite all this, N. didn’t get baptized, embarrassedly mumbled something to the father about having been baptized secretly during childhood, so a second
time wouldn’t be appropriate. What’s more, when entering the church, he wouldn’t make the sign of the cross, just bared his head or, inasmuch as he rarely had it covered, gave a little bow, as upon meeting someone he knew.

He spent about half a year struggling to master the Bible, skipping a lot, and not at all grasping that there’s a holiness in the endless repetitions and enumerations naming long dead people. However, he read and reread the Gospels, such that he quickly memorized them well and particularly remembered the Evangelists’ variant readings. One day, rereading Mark, he wept at the spot where “they offered Him wine mixed with myrrh, but He did not take it,” because the Crucified one refused anesthetic while already upon the cross, beneath the sunset heat. He wiped his tears, felt embarrassed although at that point he was entirely alone.

However, after this he bought in the church a cheap silver cross on a lace, which he took to wearing.

And so it went until he made a final decision which, like all final decisions, arose as if within his very self—at which precise moment remained unclear . . . one minute nothing’s definite at all, then the next everything’s clear, as if it had always been. Strange that it hadn’t entered his head before. Everything was so simple, settled, final, that it couldn’t possibly be any other way.

Yet something was troubling him.

This was with him even as he drove through the rain, which had now become a raging storm.

Using a broken-spoked, old black umbrella as a barricade against wind-whipped torrents lashing parallel to the ground, the priest ran out to meet him and, like an experienced driver, beckoned and cautioned with held-out hands to help him park in the enclosure.

“So, father,” yelled N. through the rain, still shy with this form of address, “I went, I went by car and made out a power of attorney because to draw it up otherwise—hemorrhoids for sure; but, for cash they drew up the power of attorney without a hitch.”

He felt totally embarrassed at using such offensive language, but other phrases just didn’t come to mind.

“And here’s one other thing,” he hurried to say. “There are altogether enough assets...to cover the three lines of credit you took out.”

By now they were standing on the church porch, beneath the overhang.

“And another thing,” he finally dared to say what was most important of
all, the reason he’d come, “as for my decision . . . You understand . . . father, that I’ve decided . . . well, just for myself . . . that is, there aren’t any sacrifices here, you understand? . . . I just want to hide in order to save myself . . . Okay, I guess that’s enough.”

“Don’t think,” the priest said, smiling, “don’t think about anything, that’s all there is to it. You want to save yourself? Fine, as you should. People have always saved themselves from the world in churches, for if you don’t save yourself from the world, it’s difficult to save your soul. Here I am too, saving myself. You know what kind of person I was? Oi-e-ei! I served in the navy at some point, Captain 2nd rank, imagine, of a missile boat brigade. Well, what can I say now. We’ll save ourselves together, eh? A minute survived without sin, now that’s salvation. Your room is there, we moved in some pieces of furniture yesterday, want to have a look?”

The priest opened a narrow half-door to the right of the large church doors, and N. glanced inside. He saw a bed with a peeling wooden frame, a plywood night table, a bow-legged chair with torn upholstery and a wardrobe with an open, crooked little door. A dacha’s ancient cast-iron washbasin and faucet pipe suspended from the wall; beneath them a green enamel bowl sat on a stool. And only a corner icon, so dark as to be barely discernible, distinguished the premises from a room in some regional civic center’s hostel.

“And the toilet’s not far, over there by the market,” reached the father’s voice from behind, “and the bath we have in the settlement is a good one, works every other day. There you go. Tidy up for matins in the enclosure, okay, and just keep an ear cocked at night. But we have a police alarm, so it’s safe here. Settle in.”

He turned, and for a second they lingered, the priest having to take a step back in order for N. to exit his room. They again found themselves on the porch, recently covered at N.’s expense in slippery faux marble tiles. He stepped to the open church doors, lifting his hand to cross himself for the first time.

And in the damp early morning, he swept the enclosure and thought how the rain would always remove construction dust, so wasn’t it foolish to work with broom and dustpan? He’d have to come up with something, he thought, to improve procedures.

And then he didn’t think about anything at all.
Ludmila Ulitskaya (born 1943, Davlekanovo) is one of Russia’s most popular authors, with over two million books sold worldwide. Situated between mass culture and experimental literature, her works are typical of contemporary belles-lettres. The recipient of numerous awards, her most recent book to be translated into English is the Big Book Prize–winning Daniel Stein, Interpreter, a novel dealing with themes of the Holocaust and religious intolerance.
The table was laden with the improvidence of the poor, the food untouched by human hand, having been bought at Zabar’s, an upmarket delicatessen on 81st Street, and lugged by Vera the whole length of New York to Queens before being dished up in haste in rather basic Chinese bowls. There was twice as much food as necessary for three women who were trying to lose weight, and enough drink for five hard-drinking men, of whom, as luck would have it, there were none.

The overprovision of spirits was unplanned. Vera, the hostess, had put up ordinary, bog standard vodka, and had a bottle in reserve in the cupboard. Both her guests had brought a bottle each; Margot contributed Dutch Cherry Brandy, and Emma, a Muscovite on a business trip, had produced counterfeit Napoleon brandy, acquired at the food hall on Smolensk Square for a special occasion. The special occasion had now arrived, since she had landed this fantastic expenses-paid trip which was almost more than she could have hoped for.

Margot and Emma now sat before the feast provided by Vera, but their hostess had gone to take Sharik for a walk since, because of his advanced age, he couldn’t contain himself for long. His good breeding meant he couldn’t bring himself to excrete at home, with the result that he was riven by inner conflict. They sat in silence by the lavish spread and awaited the return of Vera with whom Margot had become very friendly in America. Vera and Emma had not met before, but knew a lot about each other because Margot was a chatterbox. Since yesterday evening some long forgotten cat had run between Margot and Emma, and Emma was now trying to remember why
she had sometimes distanced herself from Margot long ago in Moscow, before returning to her as if to an ex-lover.

Emma was staying not at a hotel but with Margot, whom she had not seen for a full ten years. They had been born in the same month, lived on the same block in Moscow, studied in the same class, and until they were thirty had never been apart for more than a few days. When they met up again they had been sure to pour out to each other every detail of their adventures during the intervening period. They both had babies in the same year and their children brought them even closer together. Having put them to bed, they would meet up in Emma's kitchen, smoke a packet of Java cigarettes each, confess to each other as a matter of course all their thoughts and deeds, their sins of omission and commission, and would part absolved, replete with conversation, after two in the morning with less than five hours left for sleeping.

Now, after a separation of ten years, they had clasped themselves to each other's bosoms and known a joy of mutual comprehension such as is usually experienced only by musicians in a good jam session, when every twist and turn of the theme can be anticipated through the agency of a special organ not present in other human beings. They knew all the events of the other's life, since they corresponded not often but regularly. There were many things, however, that you couldn't put in a letter, that could be communicated only by a tone of voice, a smile, an intonation. Margot had divorced her alcoholic husband, Venik Goven, three years previously, Shitty Bogbrush, as she called him. She was now passing through the phase of her exodus from the darkness of Egypt. The wilderness in which she was wandering afforded her limitless freedom, but she was not happy. There was a void which had previously been occupied by Venik, with the empty vodka bottles in his briefcase, in the wardrobe, among the children's toys, with the ignominy of his drunken sex, with his stealing of family money, the children's, the rent, whatever. There now sprouted in this empty space dreadful quarrels with her elder son, sixteen-year-old Grisha, and complete alienation from nine-year-old David. All this she now explained to Emma, and Emma could only tut-tut, shake her head, sigh and, without actually coming up with any practical advice, empathize so passionately that Margot felt a whole lot better. Emma saluted her successes in emigré life, her truly heroic achievement in getting her university degree recognized and landing a modest goldfish in the shape of a job as nursing assistant in a private cancer clinic, with good prospects of herself becoming licensed in due course, and so on. It was a long story.
The first three days in Margot’s apartment, or rather nights, since during the day the friends had to rush off to their work, had been spent mainly discussing the extravagant behavior of Bogbrush. Emma could only marvel that the absence of her husband seemed to preoccupy Margot every bit as much as had his presence. It might have been expected that someone who had endured so many years with a bad person, an alcoholic into the bargain, reluctant because of her oriental origins to get divorced, should now be feeling very pleased with herself for having finally plucked up the courage to get divorced. Alas, no. Now she was agonizing over why she had put up with it for so long, and was reliving the saga in great detail and at great length. The evening did, however, eventually arrive when Margot got round to asking Emma, “So how are you getting on? What’s the score with your hero?”

That might even have been genuine interest in her voice.

“It’s all over,” Emma sighed. “We’ve split up, at last. I’m beginning a new life.”

“When?” Margot was suddenly interested, having also finished her old life but being quite unable to get a new one to start.

“The day before I came here. On the eighteenth.”

She went over her last meeting with Gosha. She had gone to his studio, which was crammed with people made of twisted metal. She thought they looked tragic, as if they had accidentally come to life not in a body of flesh and blood but in unyielding metal and were now tormented by feelings of rusty inadequacy.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, yes, I think so. What then? You met . . .”

“We were going nowhere. It was a dead end. There was no way out. His wretched wife is completely useless. One daughter is ill and the other is a downright psychopath. He can’t get away from them and I was only making things worse. Our relationship wasn’t helping anyone, and he was drinking because it was all so hopeless.”

Margot gave Emma her Armeno-Azerbaidjani look. Disquiet was replaced by distaste, which broke through as an improper question: “Emma, do you sleep with him when he’s pissed?”

“Margot, in the past eight years I have seen him sober perhaps twice. He is simply never not pissed.”

“Poor girl,” Margot screwed up her overlarge eyes. “I do understand.”

“You don’t, you don’t,” Emma shook her head. “He’s fantastic, and it doesn’t matter if he’s drunk or sober. He is just what every woman needs.
He is all man. It’s just he’s in this dreadful situation, and he dragged me into it. He owes me nothing. It’s just life, but I have finally decided to break up with him. I’m getting out. I mustn’t stand in his way. He is creative, he is special. He is quite different from all those engineering plodders. The whole world is different for him. Of course, I will never meet anyone remotely like him again, but he belonged to me. That is part of my life, a whole eight years, and nobody can take it away. It is mine.”

“What makes you think this is your final break-up? You have already written to me three times to say you have broken with him, and every time you go back again. I keep all your letters,” Margot reminded her rather unnecessarily.

“You know, before I only thought about what was best for him, but now I have looked at things from the other side. I am thinking about myself now, what’s best for my own life. I am past forty . . .”

“I know all about that. Me too,” Margot remarked.

“Well there you are. It’s just the right moment to start a new life. We have split up on my terms, do you see? I was the one who chose the time and place. We spent our last night . . . I will never forget it, because it went beyond the bounds of what usually happens in sex. This was something else, in the presence of heaven. Those metal people he welds were there like witnesses. You can’t imagine what it’s like living with an artist.”

“No, I can’t. Venik is a software engineer, admittedly a very good one. He is not at all heavenly, as you know. He is the ultimate egoist, and he really doesn’t need anything other than his computer and his vodka. You were always extraordinary, though, Emma, and so were your lovers. That Hungarian hunk you had! What was his name?”

“Isztvan.”

“And your husband, Sanek, was such a decent man. You will find another and get married again, but I . . .” Margot pushed her thumbs under her brassière and raised her still flowering but slightly wilting tackle. “In spite of all this . . .” She stood up and turned round, swaying her hips to show off the wonderful receptacle she was, with her breasts, her slender waist, the convincing firm roundedness of her rump, “and sod all good it does me. In my entire life, since I was eighteen, I have slept with no one other than Shitty Bogbrush. Explain to me, Emma, if you will how things have worked out this way. You have no figure, your tits aren’t even a size two, and, forgive me for saying it, you are bow-legged. So why do you always have shoals of lovers?”

Emma laughed good-naturedly, not offended in the least.
“What I love about you, Margot, is your directness. I can tell you why, though, and anyway I have been saying this for a long time. It's the Armeno-Azerbaidjani conflict. You have to resolve it in yourself. Are you an oriental woman or a western woman? If you are oriental, don’t divorce your husband; if you are western, get yourself a lover and don’t see it as a problem.”

Margot was unexpectedly upset.

“But I know your whole family, your mother and your grandmother. What way are your Jewesses better than my Armenian mum? What makes you so western?”

“Western woman respects herself. Do you remember my grandmother?”

Margot certainly did. Cecilia Solomonovna was a grand old woman, a tsaritsa, but actually she was bow-legged too. Was she really a westerner?

On that note of bathos Margot had cleared the dishes from the table the night before, looked at her watch and sighed because, as in their days in Moscow, it was already past two o’clock and she had to get up at seven. They had gone off to their rooms to sleep: Margot to the bedroom and Emma to the sitting room where there was a new convertible divan. It had been bought after the departure of Venik when there was suddenly a lot of money in the house again, as if she had had a big win in the lottery.

Now Vera returned, her wrinkled, youthful face flushed and her hair badly dyed. Behind her Sharik waddled like an old man and sat down to the left of her chair, feigning indifference to the food on the table.

“There’s a couple who don’t disguise their age,” Emma thought admiringly.

Vera flopped down in her wicker chair which gave a thin screech. She reached for a bottle.

“The date’s an odd number, but I count in lunar months. It is seventeen months today since Misha died.”

She poured out the vodka without asking, and Emma noted that the glasses came from Moscow, crystal from the Stalin era.

“May the Kingdom of Heaven be yours, Misha,” Vera exclaimed joyously, and drained the glass. Then she sighed. “A year and a half. It seems like yesterday.”

She took a piece of smoked turkey from one of the plates and threw it to the dog.

“Pig yourself, Sharik. This is pure poison for you.”

The dog appreciated his mistress’s gesture. He was again torn between
two powerful urges. One was to immediately lick her hand in gratitude, and
the other was to no less immediately swallow the piece of meat with its
golden tan and heavenly taste. He froze in consternation. Sharik had a com-
plex personality.

“Now for a blow-out,” the hostess murmured hazily. “Get stuck in, girls!
Since Misha passed away I don’t think I’ve cooked a meal once. It’s been all
fast food outlets. Margot! How about it?”

Either because they were all really starving, or because the dog was growl-
ing in ecstasy over his turkey bone, they fell upon the food, forgetting about
the proprieties, and forks, and pausing for breath. They were suddenly raven-
ous. They didn’t even say how good the food was, just chomped in silence,
helping each other to more, sharing round the vodka. Sharik became quite an-
imated under the table as they threw him some as well. Everything was so
delicious, the skate and the salads, the pie and the paté, and just the sheer un-
American taste of the food, which Margot mentioned. Vera laughed.

“Un-American, of course it is! The food tastes Jewish. The store I bought
it from, Zabar’s, is Jewish. Misha and I took a fancy to it as soon as we arrived.
It was really expensive and we had no money then. We bought four-ounce
portions at a time: potato and herring forshmak, paté, and there was no black
bread to be had in America at that time, only in Zabar’s. Here in America
Jews from Russia are called Russians, and people like me who actually are
Russians become incredibly judaised,” Vera laughed, addressing herself to
Emma who was ignorant of these local nuances. “My poor grandmother died
on the eve of our wedding. I suspect from grief that her beloved granddaugh-
ter was marrying a Jew. But mother just kept saying, ‘Who cares if he’s a Jew.
At least we’ll have one son-in-law who isn’t a drunkard.’”

Vera chortled with mirth, and her wrinkles gathered in bouquets on ei-
ther cheek and, paradoxically, made her look even younger.

“Was he a heavy drinker?” Emma asked. It was a question in which she
had a personal interest.

“Of course he did!” Margot frowned.

“God, yes. Didn’t he just!” Vera turned her smiling face to the large por-
trait of her departed husband. The portrait had been blown up from an old
photograph taken just after the war. The quality wasn’t too good. A young
soldier with an unruly shock of curly hair springing out from beneath his
cheese-cutter hat and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. “A bit of all
right, eh? Everything about him was all right, including his drinking. He
died of cirrhosis of the liver, Emma.”
Margot put her head with its luxuriant tresses on the veined marble of her arm. She was a goddess, a natural goddess with a Roman nose which grew out of her forehead, improbably large eyes, and lush lips shaped like Cupid’s bow.

“Vera, your Misha was, of course, a lovely man, charming and altogether outstanding but, let’s face it, he put you through hell with his drinking. I know all about it! What good can come from drinking? It’s tantamount to surrendering your humanity! You don’t deny that, do you?”

Vera pushed aside the empty vodka bottle. They had somehow got through it without noticing. She produced the second and said, still with the same smile, “Stuff and nonsense! Getting drunk liberates you. If someone is a good person, he gets even better when he is drunk, and if he is shit, he gets shittier. You can take my word for it, I know what I’m talking about. Wait a minute, though, something’s missing.” She jumped up, poked about on a shelf, produced a cassette and put it on to play. The gravelly, compelling voice of Alexander Galich half-sang, half-spoke: “A bottle of samogon, halva, two bottles of Riga beer, and herring from Kerch . . .”

“Misha loved him. They were drinking partners, friends . . .”

Nobody listened to the poor guitar and the voice from the past went unheeded as they talked about matters nearer home and drank. Vera drank vodka, Emma her suspect brandy, and Margot drank a bit of everything, mixing her drinks.

Strangely enough as they went on drinking they gradually changed, but in different directions. Vera became more cheerful and her spirits rose; Margot became glum and tetchy and seemed cross because she couldn’t see why Vera was enjoying herself so much; while Emma watched both of them and had a sense that she was about to learn something vital which would help her begin her new life. She sat listening closely but saying little, all the more since the alcohol seemed not to be having much effect on her today.

“I don’t care what you say . . .” Vera made a sweeping Russian gesture with her arm as if about to launch into a folk dance. “In Russia all the best, most talented people since ever was have been drunks. Peter the Great! Pushkin! Dostoevsky! Musorgsky! Andrey Platonov! Venedikt Yerofeev! Yury Gagarin! My Misha!”

Margot goggled.

“What’s your Misha doing in that list, Vera? Gagarin if you must, damn him, but Misha! Misha, for heaven’s sake!”
Vera suddenly went quiet and became serious. She said softly, “Well, he was one of Russia’s best... so honest...”

Margot had got the bit between her teeth, however, and there was no stopping her now.

“And what’s Peter the Great doing there? The man was mad! He was a syphilitic! Okay, he was at least an emperor, but your Misha was a complete Jew! What was so honest about him? Eh? The amount of shit he made you eat! Honest, indeed!”

By now Margot was addressing herself not to Vera but to Emma.

“Honest! Him! I can’t bear to hear it! How many abortions did he put her through, her Mr. Honesty? How many women did he put himself around to while you were going through hell with all those abortionists? There wasn’t one of your friends he didn’t poke. It was disgusting!”

“Well, he didn’t try it on with you, did he!” Vera snorted.

“What do you mean? You think he tried it on with everyone except me? He just didn’t get lucky with me!” Margot proudly cut her short.

“Well you’re stupid! If you’d slept with Misha things might have gone better with Bogbrush!”

“That’s enough! My Bogbrush may be shitty, but your Misha didn’t come to much either. Randy old man!”

Sharik got up laboriously, ambled over to Margot and barked listlessly. Vera chortled.

“Girls! Margot! Emma! You mustn’t speak ill of Misha in the presence of Sharik. He’ll tear you to pieces.”

Sharik, aware that he had been praised, waddled over to his mistress and opened his black jaw with its raspberry-red lining in anticipation of a reward. Vera tossed him a piece of French cheese.

Margot, her blood now off the boil, downed a glass of brandy.

“I didn’t like it, Vera, the way he just did as he pleased. He was unfaithful to you right, left, and center and you went on loving him and forgave him it all. I would have killed him. If I have a husband I love him, but if he cheats on me I cut his throat, I swear to God!”

Could it really be that in America, a world away, in the city of New York in 1990, this completely zany conversation was taking place, bitchy, more at home in a Moscow kitchen, and before you know it likely to boil over into a fight? Emma listened in wonderment and observed her old friend who had hardly changed at all. As Margot had been, so Margot remained, an Ar-
menian woman with an Azerbaidjani surname which had her Armenian relatives looking askance at her throughout her life. Her father, Zarik Huseinov, had died in a climbing accident when Margot was only six months old. There was no getting away from it, her passport might be American but her mentality was resolutely that of a woman from the Caucasus. She would feed everyone, give away all she possessed, but if you forgot her birthday she would kick up such a fuss you would hear about nothing else for the next year. “I’ll cut your throat!”

“Margot, you don’t understand at all! The problem is inside you yourself! You are simply incapable of loving. If you love someone, you do forgive them everything. Anything and everything.”

“But not to that extent” Margot shrieked, shaking her symmetrical curls. “Not to that extent you don’t!”

Vera poured herself a drinking tumbler of vodka, not a full one, just a half. She held it pensively and looked at the portrait diagonally across from her. It was as if the young Misha with his postwar shock of hair was gazing straight at her, although she had never known him when he looked like that. They had met later when she enticed him away from his postwar, second wife for her own, as it then seemed, private enjoyment. She had been wrong. Oh, how wrong she had been! He had run back even to his wartime wife, Zinka, which she had known about, and to his postwar wife, Shurochka, and there had even been another one. She looked unflinchingly at the portrait and at Margot.

“You are a fool. Listen, I loved Misha with all my strength, with my body and soul, and he loved me. You have no idea how much we loved each other. We made love drunk and sober, especially drunk. He was a great lover. He was not unfaithful to me, he just slept with other women. I wasn’t a bit jealous. Well, perhaps just a bit,” she corrected herself. “But only when I was young, before I understood. He had a talent for loving, and when the cirrhosis caught up with him, then we really loved each other with such passion, because time was running out. We both knew it . . . He got a girl in the hospital, a nurse, who fell in love with him one last time. I knew all about it, he didn’t hide it. He slept with her. Then he said, ‘No, I don’t want anyone else. There is not much time. Get them to discharge me. I want to die at home, with you.’ We screwed until we cried. He kept saying, ‘How lucky I’ve been. I was seventeen when I went to the front in 1943, and I survived. I fought right through the war without killing anyone, I was in the maintenance sec-
tion, repairing tanks. Women always loved me. I was sent off to the prison camps in 1949, they arrested me at college, but I lived to tell the tale. And again women loved me. And you, my joy,’ that’s what he said, my joy! ‘And you, my joy, fell in love with me. You were just a young girl and you went for an old goat. You saw what you wanted. Clever girl. Let me feel those folds, and what knees, what shoulders. I don’t know what to go for first.’ Two days before he died that’s what he said, with me already past my half century! What shoulders, what knees . . . They’re nothing of the sort. You’re a fool, Margot, a fool. You’ve let everything slip through your fingers, you haven’t seen anything. You are incapable of loving, that’s what, that’s your problem. Your Bogbrush is nothing to do with it. He was out of luck, your Bogbrush. Perhaps another woman could have loved him and taught him to love, but what sort of a woman are you? All leafy top and nothing down below!”

Margot started to cry, stricken by this drunken truth. Perhaps that was right? Perhaps she was the problem? Perhaps Venik would not have drunk if she had loved him as much as Vera loved her Misha? Or perhaps he would still have drunk but would have loved her terribly. Then there would not have been the shame and embarrassment of drunken copulation, when you lay there filled with loathing while two hundred pounds of meat jerked up and down on you, braising your dryness, making you feel you were being impaled, and your breasts ended up covered in bruises as if you had been beaten and the brown marks took a year afterwards to fade. The stench of the vodka he’d drunk and the smell from down below made waves of nausea roll over you, and you felt as seasick as if you were down in the hold of a ship, and you just hoped you could make it to the toilet to spew everything out into its gleaming white depths. What? Wasn’t that enough? You want more? Get away from me with your insatiable prong! What are you doing? What do you want now?

Emma too began to cry. What had she done? Gosha, I love you as I have never loved anyone, as nobody has ever loved anybody. No, no, I don’t want a new life. Let me just have this one back, with eternally drunk Gosha, with the despair every day, the worry, the trips hither and thither in the night in the ambulance, the redemptive third of a bottle of vodka in the mornings, the warm pie wrapped in newspaper. And all of it under the contemptuous gaze of her daughter: has he had you flapping about in a panic again? All without the hope of any halfways normal life, without anything in return, without acknowledgment, without gratitude, without any compensation. You just give and give, and that’s it.
“You just give, and that’s it! You don’t ask what you’re going to get in return!” Vera declaimed, ablaze with a drunken radiance and her visceral feminine wisdom. She poured out more vodka, in tumblers this time, not in the crystal liqueur glasses. She was chain-smoking and stuffing the cigarettes before she had finished them into a huge ashtray more appropriate to a public smoking area than to the private needs of a widow living on her own. She stubbed out a cigarette, rose to her full height, rocked forward and clutched the edge of the table. The table also rocked but did not fall over. She kept her feet, and shuffled across the floor as if it were an ice rink, chuckling and supporting herself against the wall, to the toilet.

“Vera really is drunk,” Margot commented, and immediately a crash was heard from the bathroom followed by a loud expletive. Several items had fallen, one of them heavy. Margot and Emma jumped up to run to her aid, but somehow couldn’t. They bumped into each other, which stopped their unwise attempts at running, and walked uncertainly toward the bathroom. Vera was floundering there on the floor, rubbing one of her celebrated knees and muttering to herself, “People are always leaving their clothes on the floor and tripping you up . . . Margot, why are you standing there like a cow. God knows, I’ve broken all my perfume bottles.”

The floor was indeed covered with wet, glinting pieces of glass and the smell of perfume hit you like an antitank shell.

They picked Vera up off the floor. She was a bit riotous but in a cheery way, and kept demanding just a little bit more. Alas, all the bottles were empty: both the vodkas, the brandy, the liqueur, and a bottle of French wine which had appeared from nowhere and which they had drunk without remarking its premium label.

“The premises are to be searched! Misha always had something hidden away . . . In Moscow before we left the KGB conducted a search. They found more hidden bottles than hidden books.”

Vera opened all the drawers in the writing desk:

“I have admittedly searched everywhere here on more than one occasion, but there must be something somewhere. Mishenka! Hello-o!” She suppedicated her husband’s portrait, raising to heaven her long arms which were sagging slightly at the shoulders.

Then she got down on her knees, not before the portrait but before the bookcase, pushed back the glass and started hauling books out of the bottom shelf in slithering piles. She emptied the lower shelf: there was nothing there.
Emma and Margot were standing propped up like two trees leaning against each other, one thick and one thin. Margot was assailed by hiccups.

“You need something to drink,” Emma counseled.

“I’m looking, aren’t I? It’s got to be somewhere.” Vera lay down on the floor on her back and kicked the books out with her foot, by now from the second shelf, on to the floor. One book split open and clinked. It was a pretend book with only a cover, within which there nestled a partly drunk bottle of vodka.

Vera seized it and pressed it to her breast.

“Misha! My faithful friend! You thought you could hide it from me. Why did you even try? Found it!”

They poured out this final vodka, a present from Misha, and at last could drink no more. They were full to their ears with alcohol, to the upper limit of a woman’s capacity. Vera, before crashing out, told them to carry her to Misha’s study, and while they were en route completed her last drunken confessions, which might not have been confessions at all but only fantasies.

“Put me on the couch in the study, with Misha. I’ve got myself a gentleman visitor, a Puerto Rican boy, very handsome. I always make sure to put him down on this couch. It smells of Misha. Misha can watch him. He’s young, only thirty-five, Misha can watch him f-fucking my brains out. Misha enjoys it. ‘Enjoy yourself,’ he says, ‘my joy, enjoy, enjoy.’ That’s what he tells me.”

Margot tried for ages afterwards to remember whether Vera had told her she had a Puerto Rican lover, or whether she had just imagined it because she was so drunk.

They deposited Vera on the couch. Sharik was already snoring there and didn’t take kindly to having to move. Margot and Emma headed for the bedroom where a double bed, as wide as Vera’s Russian soul and just as soft, had been made up for them before the festivities began.

Margot, the last respectable woman on the continent, who still wore lace-edged bloomers, chastely extracted her brassière from beneath them and collapsed on to the nostalgia-inducing feather bed. It had emigrated together with Vera from Tomilin on the outskirts of Moscow where, to this day, Vera’s mother and two elder sisters slept on similar mattresses. Emma took off everything and slipped under the sheet in the nude, but everything immediately began to sway and rock, first in one direction then in the other.

“Oh, I feel bad,” she groaned.

“For whom is life in Russia good?” Margot responded brightly, remem-
bering her Nekrasov from school. “The main thing is, don’t go to sleep before you feel better. Poor Bogbrush, can he really have felt as bad as this every day?”

“Even worse,” Emma whispered. “In the morning it’s always even worse than in the evening. Poor Gosha.”

An inexplicable feeling of tenderness welled up in Margot and she couldn’t even tell toward whom it was directed. It might almost have been for Shitty Bogbrush. She sniffed because her tears were ready to trickle, and put her arms round Emma’s skinny back. She was as thin as a fish and just as smooth, only not wet but as dry as toast, and slippery under her hands. Margot began to stroke her, at first her back, then her shoulders a little, and a warm, powerful wave swept over her, carrying her out into uncharted waters. Emma just kept groaning, but she lay there completely still and motionless and Margot raised herself a little. She stroked Emma’s insignificant breasts and was amazed at how delightful it was to touch them, as if the whole of her adolescent’s body had only been made to be stroked. She pressed her lips to her neck, and Emma’s skin smelled not of Vera’s explosive perfumes, which still had the entire apartment reeking as if someone had burned the milk. It smelled of something which caught you and entered the very center of your being, the very center. Margot felt as if a flower was opening up inside her belly and reaching out toward Emma, and she melted with pleasure. She touched Emma’s breasts, first with her lips and then with her fingers, lovingly, around the button of the nipple . . .

Emma groaned. She was floating who knows where, but her stomach was lurching quite separately and she very much wanted to be sick. In order to do so, however, she needed to stay still, she needed to make an effort, but the swaying was so strong she couldn’t stop it. That anyone’s hands were stroking her was something of which she was quite unaware. All her feelings were concentrated in her stomach, and a bit in her throat.

Margot’s flower, however, was swelling up and about at any moment to burst open. She pressed her belly to Emma’s side, and her fingers rejoiced in the feel of Emma’s firm breasts, such a solid gland, she was palpating the inferior part, following a cord upwards to the nipple, and further left, a second one. A lump, another one. A textbook case. Cancer! No need for a biopsy! She must be operated on immediately! Margot sat up with a jolt.

“Emma!” she yelled. “Emma, get up! Get up at once!”

The intoxication vanished as if it had never been. Everything fell away. She stood there in her yellow laced-trimmed combinations with her sagging
but perfectly healthy breasts: she had a mammogram twice a year, as any civilized woman does. She caught Emma under the armpits, set her on her ragdoll legs, shook her and continued yelling: “Stand up will you, you silly bitch! Stand straight. Put your arms out, like this. It’s your armpits I need, not your elbows. Hold my shoulders!”

And with searching fingers she pressed into the soft hollow of her armpits, probing the depths. The lymph gland on the left was hardened and swollen, but not very much. The gland on the right was problem-free. She squeezed the left nipple.

“Ouch!” Emma responded.

“Did that hurt?”

“What do you think?!” Emma snapped and flopped back on to the bed.

Margot’s fingers were damp.

“Emma, have you had a discharge from your nipple for long?”

“Give over, I’m already feeling sick enough. Give me something to drink.”

Margot dragged her to the bathroom. Emma was sick, then had a pee. After that Margot pushed her under a cold shower. Morton was on duty at the clinic today, the best of their doctors. He was an old man who really knew his job and was very accommodating. They were in luck.

Margot pulled Emma out of the shower. By now she was looking entirely together.

“Get ready quickly. We’re going to my clinic.”

“Margot, are you mad? I’m not going anywhere. I’ve got today off.”

“Me too. Get ready quickly. You’ve got God knows what going on in your mammary gland. It needs to be checked straight away.”

Emma saw the situation at once. She pulled a towel off the rack and dried herself. She prodded her left breast.

“Here?”

Margot nodded.

“Put the kettle on, Margot, and calm down. Do you think it would be very expensive for me to phone Moscow?”

“Go ahead. Do you know how to dial through?”

Margot brought the telephone. Emma dialed the code, then the Moscow number. Gosha didn’t answer for a long time.

“What time is it there now?” Emma suddenly wondered.

“It’s half past five here, plus eight. Half past one in the afternoon,” Margot calculated.
“Gosha! Goshenka!” Emma shouted. “It’s me, Emma. Yes, from New York. It’s all off. No split-up. I was being stupid. Forgive me! I love you! What’s up, are you drunk? Me too! I’ll be back soon. Only, you’ve got to love me, Gosha. And don’t drink. I mean, don’t drink so much.”

“I need half an hour to get my things together. No, forty-five minutes. I’ll order a taxi for six fifteen,” Margot announced, taking the telephone out of Emma’s hands.

“Hey, what’s the hurry? Is it really that urgent?”

“It couldn’t be more urgent.”

At the door stood Sharik, old age making his needs too very pressing. He stood there waiting and smiling, with his tongue stuck out engagingly. They would have to take the old buffer out for a walk before the taxi arrived.
Mikhail Shishkin (born 1961, Moscow) has lived and worked in Switzerland since 1995. The author of four widely acclaimed and award-winning novels, Shishkin is renowned for his excellent style and appreciated as one of the most innovative and unusual Russian prose authors. His most recent novel, Letterbook, which is shortly to be published in English by Quercus Books, was awarded both the 2011 Big Book Prize and the Readers’ Choice Award.
There’s a famous police photograph of Robert Walser, taken at the place of his death: winter, a white incline, tracks in deep snow, a man fallen supine, arms outstretched. His old man’s hat flung to the side. That’s how he was found by children on their Christmas walk.

He described his own death in a story published half a century before his final Christmas. The protagonist of this brief little tale is a lost soul, inconspicuous, needed by no one—and yet, to make things worse, also a genius and master of the world. He wearies of being unneeded and escapes from his troubles like this: he buries the world in a snowstorm and lays himself down in a drift.

Foreknowledge of one’s own death is not, however, the privilege of the writer. It’s just that it’s easy to catch him red-handed—in the literal sense: the hand records whatever is revealed to him at a particular juncture. Such breakthroughs happen in every person’s life. Holes in matter. Points of transmission. In such moments the composer comes by his melody, the poet his lines, the lover his love, the prophet his God.

In that instant you encounter what everyday existence holds asunder: the visible and the invisible, the worldly and the sacred.

You begin to breathe in time with a space in which all things occur simultaneously—those that have been and those yet to be.

Reality has been playing hide-and-seek with you, hiding behind the past and the future like a child who’s squeezed himself in under the fur coats hanging in the hallway, and now jumps out at you, sweaty, happy, bursting with
laughter: Here I am! How d’you manage that—went right past and didn’t see me! Now you’re it!

To see your own death in such a moment is nothing, for there arises in all its glorious patency this knowledge: I was never born, but have always been. Suddenly comes the realization that there’s no need to cling on to life, because I am life. And it is not I who can sense the smell of mulch exuding from the forest’s mouth, it is the universe sniffing its own scent with my nostrils.

If you can measure your life by anything at all, it’s probably by the number of such encounters allotted to you.

I remember very well how I experienced that for the first time. My twelfth year. The smell of peat bogs burning around Moscow. The hazy country mornings of ’72. A charred aftertaste to everything, even the hot strawberries from the garden bed. Mum went on holiday to a rest home on the upper Volga, and took me with her. One of my first trips away.

It rained incessantly, we lived in a damp, mosquito-infested little house, and at first I was bored, nightly film screenings notwithstanding, but after a while the weather improved, we got a new canteen neighbor, Uncle Vitya, and our life took a turn for the better. We swam with him, took motorboat rides on the Volga, went on forest rambles. Sinewy and gold-toothed, Uncle Vitya made Mum laugh no end with his stories. I didn’t get half of his jokes, but the way he told them made it impossible not to laugh. I took a great liking to Mum’s new acquaintance. What’s more, I was bowled over by the fact that he worked in a recording van—a “Tonwagen.” No doubt I was already spellbound by words.

There I go, presumptuously calling that teenager myself, though I’m not at all sure whether he’d agree to acknowledge himself in me as I am now: gray-haired, advanced in life, a sickly bore with a brazenly protruding belly. He’d be very surprised: can that really be me? I don’t know that I could find anything to answer. Not likely. We may be namesakes—but so what?

Among Uncle Vitya’s stories I somehow remember one about how, skating on the river as a child, he and other boys would sometimes happen upon frogs frozen into the ice. If you peed on them they’d come to life and start moving. And another one about the war. He told us about the penals whose only hope was to get wounded. Redeem your guilt with blood and you’d have your decorations and rank restored. And so they’d resort to self-injection, shooting themselves in the arm or foot through a loaf of bread so there’d be no gunpowder traces in the wound.

It had never occurred to me that Mum liked to dance, but now she’d be out dancing with Uncle Vitya every evening.
One day Mum started speaking to me in a strange voice. If Uncle Vitya ever asked me about Dad, she implored, I should tell him that he was dead.

“But he’s not dead,” I said, surprised. “He just moved away.”

She pressed my head to her breast. “But you’re my clever boy and you understand everything.”

I understood nothing, but nodded all the same.

And I began waiting for Uncle Vitya to ask me about Dad.

It was strange to see Mum rouging and powdering herself, making up her eyes, painting her lips, spraying perfume on her neck, and doing her nails—I’d be hit by the sharp smell of nail varnish. I had never known her like this before.

Mum was a teacher, she taught Russian language and literature, and by that time she’d already become head of School No. 59 on the Arbat. Ever since year one I’d commuted with her across the whole city—initially from Presnia, where we lived in a communal apartment, and later from Matveyevskaya, where we were given a two-room flat in a new housing development.

Naturally, she wanted to keep her child close by, at her school, but this made life much more complicated for me. Her role model was some retired maths teacher. His son had been in his class, and he knew the subject better than anyone else, but when his father called him up to the blackboard all he’d ever say was “Sit down, C”—even if his son had got the problem correct. I had to go through something similar when our class was being divided into English and German sets. I wanted to go in the English set—and with good reason, because German was a kind of punishment for those who weren’t doing well: do badly, went the threat, and it’ll be the German set for you. I was doing well, but Mum put me exactly where I didn’t want to be. So none of the other parents could reproach her for anything. School came first for her, things personal and domestic second.

Her generation had grown up under the slogan “The Motherland is Calling!”

Perhaps, if I hadn’t got into a university with a military chair after finishing school, she would equally have sent me off to Afghanistan not only with sorrow but also with a sense of having fulfilled her mother’s duty to the nation. I don’t know. Incidentally, it would seem that I am to this day a reserve officer of the nonexistent army of that nonexistent nation. I did, after all, once swear an oath in a military camp near Kovrov to defend the soon-to-disintegrate motherland till the last drop of my blood. We had to kiss the red standard, I remember, so I brought it to my lips—and got a great whiff of smoked fish. No doubt our
commanders had been tucking into some beer and fish and wiping their hands on the velvet cloth.

While still at school I didn’t realize, of course, how hard it must have been for Mum and all our teachers: they were faced with the insoluble problem of teaching children to tell the truth whilst initiating them into a world of lies. The written law requires that truth be told, but the unwritten dictates that if you do, you’ll be facing the music later.

They taught us lies they themselves didn’t believe because they loved and wanted to save us. Of course, they were afraid of wrongly spoken words, but they were afraid for us even more than they were for themselves. The country, after all, was in the grip of a deadly word game. You needed to say the right words and not say the wrong ones. The line had never been drawn, but inside everyone sensed where it lay. Our teachers were trying to save truth-loving youths from folly, to inject them with a life-giving dose of fear. You might feel a little momentary sting, but then you’d have immunity for life.

We may have been badly taught in chemistry or English, but at least we got illustrative lessons in the difficult art of survival—how to say one thing, and think and do another.

The gods of the grownups were long dead, but we had to venerate them during idolatrous rituals. School taught us children of slaves the meaning of submission. If you want to achieve anything, you have to learn how to pronounce the dead words of a dead language, in which that dead life stagnated and rotted away.

Generally, what does it mean to be a good teacher?

Clearly, a good teacher under any regime must cultivate in his pupils those qualities which will help them later in life, and will not teach them to go against the current, because they’re going to need a completely different type of knowledge: the knowledge of the traffic laws in this particular life. Veer into the oncoming lane and you’re heading for a crash. You need to reverse and merge into the mainstream flow. If you want to get somewhere in this life, earn a decent wage, provide for your family and children, you have to blend into the mainstream: you’re the boss—I’m the fool, I’m the boss, you’re the fool, honor and profit lie not in one sack, who keeps company with wolves will learn to howl.

A bad teacher, meanwhile, will instruct his charges to live by a different law, the law of the conservation of human dignity. By and large this is a road to marginalization at best, and to jail or suicide at worst. Unless they just shoot you.
Does this mean that bad teachers were good, and good ones bad? Then again, it’s always been like that in Russia: the right on the left, the left on the right. It’s an age-old question, and one that still hasn’t been answered: if you love your Motherland, should you wish her victory or defeat? It’s still not completely clear where the Motherland ends and the regime begins, so entangled have they become.

Take hockey, for instance. On both sides of the barbed wire, USSR-Canada matches were regarded as the symbolic clash of two systems. By the end of Soviet power we were supporting the Canadians against the Soviets. But in ’72, the year of the epoch-making Summit Series, the teenager I obstinately refer to as myself still inhabited an unshadowed, prelapsarian world—and supported “our lads.”

It really was a strange old nation. Hockey victories prolonged the regime’s life, while defeats shortened it. You couldn’t tell from close up that Paul Henderson goal, scored from the goalmouth 34 seconds before the end of the final game, not only changed the outcome of the series, but became the point of no return for the entire world empire created by the mustachioed despot. From that moment on, its disintegration became only a matter of time.

It’s curious that a man who struck at the very heart of my country should accept his fate in an eminently Russian manner: first he turned to drink, having ditched hockey, and then became a proselytizer.

Hockey has found its way into these pages because our school happened to stand just opposite the Canadian embassy. In front of it would park incredible foreign limousines that had turned into our Starokonnyushenny Lane straight from American movies. You could press up against the window and take a good look at the dashboard—the number 220 on the speedometer was especially impressive—and we boys in our mousy-gray uniforms would heatedly debate the merits of Mustangs over Cadillacs or those of Chevrolets over Fords till a policeman leapt out of the booth outside the embassy gates and sent us packing.

A reception for the Canadian hockey players was held in the embassy. Word of the Canadians’ arrival spread instantly, and we crowded on the opposite pavement, trying to get a look at our idols. These were our gods, come down from television’s ice rink, and it was strange to see them in suits and ties. In the first-floor windows of the Arbat townhouse, flung open on that warm September day in ’72, we caught glimpses of Phil Esposito, “Bullyboy” Cashman and brothers Frank and Pete Mahovlich. In response to our adoring screams they peered out of the windows, smiled, waved, gave us thumbs-up—all as if to say, Well, lads, ain’t life just dandy!
So many years have passed, yet still I can see, vividly as ever, the toothless grin of Bobby Clarke, who'd leaned out of the window and thrown us a badge. Other players, too, began throwing badges and sticks of chewing gum. Even some biscuits. It all really kicked off then! Try as I might to catch something, anything, I was shouldered aside by those with more luck on their side. I would have ended up empty-handed. But then the miraculous happened. Bobby Clarke, who was almost lying on the windowsill, began jabbing his finger in my direction. I couldn't believe my eyes. He was looking at me, and threw me some gum. I caught it! He laughed and gave me another thumbs-up—you did good, son! It was then that we were driven off by the police. I shared the gum with my friends, but the wrapper I held on to for ages. Need I mention that it was the best-tasting gum I've ever had in my life?

The next day Mum came into our class. She had her strict face on. Mum knew how to be strict, and when she was the whole school was afraid of her.

She began saying that our behavior had brought shame and dishonor upon the school and the whole country as well. We'd been photographed by foreign correspondents, and now the whole world would see how we'd debased ourselves by fighting over their chewing gum.

Everyone was silent. I felt injustice in these accusations. And suddenly, to my own surprise, I spoke out.

"Why does our country have no chewing gum?"

"Our country doesn't have a lot of things," Mum replied. "But that doesn't mean you have to lose human dignity."

I didn't forget that.

As headmistress, Mum was the school’s representative of that prison system, and she had it hard. I know she shielded and saved the skins of many. Trying to do whatever possible, she rendered unto Caesar the things which were Caesar’s, and Pushkin unto the children. For several generations Pushkin was a secret code, the key to the preservation of the human in this bedeviled country. By then many already believed that the worse things were, the better, the sooner everything would go to pieces, but those like her strived to endow an inhuman existence with humanity. There was no saving her own skin, though—she got what was coming to her, and then some.

By the time I was seventeen our relationship had deteriorated to the extent that I’d stopped talking to her. Completely. We lived in the same flat but I wouldn’t even say hello to her. I couldn’t forgive her being a Party member, nor our having to write essays on Virgin Lands and Malaya Zemlya at school. I thought that the struggle against the odious system must be waged without
compromise—starting with yourself, your family, those closest to you. I wanted
to live not by lies, but I didn’t understand then that I wasn’t a hero, I was just
a little brat. My silence, too, I think, shortened her life.

Now, no sooner have I written that I’d stopped talking to Mum than I
sense that I’ve not written the whole truth, and have ended up lying as a result.

Yes, I never even said hello to her, but not only because I’d read The
Kolyma Tales and The Gulag Archipelago, which had inexplicably ended up in
my possession around that time and changed much in my youthful conception
of the world. Of course not. The conflict arose because of my first love. Mum
didn’t like that girl. She didn’t like her at all.

At school she was the all-powerful headmistress, she could quell an inex-
perienced teacher’s unruly class with a single glance, but at home, in her relation-
ship with her own son, she turned out to be completely helpless. Of course
the mother wished her son well. But she didn’t know how to do him good. And
of course Mum was totally right about that girl. But I realized that only later.

Disaster struck at Mum’s school when Andropov came to power. No one
knew he was already mortally ill. Once again everyone got frightened of their
own fear.

The seniors wanted to organize an evening dedicated to the memory of
Vysotsky. Mum’s colleagues tried to dissuade her, but she authorized it. The
evening went ahead. The kids sang his songs, recited his poems, listened to
his recordings. Someone informed on the headmistress.

The school got an exemplary slap on the wrist to teach others a lesson.

I’d already moved out by then. I remember how I came home and Mum
told me how she’d been summoned, boorishly spoken to, yelled at. She tried
to defend herself, to explain. No one was going to listen to her.

She wanted to live out her life without losing human dignity. For that she
got absolutely trampled.

For the first time, I think, Mum burst into tears in front of me. I didn’t
know what to say, I just sat beside her and stroked her on the shoulder.

Suddenly I wanted to ask her forgiveness for not having spoken to her for
almost a whole year, but I never did.

Mum got kicked out of work, a blow from which she would never recover.
School was her whole life.

She fell seriously ill. First her heart. Then cancer. So began the hospitals,
the operations.

By then I was working at a school myself, at the no. 444 on Pervomaiskaya
Street, and after lessons I’d go and see her. I spent hours in the hospital ward,
doing my marking, fetching Mum something to drink, giving her the bedpan, reading her the paper, cutting her nails, just being close by. If we spoke at all, it was of trivials. Or rather, of what seemed important then, but now, so many years on, seems unimportant. I kept meaning to ask her forgiveness, but somehow I never managed to.

Later I described it all in *The Taking of Izmail*: her neighbor in the hospital who, bald from chemotherapy, never took off her beret, which made her look like a caricature of an artist; how bits of her nails, grown long on her gnarled toes, would fly all over the ward when I clumsily attempted to cut them; how I brought in some boards for her bed, because Mum couldn’t get to sleep on its caved-in wire frame.

The novel, written a few years after Mum’s death, took its rise from Russian literature, containing as it does many quotations, associations and interweaving plot threads, but by the end I was simply describing what was going on in my own life. From the complex to the simple. From the literary and the learned to Mum’s foam-filled bra, which she wore after they cut off her breasts. From Old-Slavonic centos to her quiet death, which she so longed for to release her from the pain.

There were a great many people at her funeral: teachers with whom she’d worked, former pupils. She’d accumulated a lot of pupils over the years. Only through your own life can you truly teach anything of any significance.

I was stunned to see her lying in the coffin with an Orthodox chaplet on her forehead. I don’t know where it came from, Mum was anything but a church person. She was a completely sincere nonbeliever. That’s how she’d been brought up. So when I was born she didn’t want me christened. And not because she feared repercussions—at the beginning of ’61, when Stalin still lay in the Mausoleum, she was the school’s Party organizer. She just genuinely couldn’t understand: what would be the point? Grandma had me christened on the sly at the church in Udelnaya, where we spent the summer at our dacha.

Even as a child, it was clear to me that church was a place for uneducated grannies, like my own, with three years of parochial school under her belt.

Later I thought that the old go to church because they fear death more than the young. And I didn’t yet know that, on the contrary, it is the young who have the greater fear.

It was only after Mum passed away that I sensed acutely how essential it is for close people to engage in one all-important conversation. Usually that conversation gets put off—it isn’t easy to start talking about the things that
matter most over breakfast or somewhere in the metro. Something always gets in the way. I needed to ask Mum for forgiveness, but in all those years I never did manage to. When I began writing *The Taking of Izmail*, I thought it a novel about history, about the nation, about destiny, about the world, but it turned out to be that very conversation.

Most likely, such a conversation cannot take place during life in any case. It’s vital that it should come about, but what matter whether it happens before or after the end? The important thing is that she heard me and forgave me.

Between operations, during the time she had away from the hospitals, Mum would sort out her lifetime’s worth of photographs. She asked me to buy some albums and glued the photos into them, annotating each one with the names of the people it featured, and sometimes she’d write stories associated with these people into the margins. The result was a family archive—for the grandchildren.

After her death I took the albums over to my place. And when I was leaving for Switzerland, I left them all with my brother. The albums were stored in his house near Moscow.

The house was burnt down. All our photographs were destroyed.

All I have left is a handful of childhood snaps.

One of them, a picture of me, was taken probably by my father while we were still living in Presnia, though we moved to Matveyeskaya that same year. I’m in year four. I’m wearing an overcoat with a half-belt that’s out of the camera’s view. I perfectly remember that overcoat, which was a hand-me-down from my brother. I had to wear all his hand-me-downs. But here’s why the overcoat has stuck in my mind. Mum would often tell this story. It’s very short.

To get to school from Matveyevskaya we’d take the no. 77 bus to Dorogomilovskaya Street, where we changed to an Arbat-bound trolleybus, or alternatively we could take the same bus in the other direction to the railway station, and then on to Kievsky Terminal. That morning we went to the station. The first snow had fallen during the night. Thousands of feet had trampled the platform into a skating rink. When the train pulled in everyone dashed for the doors. You had to storm the already overflowing carriages, squeeze yourself into the jam-packed vestibules. Between the edge of the platform and the door was an enormous gap. I slipped and was about to fall headlong into it. Thankfully, Mum held me back by the half-belt.

That, essentially, is the whole story—nothing extraordinary. But this incident held such significance for Mum that she continued to recall it even on the eve of death. She’d smile and whisper just audibly—she’d lost her voice by
then, and could only whisper: “I’m pulling you by the half-belt and all I can think is, what if it snaps?”

*Maiden Hair*, written in Zurich and Rome, also actually took its rise from Mum, or more precisely from her diary, which she gave me before her last operation. A thick oilskin notebook, its yellowed pages covered with pencil notes—written not, I may add, in the “clinical” hand I was used to, but in a cozier, more girlish one. Mum began it when she was in her final year of school and continued writing in it for several years as a student. This was the end of the forties and the very beginning of the fifties.

I remember her telling me about the persecution of the “cosmopolites” in her institute, during which its best professors disappeared. But there’s no mention of that in the notebook. It’s a most ordinary girl’s diary: yearning for someone to love, she listens anxiously to her heart—has the feeling already come over her, is it the real thing? And it radiates a great deal of happiness. From books she’d read, from girlfriends, from the sun outside the window, from the rain. Its pages are awash with the unthinking youthful confidence that life will give you more than you asked of it.

It contains no traces of the fear that had gripped the country. As if there were no denunciations, no camps, no arrests, no queues, no penury.

I read it then and marveled at the naïveté of that blind girl who could not see what she had fallen into.

That girl was born into a prison nation, into darkness, yet she still looked upon her life as a gift, as an opportunity to realize herself in love, to give love, to share her happiness with the world.

When I found out that Mum’s diary, too, had perished in the fire, I felt its continued grip on me. And at some point I realized: no, this was not the naïveté and folly of a silly young girl who had failed to understand what was going on around her, this was the wisdom of the one who has sent, does send and always shall send girls into this world, no matter what hell we’ve turned it into.

The world around is cold and dark, but into it has been sent a girl so that, candlelike, she might illuminate the all-pervasive human darkness with her need for love.

Mum loved to sing, but knew she had no voice, and felt embarrassed. She’d sing when there was no one to hear her. Most often she sang what she used to listen to as a child. One of her favorite singers was Izabella Yurieva. My father had some old recordings of her romances, and would often put them on when we were still living together in the basement on Starokonyushenny Lane and in Presnia.
I was convinced then that all these voices from old records belonged to people long since dead. Stalin and Ivan the Terrible were much of a muchness to me—the distant past. Then it suddenly transpired that Izabella Yurieva was still alive, her records started being re-released and she began making television appearances. You could even go and see her at the House of Actors. I never did get to meet her while she was still alive.

When the singer died, I was staggered to learn that she’d lived a hundred years—she was born in 1899 and died in 2000—the entire monstrously accursed Russian twentieth century.

I wanted to write about what I had felt and understood thanks to Mum’s diary. I started writing about Bella. The result was Maiden Hair.

Little of the singer’s life remains—there are no diaries, no memoirs, leaving us with no more than a spare outline of her life story. In those years people were afraid of their own past—it was impossible to tell what might later put you in mortal danger. Danger might spring from any source: past meetings, things said, letters. People would destroy their past, would strive to rid themselves of it.

I wanted to restore her obliterated life to her. I began writing her reminiscences and diaries.

As far as possible, it was important for me not to fabricate anything. For example, I would pick out real-life accounts from the memoirs of people living in prerevolutionary Rostov, restoring to my Bella her actual teachers at the Bilinskaya Gymnasium in Khakhladzhev House on Taganrog Prospect, the clerk in the Joseph Pokorny stationery shop on Sadovaya Street, where she bought her exercise books and quills, and that gymnasium porter who, having read “Kholstomer,” bequeathed his skeleton to an anatomical cabinet.

Detail by detail, I restored her vanished life history to her.

She never did anything but sing—like that grasshopper from the fable. Only in real life the survival of the ants building that Babelian anthill up to the heavens and turning into camp dust depended no less on her singing than on supplies for the winter. She was the proverbial candle that illuminated, however faintly, their darkness. She sang to the slaves about love. She helped them preserve human dignity.

I was eager to restore her life to her, if only in a book—and there’s no other way in any case.

Of course, much in the life of Izabella Yurieva wasn’t the same as in my Bella’s.

But I know that when she and I finally meet, Izabella Danilovna shall
forgive me and say: “Don’t worry yourself! Everything’s fine. Thank you kindly!”

And now I return to the rest home on the Volga, where the woods are full of wild strawberries and everyone is still alive.

I see images from that time:

The herringbone brick path leading to the canteen.
The defiled nearby forest, strewn with scraps of paper, bottles, greasy newspapers.
The Volga in a downpour, white with frothy foam, as if there’s laundry being done.

We’ve been mushroom picking in the faraway forest and are taking the track homewards, but our eyes still can’t stop searching, and rove about the track verges.

And now, having gone for a morning swim in the Volga, Mum and I are coming back to our little house. We walk barefoot over the wet moss, dew seeping up between our toes. We climb the porch steps, already warmed through by the sun, and Mum draws my attention to our rapidly disappearing tracks: “See, I’m flatfooted!”

Our room on a hot day: mushroom dampness, the curtains are held together by a pin, the wallpaper’s curling and bulging, and Mum closes the creaky cabinet door, sticking a piece of cardboard into the crack so it doesn’t open.

And now I see the boozer in the nearest town—Uncle Vitya’s popped in for just a moment, and there we stand, Mum and I, waiting a good half hour for him in the heat, and still he won’t come out.

I kept waiting for Uncle Vitya to ask me about Dad, but he never did, right up until the very last moment.

The night before we left I woke up with the thought that someday Mum would die. I lay there in the darkness and listened to her puffing in her sleep, snoring herself awake, then, after much tossing and turning, puffing away once again. I remember this acute sense of pity which wouldn’t let me get back to sleep. It was strange somehow—she lay there in the bed next to mine, very much alive, and at the same time it was like she’d already died. Also, I really needed the loo. The houses had no toilets. During the day you had to go to a rather unpleasant establishment that stank to high heaven of chlorine, but at night I’d just find a spot somewhere near the porch.

I got up quietly and went out, carefully closing the door behind me.

Damp, mist, cold night air. The cusp of daybreak.
I stopped at the nearest bush. Steam rose from the stream.

And suddenly something happened to me. As if I’d stepped from the unreal into the real. As if, like a lens twisted into focus, all my senses had been sharpened. As if the whole world around me had donned my skin, chilled in the August morning frost.

I looked around and couldn’t understand what was going on: after all, I’d passed by this spot on so many occasions—and took notice of nothing; but now I saw, as if for the first time, that honeysuckle bush, and this rowanberry tree, and the towel forgotten on the washing line.

In the silence, sounds came forth from the mist: the distant hum of a motorboat on the river, the barking of dogs from the village on the far shore, the anxious call of a night bird, the whistle of a train at the station. Hoarse profanities floated in from the main road, accompanied by a girl’s drunken guffaws.

And I heard myself breathing, heard my lungs gulping in life.

Suddenly I felt that I was no longer by a bush amidst the mist, but amidst the universe. No: I was the universe. That was the first time I experienced this remarkable sensation. And this was not only an anticipation of all my life to come. For the first time everything fused together, became a single whole. The smoke from an unseen bonfire and the wet rustling in the grass under my feet. Dad, who’d died no death, and Uncle Vitya, who’d asked no questions. What was and what would be.

Everything is still unnamed, nonverbal, because words for this do not exist.

And the Volga courses somewhere close by, swashing in the mist, but flows into no Caspian Sea.

And Mum died and yet lives still. She lies in her coffin with an Orthodox paper chaplet on her forehead, puffing away in her sleep in that rest home.

And everything melts into one: the half-belt overcoat, and Bobby Clarke’s toothless grin, and Robert Walser’s snowdrift, and that rickety 77 that never made it to Dorogomilovskaya Street, forcing us to splash our way through the puddles. And so, typing these words on my notebook, do I. As does the I now reading this line.

And the only way to die is to choke with happiness.
YURY BUIDA (born 1954) is a native of Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave situated on the former territory of Prussia. Kaliningrad's unique position in Europe and Russia inspired many of the stories in his award-winning collection *The Prussian Bride*, which has been published in the UK, France, Poland, Estonia and Slovakia. Buida combines an active literary career with an editorial position at the publishing house Kommersant.
Before dying, Katerina Ivanovna Momotova sent for Doctor Sheberstov, who’d treated her all her life and had been pensioned off a long time ago. She handed him the key to her little house and a scrap of paper folded in four, asking him to burn it along with all the others.

“They’re at home,” she explained in embarrassment. “But please don’t tell anyone. I’d have done it myself, only you see how it’s all turned out . . .”

Sheberstov raised his eyebrows, but the old woman just smiled guiltily in reply. She was in a very bad way: dying from a sarcoma. The doctor looking after her at the hospital said she was unlikely to make it through the night.

Lyosha Leontyev was having a smoke on the bench by the hospital entrance. Next to hulking Sheberstov, he looked like a teenager in police uniform. His cap with its faded band was lying in the sidecar of his motorbike.

“Fancy a walk?” asked the doctor, gazing over Lyosha’s head at the midges circling a dim streetlamp atop a wooden post turned green by the damp. “To Katya Ivanovna’s.”

“To Sindbad the Sailor, you mean? She hasn’t died, has she?”

“No.” Sheberstov showed the policeman the key. “She asked me to look in. I’m an outsider, at least you’re law and order.”

Lyosha dropped his fag-end in a wide stone vase filled with water and got up with a sigh. “Wish it were winter already . . .”

They set off at a leisurely pace along the slabbed pavement toward the mill, next to which lived Katerina Ivanovna, famous throughout the town for her exemplarily unsuccessful life.

She’d arrived here in East Prussia with the first settlers. Her husband had worked at the paper mill, she as a washerwoman at the hospital. They’d
had four kids: two of their own and two they took from the children’s home. The withered little woman had a big household to look after: a vegetable patch, a cow, a piglet, two dozen sheep, chickens, ducks, her ailing husband Fyodor Fyodorovich (who’d been wounded three times at the front) and the kids. In ’57 she lost half a leg—she was run over by a train as she was bringing the heifer back from pasture. She’d had to leave the wash-house. Got a job as a caretaker at the nursery school. That same year her eldest boy, Vasya, drowned in the Pregolya. Three years later Fyodor Fyodorovich died too: an operation on his heart, which had been grazed by shrapnel, proved too much for him. The girls grew up and left town. The youngest, Vera, married a drunken, thieving down-and-outer; dumping their son on his granny, they upped and left for Siberia, hoping to make some money—and vanished. For the sake of the kid, Katerina Ivanovna knitted to order (before her fingers became riddled with arthritis), sheared sheep and herded all summer long. It wasn’t easy for her chasing after the animals on her peg leg, but the pay wasn’t bad and sometimes she’d even get fed out in the fields—she didn’t grumble. The boy grew up, did his stint in the army, got married and only rarely—for New Year or May Day—sent his grandma a card wishing her success in her work and happiness in her private life. Katerina Ivanovna’s pension was piddling. By and by, she found herself collecting empty bottles in vacant plots and backstreets or outside shops. She’d get into squabbles with her rivals, boys who yelled “How much for a pound of old hag!” when they saw her and swiped her booty. Katerina Ivanovna got angry and swore, but her rage only lasted so long. Eventually she found a solution. She’d head out of town bright and early with a sack over her shoulders and hunt for empties in the ditches and woods by the road. Despite the pain from her leg, she traipsed many miles every day, returning home with her rich pickings late in the evening, her eyes sunken and hot sweat streaming off her. She crumbled bread into a deep bowl, poured vodka over it and slurped it up with a spoon. Once in a while she’d start singing something afterwards in a quiet, tinkling voice. “Others in her shoes would’ve croaked ages ago,” Battle-Axe, the town tsarina, would say. “But she’s not even properly bonkers yet.” It was thanks to her bottle hikes that Katerina Ivanovna received the nickname Sindbad the Sailor.

Glancing furtively to both sides, Doctor Sheberstov opened the front door and motioned Lyosha ahead. Lyosha turned on the lights in the hall and kitchen. “What did she want anyway?” he shouted from the other room. “What is it we’re after?”
Sheberstov didn’t reply. He unfolded the piece of paper that Katerina
Ivanovna had given him along with the key, and his face became flushed and
swollen. Flinging the scrap onto the kitchen table, he bent down to avoid
hitting his head on a beam and, wheezing noisily, came up behind Lyosha.
The policeman was pensively inspecting the old woman’s second room. A
dim, unshaded bulb shone on an enormous pile of paper that took up nearly
all the available space.

“What’s she been doing, writing novels?” muttered Lyosha. “Look here
...” He picked up a scrap of paper from the floor. “‘I loved you. Even now,
perhaps, love’s embers ...’” He threw the doctor a puzzled look. “What’s it
all about, eh?”

Sheberstov put his stick in his other hand and shoved Lyosha firmly to
one side. Puffing and panting, he squeezed through a narrow gap to a bent-
backed chair and sat down. He grabbed a handful of scraps from one of the
piles and started reading.

“So what is all this?” Lyosha repeated, gazing in bewilderment at one of
the scraps covered with an old woman’s scrawl. “She can’t have ...”

Sheberstov angrily looked him up and down.

“So who do you think invented the soul, the Devil?”

All night long they sorted through the papers that Sindbad the Sailor
had asked to be destroyed and which she’d hidden from sight for almost fifty
years. Every day, starting on November 11, 1945, she’d written out one and
the same poem by Pushkin: “I loved you.”1 Eighteen thousand, two hundred
and fifty-two pieces of paper of various sizes had been preserved, and those
eight immortal lines were on every one of them, their beauty undimmed de-
spite the lack of punctuation; the old woman had never used so much as a
comma. She must have written from memory and had made many spelling
mistakes; as for the word “God,” she’d always capitalized it, despite the Soviet
orthography of the time. She’d put the date at the bottom of every scrap and,
very rarely, added a few words: March 5, 1953, Stalin died; April 19, 1960,
Fyodor Fyodorovich is dead; April 12, 1961, Gagarin flew away to the moon;
August 29, 1970 Petinka [her grandson] had a girl Ksenya. Several sheets
were burnt at the corners, others were ripped, and you could only guess at
the emotional state she must have been in that day, when she wrote yet again,
I loved you. ... Eighteen thousand, two hundred and fifty-two times she’d
reproduced those eight lines on paper. Why? And why those eight lines in
particular? And what were her thoughts when she wrote out the end of the
poem, As God grant you may yet be loved again, adding neatly Stalin’s dead or Fyodor Fyodorovich died?

Just before dawn, Sheberstov and Lyosha lit the stove and started burning the paper. The stove took only half an hour to warm up, and the room got stifling hot. Both felt uneasy, but when Lyosha said, “What’s the difference, burning a person or burning this . . . ?” the doctor just snorted angrily. There was one scrap—the one Katerina Ivanovna had given him—which Sheberstov decided to keep, even if he didn’t know why. Perhaps just because, for the very first time, the old woman hadn’t written the date, as though she’d understood that time is powerless not only over the eternity of poetry, but even over the eternity of our wretched life.

1This is probably the single most famous Russian lyric poem:

I loved you. Even now, perhaps, love’s embers  
Within my heart are not extinguished quite.  
But let me not disturb you with remembrance  
Or cause you any sadness, any fright.  
I loved you hopelessly, could not speak clearly,  
Shyness and jealousy were ceaseless pain,  
Loved you as tenderly and as sincerely  
As god grant you may yet be loved again.

(Translated by Jim Reed)
IGOR SAKHNOVSKY (born 1958, Orsk) is based in Ekaterinburg. His collection of short stories, *The Happy and the Mad*, won the 2003 Russian Decameron prize while his 2007 novel *The Man Who Knew Everything*, was nominated for both the Russian Booker and Big Book Awards, and was also adapted into a successful film.
If anyone hasn’t yet given up wanting to learn what love is, I’ll tell you now. Love is a mafia-style pact: two against everyone else. It’s this little double fortress, the incestuous conspiracy of two bodies and souls against the rest of the world. Almost all other versions of amorous relationships are only attempts at imitation, surrogate alliances entered into to find salvation from solitude, to satisfy lust, cupidity or some practical need. Well, or else because “it’s what people do.”

My name is Philippa Rolf.* I was 36 that January when, perhaps too intrigued and excited by the coming meeting, I set off for the South of France, to Nice, for the sake of some genteel tea-drinking and a brief acquaintanceship with that strange couple, the Hog and his wife.

I’ll explain at once to avoid misunderstandings. It was I myself who mentally, not to his face, christened him the Hog. Then later on I called him that his face too, but again mentally, to myself.

Some five years before, the Hog had published a sensational novel about the love of a certain degenerate for his underage stepdaughter, after which he had rapidly become a worldwide celebrity, a piquant delicacy for photojournalists and newsmen of various countries. The press now called him coquettishly “Mr. Baby.” The predictably infectious hullabaloo with its faint sticky smell of scandal had even rumbled as far as my own northern backwater.

I gathered an ephemeral little pile of newspaper cuttings which could only, at the very most, have served to flutter to the author by the postal route, gratify his vanity and soil his fingers with typographic lead. And this is what I did: found the address with no great effort and sent those good-for-nothing
cuttings to the Hog, accompanied by a laconic letter from the person of a
well-informed, interested female reader.

I wasn’t reckoning on a reply and was in no particular need of one.

It was at just that time that I had the bust-up with my crazy Hilda. She
bombarded me with tearful epistles in the style of a jilted lover, and I replied:
“Stop your womanish hysterics. Don’t behave as if you’re dealing with your
latest stud.” At the same time I lazily put an end by letter to my arguments
with her aristocratic Mummy, who had long regarded me as complete and
utter vice, or else somebody’s grave medical error.

So that was the unattractive background against which the post suddenly
presented me with an old-fashioned Christmas card bearing a French stamp
and cursive, but legible handwriting. I started reading from the end: “... If
you find yourself on the Riviera, we shall be pleased to have you visit us.”

Well, it wasn’t the Hog himself who had written, of course, it was his
better half (I wonder what she looks like?): “My husband is sincerely grate-
ful for the selection of publications about him...” The return address was
number 57 on the Promenade des Anglais. Well I never, what a generous
surprise.

I didn’t rule out the possibility that this was merely a form of courtesy,
but at once I firmly resolved to go and see them in January.

We had time before the trip to exchange another couple of letters. With
deafening solicitude my correspondent asked herself the question of where
I might stay, so that I was even obliged to pull her up: “I hope you understand
that I am a completely independent person and am not asking anyone to take
care of me.”

This odd family of pedants fixed my audience for the Saturday evening
of 14th January. I arrived the day before, on the 13th, and put up at one of
the cheapest places. The hotel was quite some distance from the required
address, but for me that had no significance.

I changed my clothes after the journey and went out for a walk. There
were certainly things to admire there. The town glowed like a semicircular
necklace fringing the Baie des Anges. I imagined joyous promises in the way
the heads of the palm trees were tousled and the colored canvas awnings
trembled in the wind.

I knew that this strange, very private couple was an attraction for very
many people. And too many would have liked to be in my shoes: receiving
such an invitation to penetrate this impregnable family fortress, to see it from
within. However, I didn’t permit myself to show impatience and dialed their number only on the following day.

I was answered by a woman’s unexpectedly young voice: “When did you arrive? Yesterday?! But you’ve lost half a day! We expect you in an hour, then.”

Number 57 was two steps away from the Hotel Negresco and was a yellow, dilapidated villa of the Victorian age with large windows and a smart way out to the sea. So this was what our reclusive émigrés had chosen. A winter refuge on the Côte d’Azur.

I arrived at precisely four o’clock in the afternoon. The Hog himself opened the door to me. He looked exactly as I had imagined him: a little younger than his rightful sixty-one; one was struck by his impeccable grooming, the perfect shaving of his cheeks, now beginning to sag, the mentorial shine of his receding hairline. His innate lordliness of manner and patrician fastidiousness he masked with a slightly forced, mischievous unconstraint, which might at any moment have been cast off without the least sympathy for his unfortunate, unpalatable vis-à-vis.

Leading me into the spacious drawing room and sitting me down in an armchair, he began to talk as though we were interlocutors who knew one another of old and were able to return at last to some briefly interrupted chitchat:

“There was something I wanted to ask you . . .”

The drawing room was sunny and cool.

“Would you like a drink? Now what was it I wanted to ask? . . . Oh yes, by the way. Do you know the secret of blue wine? Where the blue color comes from, what the trick is?”

I hadn’t yet managed to find a single word in response, when directly in front of me, at a deceptively safe distance, rendered doubly by an antique mirror and the slanting rectangle of the winter sun, there appeared a very thin, tall woman of rare beauty. I even seemed to see in that first instant something like luminescence around her head. But after I had made out the dazzling streak of gray above the smooth girlish forehead, still the lighting effect wouldn’t disappear—this woman was all aglow. She said: “How are you?” and, stunned, I was able only to smile and nod.

With the appearance of his spouse, the Hog didn’t stop pestering me with questions.

So what do we know about blue wine?

Am I aware that his wife is Jewish?
Do I realize that all letters and numbers have a color?
Isn’t it true that “A” is radically black and shines like black lacquer?
Well, yes, now I have to prove that I’m not completely oligophrenic. For the Hog, these questions are probably like signal passwords, a sort of set of master keys to another person’s soul.

The wine is blue on account of juniper berries.
I didn’t know she’s Jewish, no. Is that categorically important?
And how can it be lacquer-black, if “A” is red like a fuchsia, fading into a shamed neon underside.
He arched his brows and did a little flattered coughing into his fist. It seemed as if I could relax for a little while. I had managed to get through the first round.

But it took some effort for me to restrain myself and not say: “Ah, what a splendid examination, in a moment I’m going to be sick! If you’re so fond of playing quiz games, why don’t you tell me, damn it, what flaming right you had to make a young girl act as a plaything for a lustful degenerate? It’s thanks to you, you know, that an entire army of such monsters now start salivating, unable to take their eyes off a child’s nakedness.”

More likely than not, the Hog would have become ennuied and tense and would have replied with multitone juridical pathos: “It’s a pity you haven’t noticed how saddened I am by the poor girl’s difficult lot, aggravated by the criminal urges of the hero, an utterly immoral, decadent fellow who himself provided his own punishment.”

And after a genteel dialogue of this sort I would have been turned out with a fanfare.

Instead I asked: “What are you writing now?” and heard out an affected speech about prose being in great need of poetry, for which reason he had just begun composing a narrative poem (I don’t remember exactly, but I think the title “Pale Fire” was mentioned). And if I was going to be in Nice long enough (at least a fortnight? splendid!) he would be able to read me something.

“There are some quite good bits in it. Aren’t there, Vera?”
Vera did not fail to confirm it.
I then thought: “If you’re the Hog’s wife, then that’s your fate—to spend your whole life confirming and admiring.” However, I underestimated her. Simply I hadn’t yet realized who it was I had met that day.
I once read something written by a clever Englishman: “The one way of
getting to know someone is to fall hopelessly in love with them.” That is precisely how it was soon to be with me.

They complained to me confidingly that the cook had fallen ill, so they needed to think where to go for dinner, and on that would depend what could be worn.

I really wanted to say something sarcastic about those unfortunate people whose plans for life and outward appearance depend on the health of their cook. But I said, “It’s a shame I’m not able to invite you anywhere at the moment.”

Vera replied at once, “Oh, don’t worry! It’s for such situations we have a man.”

This was a powerful statement and I liked the way it was put: not them together, not a pair of conspiratorial spouses plus a guest, invited out of charity, but she and I, two women, plus a man, useful in some situations.

The man was sent to dress for a restaurant and then returned in a dark suit and bright yellow shoes, but on hearing just one indignant cry: “Volodya!” (with an imperious emphasis on the letter “I”—“Vollodya”), he dragged himself back again to change into black ones.

Vera enfolded herself in a fur wrap which really suited her, and which would have looked even better had it not been for the explanatory comment: “It was a gift from my husband.”

The restaurant at the Hotel Negresco seemed to me indecently pompous, as did the hotel itself. Over dinner the Hog grew very cheerful. He evidently already accepted me fully as one of his own, if he considered it necessary to inform me, for example, that he hated any seafood other than fish. Who in the world has any interest in that, damn it! Then he began reminiscing emotionally about how, when still a very little boy, at the age of five or six, he used to run around this hotel, beneath the light dome and cut-glass chandelier in the lobby, over its marble and carpets. Vera listened patiently through to the end of this memoir and then articulated very clearly: “Vollodya. Unfortunately. As far as I’m aware. When you were a little boy, the Hotel Negresco did not exist. It appeared somewhat later.”

For those words I was ready to smother her with kisses.

On the way back we encountered some shabby, wretched sort of personage resembling a mangy porcupine. At the sight of the Hog, he rushed to hug and squeeze him and interrogate him about the whole of his life, and so Vera and I were obliged to wait to one side until the rendezvous was over. It
transpired that the figurants had been at school together in St. Petersburg about a hundred and fifty years earlier.

The hugged and squeezed Hog turned noticeably sour and seemed ready to flee Nice in double-quick time. Vera replied: “Oh dear, how tragic. You’ll only ever run into each other once or twice.”

We returned to their temporary home, to the yellow villa, where in the evening light the anonymous portraits in heavy, dull frames and the furniture laying claim to cohabitation with one of the kings Louis had a particularly hopeless air.

I hinted a couple of times that I was ready to take my leave, but my host and hostess were not even considering showing me out, and were for some reason acutely interested in everything concerning me and my future. Am I intending, say, to keep on living in Sweden, or would I like a change of country? If I’m serious about writing and publishing poetry, isn’t it worth my while moving to America? There are far more readers there, and so greater prospects for writers too. It all sounded naïve somehow; I kept quiet and politely drank the lemon tea that Vera brewed. They both got carried away with the idea of my crossing the ocean to go to Harvard or Columbia University. They were ready to write a reference there and then and to make representations on my behalf.

It was past midnight when my new protectors roused themselves and rushed to see me home in spite of my objection: “I’m already old enough to get there by myself.”

“It doesn’t matter how old you are,” said Vera. “The important thing is how old you now look.”

As we walked through the nocturnal streets, they continued to educate and edify me. The next day, in their view, I ought to choose a nearer and better hotel. This hotel, for instance, The Marina—it’s simply wonderful! “Vera, how can you be so certain, have you stayed here?” “No, we haven’t. But look for yourself, the little palm trees arranged at the entrance, they’re simply little darlings!” Had it been anyone else in her place, I would at once have ridiculed both those darling palms and the sugary girlish rapture. But her smile was so dazzling, and such was the way she gazed into my eyes that I felt only joy within me.

There seemed to be no topic that the spouses could not have discussed with all thoroughness in my presence. Imagine, Stanley Kubrick, when he was filming the bedroom scene with Humbert and Charlotte, had com-
pletely disregarded Volodya’s screenplay. Dreadful! His son, Dmitry, is complaining from Milan that he has a sore throat and can’t sing. It’s not clear when the cook will be better. That really is dreadful. The Promenade des Anglais has been modernized to the point where it is utterly ugly. That’s a nightmare too. Incidentally, we’re so fond of those nice Alfa Romeo cars, why not call them Alfa Romeo and Juliets? And can you imagine, Volodya never did learn to drive.

Perhaps this was all blurted out sincerely, straight from the heart, I don’t know. But the impression never left me that it was a pose, coordinated playing to the audience—that is, to me.

Running ahead, I confess that from a certain moment onwards, everything that Vera thinks or says behind my back becomes of deadly importance to me. This is the only explanation for the fact that one fine evening I opened and read a letter which was not intended for me.

No, I didn’t steal anything, everything came about much easier. After the three of us had taken our latest stroll together, Vera had a sudden thought—she hadn’t found time to post the letters, including some urgent ones, and so I myself made the offer: let me post them on the way back. She was so grateful that she twice called me “dear.”

If “dear” it is, then so be it, I shan’t object. I found in my hands three letters for publishers and one personal one, addressed, as I later realized, to a female relative. It was this fourth letter that I arrested for a short time, keeping it with me for the evening.

I’ll do without the technical details of how you open sealed envelopes without damaging them. I found the steam from a boiling kettle and an old Gillette razor came in handy.

After the obligatory reports on routine business (Volodya is in the grip of the new novel, is writing nonstop, is in good spirits as never before; the weather is sunny; there’s still no full-time cook), Vera’s cursive handwriting finally rewarded me with the short paragraph for the sake of which I had undertaken the crime.

This is what I learnt about myself.

A Swedish beauty from a good family, but who lost her father early and broke off relations with her mother. To all appearances, brilliantly clever, a poetess, speaks almost a dozen languages. Not indifferent, moreover, to women, a lesbian with a perfectly “Dostoevskyan” temperament. Moreover, so full of inner tension, electrically charged to such a degree that sometimes
it’s simply impossible to stand beside her. A masculine mindset, and perhaps too manly in appearance, but it suits her. Volodya likes her too.

I shan’t be overmodest, the opening and inspection of the letter wasn’t my only crime during this fortnight. My next heroic villainy was paying a call at the most untimely moment, without prior agreement and without ringing. I already knew that in the mornings, before breakfast, the Hog usually writes, while Vera titivates herself. The best way of taking them unawares with bare, defenseless faces, is to come calling at the crack of dawn.

I didn’t rule out the possibility that I wouldn’t even be let into the house that morning and would then fall into disgrace for good. But the Hog heard out my quick-fire apologies in silence, measured me with a sort of forensic-medical gaze that went right through me, and, before going back to his priceless manuscripts, led me as far as an armchair in the drawing room, evidently sure that I would wait there patiently for my host and hostess to condescend to me.

Instead, on being left alone, I delved deep into the interior’s nooks and crannies that were not intended for guests. And yes, I went the right way. Almost at once, a door opened in front of me and in dazzling proximity, nose to nose, Vera cried: “Volodya, who is it?” A bouquet of apologies was already to hand, and the jointly and hastily overcome awkwardness was eclipsed in a moment by what I had taken the risk to see. Not like the lady of the house, caught by her guest in a negligee, was she embarrassed, but like a young girl by chance laid bare before an admirer to whom she is not indifferent. And there was one detail there that aroused quiet fury in me and, it could be said, caused some slight damage to my mind. This may make some people laugh, but what I mean is the short, colored silk knickers, glimpsed fleetingly beneath her unfastened dressing gown. Little girls are dressed in such things, or else infantile spinsters, but they are quite definitely not the underwear for a lady.

In short, I was no longer in any more doubt about their so-called marriage. He’d arranged things pretty well, I kept telling myself, created a surrogate Lolita out of his wife and turned a beautiful grown woman into a submissive travesty.

And that’s what I would have thought, that I had managed to penetrate the shameful family secret of the inventor and trainer of nymphets, had it not been for the incident at the cinema—I shall talk about that later.

Vera never ceased to amaze me. There was a conversation about her hav-
ing to go to Milan in March to attend her son’s performance. But she was
worried because for the flight to Milan, from there to Mantua, then back to
Milan and Nice, no less than three days would be required:

“I just can’t leave Volodya alone for so long!”

When I came to see them one day in a depressed mood and was unable
to conceal it (I had been unsettled by a strident, hysterical letter from Hilda),
Vera asked not a single superfluous question, but brought an apple from the
kitchen, peeled it and offered me half. She enquired periodically if every-
thing at my hotel was comfortable and whether any of my things needed
ironing.

The day I turned up without warning at an impermissibly early hour they
behaved more coldly, with more reserve than usual, but then everything
seemed to brighten up somewhat. The Hog was sent some galley-proofs for
authorial correction, he sniffed at the freshly printed sheets with pleasure,
squinted in my direction in a jocular, sly way and offered them to me for a
sniff. I thought: and when he gets hold of one of his own books that has just
come out, I expect he not only sniffs it, but tries it for flavor too. Maybe these
rituals are what the chief pleasure of his writing amounts to?

To be entirely frank, once I had deemed that a child’s short knickers on
a grown woman were a sufficiently expressive piece of evidence, there arose
in me a demand for revenge. It seemed then that I might even kill him, if
only I were to see Vera’s consent, or at least a hint of it.

Once and once only were we alone together—we simply ran away for a
short while to take a stroll, and now I understand that that hour and a half
was the happiest of my life. We sat for a long time on a bench looking at the
Baie des Anges, which sparkled in the sun enough to make your eyes hurt.
It was there that I asked my cruel question. I drew a lot of air into my lungs
and asked: Should there suddenly be such a misfortune as your husband
dying, leaving you alone, what would happen the day after the funeral? How
would you carry on living?

She was silent for a whole minute, then said:

“I wouldn’t. I’d hire an aeroplane and crash it.”

I said:

“Oh, come on.”

She replied very gently:

“We can do without the cynicism.”

And she didn’t get even a little angry. Didn’t move away when, mentally
begging her forgiveness for being rude, I laid the palm of my hand on her hip, a hot, slim bone beneath her black dress. Bore the intimate, demanding touch. Even if unreserved indifference toward me was hidden behind it, her natural tenderness proved stronger.

Beside me, away from the Hog, she wasn’t the fifty-eight-year-old spouse of the elderly novelist, spoilt by fame, but an utterly independent, wondrous being, much younger and gentler than I.

Why have I mentioned age?

Ever since I was a child, looking at people older than me I have almost mechanically thought: this person has less time left to live than me. He (or she) will die sooner, whereas I shall still be alive. And it was only such a thought about Vera that for the first time elicited in me genuine, unbearable pain.

But together they looked now the solid married couple, now the ideally coordinated pair of accomplices. In the middle of the most innocent conversation they would suddenly couple, like butterflies that make use of every convenient bush, and separate so quickly that it was impossible to spot a thing.

I inquired in what year they had become man and wife. The Hog replied in a lighthearted tone that it had happened in about the same year that I was born. At that point I thought with malicious glee that such remoteness guaranteed at the very least the absence of reciprocal passion and freshness of feelings. But just two days later they would prove to me with ease, without even wishing it themselves, how silly I was.

Two days later they came up with the idea of going to the cinema.

We sat as follows: she to the right, he to the left, I in the middle. When a newsreel about bullfighting began flickering on the screen, Vera thrust two fingers into her mouth like a hooligan and tried to whistle, but didn’t manage it. She then took her fingers out of her mouth and said loudly, for the whole audience to hear: “Why do they have to show this filth?”

Then the film started—I don’t remember what it was. I had been wrong to sit between them, it was a mistake. With the same degree of success might I have used my body to close a circuit of exposed, high-voltage wires. I got electric shocks from both sides, I was shivered and shaken like a crow hit by gunshot or a ripped rag-doll. But the two of them existed happily in their usual regime. Vera took a sweet from her bag and proffered it in the darkness to her husband, all but touching my knees. He took the sweet, but didn’t
remove his hand. And neither did she.

It’s unlikely they noticed I was looking down, not at the screen. Most probably they weren’t disturbed by this at all. They were disturbed by something else completely. The precise name for what they were doing in the gloom by means of their hands I don’t know. If copulation by hand is possible in nature, then this was it: soundless, frenzied sex. Moreover, the side which had offered the sweet was by no means inertly passive.

Strictly, I could say nothing about what I saw except for one thing: these people who had lived together, almost unparted, for thirty-odd years, were no less crazy about one another than the utterly enamored adolescents hiding in the cinema for the sake of bare, blind touching and the furtive friction of bodies.

After the film the Hog’s mood was fabulous, but this didn’t prevent him engaging in the oral genocide of his fellow-writers at the restaurant table. He started with the worthless Hemingway, who was apparently an unsuccessful substitute for Mayne Reid, in that Mayne Reid had, after all, written noticeably better. Camus’s and Sartre’s lack of talent is so obvious, it could stimulate gastric spasms. Stendahl and Thomas Mann would do perfectly as powerful sleeping tablets. Voltaire is to be thanked at least for having written at no great length. In for it most of all was Pasternak’s “Doctor Zhivago,” lyrical slush with helpless ambition on an epoch-making scale.

I forgot to ask what all these authors had done to upset him so.

In general, the Hog could have passed for an inveterate modernist, had he not sometimes looked infernally conservative. When the conversation incidentally turned to the Earth’s artificial satellites and Soviet successes in space, he declared that it was all political propaganda, soap bubbles for fanatics and fools. On the other hand, he was prepared to talk for hours about some Belgian maniac, about anomalous displacements in time and the mysterious disappearances of marine vessels.

In the evening I returned to the room I was renting, collapsed onto the bed and, I’m ashamed to admit it, cried almost through until morning.

Since we’re on the subject, I said to myself, if your love is unreciprocated, forbidden, unprintable, wrong, that doesn’t necessarily mean it doesn’t exist!

In essence, I was simply mourning the meager remains of my illusions. They had been insignificantly few as it was, you could have counted them on
the fingers of one hand. But they were to come out into the light for some
time yet, like foolish newborn grass from under a paving-stone.

For example, when I had already moved to the United States and my
homeless Hilda had joined me there, and we had decided to live together in
Cambridge as a family, I deemed it necessary to write to Vera about it. The
reply was the most merciless dressing-down. She condemned me, don’t you
know, unreservedly. Because my relationship with Hilda was indecent and
unwise. And Volodya held exactly the same point of view.

How I rejoiced that day: she’s jealous! Of course she is. And she refers
to Volodya’s opinion only to conceal how hurt she is personally. I replied:
“Any director could only dream of an actress like you!” Vera kept her mouth
shut, bit her tongue. But I would have done better had I not then rejoiced,
but rather learnt something from my red-eyed grief.

I left Nice on Friday 27th January. Immediately before my departure
the Hog had such a fit of generosity that he gave me, all at once, several
signed copies of his own editions, even though usually, according to Vera, he
doesn’t inscribe books to anyone.

Quite soon, incidentally, I stopped mentally calling him the Hog. And
not just because for those two weeks he was graciously gallant and good to
me, and a little later put his signature to letters of recommendation to Har-
vard and Cornell. Any other woman in my place would have regarded that
as a favor, as a great kindness. But I was quite unable to cope with the con-
jecture that they wanted to get rid of me, and for that reason were sending
me a long way away, into secure exile, to the back of beyond.

What else? I asked permission to write a candid short story about our
acquaintanceship, about the two of them. I was given their magnanimous
consent, accompanied by sterile smiles.

For all my readiness for uneven trench warfare and duels, I forced my-
self to address both spouses with equal friendliness, by their first names. But
later, when conflict burst out like a ripe furuncle, and relations became
inflamed to the extent of legal intervention, I would be very distinctly warned
that no one had allowed me to refer to them so informally, in a manner
acceptable between close friends.

That story about our January meeting I wrote very slowly, with the most
desperate scrupulousness I was capable of, as though trying to engrave on a
crunchy crust of ice the only words that came to me in my sleep or in my soli-
tary vigils over a sheet of paper covered in crossings-out. In six years I wrote
six different versions, not daring to forget that the main characters would be
the first to receive and read it all.

A sad observation about the nature of things: they all have the capacity to
deteriorate. The most essential deteriorate quicker than the rest. What a
degree of deterioration did our precious relations have to reach for Vera to
respond to the second version of my story with a request for two small amend-
ments, but to the sixth with a haughty notification that: “My husband is too busy
and in no position to keep an eye on all the alterations to your text. . . .”

Every new success for Volodya and any complimentary mention of his
name in the press aroused in me now a quiet, embittered jealousy. (Perhaps
that’s how the first signs of madness manifest themselves?) But at the same
time I felt resolved to go for the jugular of anyone who might casually, in
passing, criticize Volodya or his books.

I know he gives many people the impression that he is a cold, high-
society snob. I don’t want to try and change anyone’s mind. But before me I
can visualize Vera, choking with laughter, acting out unforgettable meetings
with Hollywood’s elite. Volodya chuckles along at it in embarrassment.

They are invited to a cocktail party at the house of some powerful pro-
ducer, where present among the guests is John Wayne, the king of the west-
ern, a stern, muscular cowboy: at the time, his promotional portraits, on
horseback and with a Winchester, were resplendent on placards half the
height of a skyscraper all across America.

Polite Volodya can think of nothing better than to go up to Wayne and
enquire: “And what do you do?” The star of the screen replies humbly: “Why,
I’m in the movies.”

At another Hollywood reception Volodya meets a nice-looking brunette
with a suspiciously familiar face. Here too he tries with all his might to be-
have in a polite way befitting high society: “You’re not French, are you, by any
chance?” The brunette looks at him with round eyes and says: “As it happens,
I’m Gina Lollobrigida.”

When Marilyn Monroe invited these strange spouses to continue the
party at her house, they immediately looked at the clock: “Oh, sorry, it’s
already quite late, it’s time we went!” Such high-society ways.

Despite the distance the equal of the ocean (or maybe thanks to such dis-
tance), naked words finally came through in my letters to Vera—I no longer
concealed my feelings. And every time she contrived to seem not to notice
those confessions. In reply she stuffed me with routine information about anything and everything. Volodya’s efforts on the tennis court. A hired Peugeot with a mechanical gearbox. Hotel apartments in Switzerland’s Montreux. The satin gleam of Lake Geneva. Even a little flock of sparrows which, emboldened after being fed, are darting about right at Vera’s feet—a detail sufficient to make me myself suddenly feel like a tamed sparrow, grown utterly impertinent.

April 1963 hit me with such a cruel nervous derangement, that the possibility of taking final leave of absolutely everyone and everything at a stroke, including myself and my own life, seemed to me the sweetest prospect. I preferred that Vera learn of my death not from third parties, but from me myself.

And so I wrote to her:

“Farewell! You are the only one I have loved in all my life.”

Let someone try and guess what her answer was.

Any versions? Suggestions?

Her answer was nothing.

We’ll take the figure of aposiopesis to be the loudest one of all.

We shall meet twice more, three years after the wintry Riviera: first, they’ll drop into Cambridge, then I’ll find myself back in Europe, and both meetings will be disfigured by a tone of obligation, like surgical procedures that can’t be avoided.

In December 1964 they were still discussing Swedish translations of Volodya’s novels with me and they unexpectedly bought me an overcoat—a present that resembled a settling of debts, or else a final “farewell.”

And then in 1969 this family of monsters set the law firm of Paul, Weiss on me.

No, their aim wasn’t to have me condemned or put away in the lock-up. Their aim was a different one—to have me stop writing to them. They were protecting their flaming privacy, don’t you know, that same fortress-cot, sweaty kennel, little bedroom, cradle for bedsores. The alcove for a child’s knickers. Who from? From me?!

No, I won’t conceal it, by that time I had already swum far beyond the buoys. Oh, it was a gorgeous state! I allowed myself to send twenty or thirty things a month—postcards, letters, telegrams and super-urgent mental dispatches. No longer did anything keep me from leaping out of bed in the middle of the night and, barely able to check my trembling, filling six sheets of
paper in describing for my silly Vera the scene of bliss of which she didn’t
even risk dreaming! A-ah, it’s too late now? Then why don’t the three of us
go to bed together? Come on, be honest, Vera, whose palm feels nicer to
your hip? Speak up, whose is it?

Those guys from Paul, Weiss are really bright, of course. After their in-
tervention and the strict ban on correspondence I started sending two letters
a day.

But, Vera. If you value above all else an enclosed private life, then why
the fuck did you let tin-eyed attorneys into our poor secret?

You’re twenty-three years older and will die much sooner than me.*

When you’re gone, who among the living will remember how your radi-
ance eclipsed the brilliance of Nice and the Baie des Anges, spread wide
open before us? Maybe my senseless, forbidden fate will serve at least to do
that. After all, every one of us has been a child, and every one, absolutely
every one is doomed. And so has the right to keep waiting—to keep living to
win at least somebody’s pity and love.

*A Family of Monsters / 139

* Philippa Rolf will die in 1978 of acute kidney cancer. Vera Nabokova will outlive her
by 13 years. —Author’s note.
VLADIMIR SOROKIN (born 1954, Bikovo) originally trained as an engineer before turning to art and writing, becoming first a cult figure within the 1980s Moscow underground and later one of Russia’s most prominent writers. He is the recipient of several prestigious awards and his work has been widely translated abroad, including the recent series of novels The Ice Trilogy published by the NYRB.
Lukashevich, the vice president of a modest but stable bank, and Zeldin, the owner of four supermarkets, were sitting at a table set for three. A Gypsy choir sang onstage. Next to the table a birch tree grew in a tub. On the table, a carafe of vodka sparkled, and a platter of salmon glowed red.

The two friends were drunk. They had begun at the Pushkin with 850 milliliters of vodka, Russian Standard, cranberry juice, beer, marinated white mushrooms, stuffed pike, veal pâté, Caesar salad, lamb à la Hussar, sterlet in champagne sauce, crème brûlée, crepes with crème caramel, coffee, cognac, Calvados.

They continued at Biscuit: 380 milliliters of tequila, green tea, fruit salad.

“No way, Borya,” said Lukashevich, carelessly lighting a cigarette. “The Gypsies don’t rock.”

“You don’t like them?” asked Zeldin, filling the shot glasses and spilling vodka on the tablecloth. “I love it when they howl.”

“Come on . . . it’s so depressing,” replied Lukashevich, picking up a shot glass. He splashed the contents on the birch tree. “Shit!”

“What, the vodka?” Zeldin asked, puzzled.

“Everything.”

“Why everything?”

“I don’t like places like this. Let’s go to the Bridge. Dance with the girls.”

“Right now? Come on, let’s have a drink! What gives, Sasha?” exclaimed Zeldin, embracing Lukashevich. “Everything’s great. Hey, wait a minute,” he suddenly remembered, “I didn’t finish telling you!”
“Telling me what?” said Lukashevich gloomily.
“About the bell.”
“What bell?” said Lukashevich in a bored voice.
“The one on Christ the Savior Cathedral! The bass bell! The ‘G’! Thirty-two tons. It’s on the southwest wing, I think. Right. So that Gazprom broad, you know, the one with lung cancer, she read somewhere that low frequencies destroy cancer cells. She paid them a bundle. So every evening they lifted her up with the bell ringer, and there she was, naked . . . Sasha, you bastard. I still can’t believe you came. Shit! You’re really here! You’re here, you sweaty old asshole.” Knocking over the carafe of vodka, Zeldin threw himself on Lukashevich and hugged him with all his might. The table rocked. Zeldin’s striped jacket split. Lukashevich snarled, and his large, doughy fingers squeezed Zeldin’s swarthy neck. Zeldin clenched Lukashevich’s white neck.
“You Moscow scumbag!” Lukashevich growled, and they started choking each other.

11:48 P.M. FIVE-STORY BUILDING SLATED FOR DEMOLITION ON INNOCVATOR STREET

Two homeless men, Valera and Rooster, were sitting on a pile of damp rags in the corner of a dilapidated apartment. A slim crescent moon shone through the broken window. The men were drunk. They were polishing off a bottle of Russian brand vodka. They’d started drinking early that morning at the Yaroslavl train station: a quarter liter of Source vodka, a half loaf of white bread, chicken scraps from the grill bar. Then they rode to Sokolniki park and collected enough bottles to turn in for some money and continue: three bottles of Ochakov beer and two poppy-seed danishes. Then they had a nap on a bench and rode to the Novodevichy convent cemetery, where they begged for alms until evening. They got enough for a bottle of Russian Vodka.
“That’s it,” said Valera, drinking down the last drop in the dark.
“What?”
“I got the shakes, goddamnit. Like I didn’t have a drop. I could use another swig.”
“We’ll go to Izmailovo tomorrow. We’ll load up. Tomorrow! Tomorrow!”
Valera began to chuckle and sing something incomprehensible.
“Whatya mean, tomorrow?” said Rooster, slugging him.
“You dick-face . . . asshole . . .” said Rooster, hitting him lamely.
“What’re you . . . Oh go fuck yourself!” Valera said, and hit him back.
They were quiet for a moment. A fire engine passed by noisily outside the window.
“A hearse?” asked Rooster with a yawn.
“A cement truck,” Valera objected authoritatively.
They sat quietly.
“Tomorrow. To—moooooorrrrow. Fucking tomoooooorrrrow!” Valera started singing and laughing again, opening his mouth of rotten teeth wide in the dark.
“Just shut the fuck up, you jerk!” shouted Rooster and grabbed him by the throat.
Valera wheezed and grabbed him back.
They began strangling each other.

11:48 P.M. AN APARTMENT ON SIVTSEV VRAZHEK LANE

Alex, a dancer, and Nikola, a web designer, were lying on the bed naked. Mozart’s Fortieth Symphony played quietly in the background. Nikola was smoking, while Alex cut cocaine on Alexander Laerts’y’s CD Udder. They had begun twenty-four hours earlier at the birthday party of a makeup artist friend (0.5 grams + orange juice), then continued at Tabula Rasa (0.3 grams + still mineral water) and Niagara (0.8 grams, still mineral water + two cigars).
After that, having drunk a cup of green tea at Shot Glass, they went to see a morning show of Attack of the Clones. Then they went to the dacha of a woman designer they didn’t know very well (1.3 grams + sparkling mineral water + fruit tea + 150 milliliters whiskey + apple juice + strawberry tart + grapes + candy + 150 milliliters of apricot liqueur + strawberries + green tea + strawberries with whipped cream). In the evening they returned to Nikola’s place (0.4 grams).
“Just a tiny bit, Kol. We’ll finish it off,” said Alex, who was making two puny lines with a discount card from the “Party” stores.
“Is that all there is?” asked Nikola, squinting his beautiful, glazed eyes.
“That’s it, now—all gone.”
They silently snorted the cocaine through a plastic straw. Alex wiped up the cocaine dust with his slender finger, and gently touched the head of Nikola’s member with it. Nikola looked at his member.
“You want to?”
“I always want to.”
“Listen, do we have any whiskey left?”
“We never did have any.”
“Really?” said Nikola, tensely surprised. “Well, what do we have?”
“Only vodka.” Alex gently took Nikola’s balls in his palm.
“I’m kinda out of it . . .” said Nikola, stretching.
“T’ll get it.”
Alex sprang up and went into the kitchen. Nikola stubbed out his cigarette in a steel ashtray. Alex returned silently with the vodka and a shot glass. He poured. Nikola drank. Alex kneeled down in front of him and slowly ran his tongue around the lilac-colored head of Nikola’s member.
“But first do the velvet, hedgehog,” said Nikola, licking his dry lips.
“Yes, massah,” said Alex, taking two velvet women’s belts—one black and one purple—off the chair.
They lay on the bed, pressed their bodies together, and wrapped their legs around each other. Alex looped the purple belt around Nikola’s neck; Nikola wound Alex’s neck in the black one. Their lips came together, opened, and their tongues touched. They began choking each other.

11:48 P.M. A HUT IN THE VILLAGE OF KOLCHINO

Two old women, Niura and Matriona, kneeled, praying before a dark icon case. The blue flame of the icon lamp barely illuminated the faces of Nikola the Saint, the Savior, and the Virgin Mother. It was dim and damp in the hut.
“To you we pray Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, and to Your Immaculate Mother and our Lord in Heaven and all the Holy Saints, hear our prayers and have mercy upon us.”
“Amen,” the old women murmured separately. They crossed themselves, bowed, touched their foreheads to the uneven floor, and with a creak began to stand up.
Matriona got up first. She helped Niura up by her bony elbow.
“Oof, God almighty . . .” Niura straightened up with difficulty, took a step toward the bench, and sat down.
“Maybe write Vasily after all?” asked Matriona, walking over to the table.
“No. No strength left,” said Niura, breathing hard.
“Well, I wrote my folk. Let them come.”
“Mine ain’t been by for eight months. Oy, everything hurts,” moaned Niura.

“On with it then, ain’t no point . . .”

Matriona pulled at the tablecloth. Next to the bread and salt cellar was a plate with one pancake. Matriona took the pancake, sat down next to Niura, and split it in half.

“Here, eat up. I made it this morning.”

“Only one?” Niura took the half pancake with her thin, shaking hands.


“I’ll eat.”

They ate in silence, chewing with their toothless mouths. Matriona finished, wiped her mouth with her brown hand, got up, and took Niura by the elbow.

“Let’s go, praise God.”

“Let’s go . . . Lord almighty . . .” The old woman, still chewing, had trouble standing up.

They went out into the dark mudroom with the rotten floor. Moonlight filtered through the holes in the roof. A hemp rope with two nooses had been thrown over the ceiling beam. Matriona led Niura to the nooses. She helped her put one of them around her neck. Then she put on her own. Niura wore her new white scarf with blue polka dots. Matriona wore her old black one with the white speckles.

Matriona clasped Niura by her bony shoulders and hung on her. Niura let out a sob, and hiccupped. The nooses tightened and the old women’s legs gave way.

11:48 P.M. Kindergarten Boarding School No. 7

Five-year-old Rita and Masha lay on their beds, side by side, eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling. The other sixteen children were asleep. On the other side of the wall, the nanny and the night guard were making love.

A car passed by outside the window. Strips of light slid across the ceiling.

“A dragon,” said Masha.


The nanny’s muffled grunt could be heard through the wall.

“What is Nina Petrovna doing in there?” asked Masha.

“She and Uncle Misha are strangling themselves.”

“What does that mean?”

Hiroshima / 145
“They lie in bed naked and strangle each other. With their hands.”
“What for?”
“It’s where babies come from. And ’cause it feels good. My mama and papa do it all the time. They undress naked all the way and start doing it. Do yours?”
“I don’t have a papa.”
They were quiet for awhile. Another car passed by. Then another one.
“Oy, oh, oh, oy, Mish . . . Not that way . . .” muttered the nanny on the other side of the wall.
Masha raised her head. “Rita. You wanna strangle each other?”
“But we’ll have babies.”
They were quiet for awhile. Rita thought about it:
“No we won’t.”
“Why not?”
“We aren’t a man and a lady.”
“Oh . . . then alright, let’s do it.”
“Okay. Only we have to get naked.”
“Noooo! It’s cold. Let’s do it like this.”
“If we have our clothes on it won’t work.”
“Really?”
“Uh-huh.”
“All right.”
They spent a long time taking off their pajamas. They got into Masha’s bed. They grabbed each other by the neck. And began strangling each other.

The above-mentioned Lukashevich, Valera, Alex, Matriona, and Rita didn’t see anything in particular during the process of choking and strangling.

But Zeldin, Rooster, Nikola, Niura, and Masha first observed a series of orange and crimson flashes, which gradually turned into a threatening purple glow. Then the purple light began to dim, changing to dark blue, and suddenly opened up into a huge, endless expanse. There was an unbelievably spacious, ash gray landscape, lit from the dark purple sky by a huge full moon. Despite the night, it was as bright as day. The moon illuminated the low ruins of a burned city in minute detail. A scattering of stars glittered in the sky. Among the ruins walked a naked woman. Her white, moonlit body emanated a mesmerizing sense of calm. She didn’t belong to the world on whose ashes she walked. In those ashes and ruins people lay injured by the blast. Some of them moaned, some were already dead. But their moans did
not disturb the woman's calm. She moved serenely, stepping over the dead and the moaning. She was looking for something else. Finally she stopped. Among the melted bricks lay a pregnant bitch, mortally wounded. A large part of the dog's body was burned, and her rib bones protruded through clumps of fur and skin. Breathing heavily and whining, she was trying to give birth. But she no longer had the strength for birthing. The dog was dying; her entire disfigured body shuddered, tensing powerlessly. Bloody spittle drooled from her crimson mouth, and her pink tongue hung out.

The woman lowered herself onto the ashes next to the dog. She placed her white hands on the bitch's singed belly. She pressed down. The dog's dirty, blood-spattered legs spread slightly. She whined and let out a little yelp. Puppies began to squeeze out of her womb: one, another, a third, a fourth, and a fifth. A spasm convulsed her body. She glanced at the woman with mad, moist eyes, yawned and died. The wet black puppies stirred, sticking their muzzles into the gray ash. The woman picked up one and then another, and held them to her breasts. The blind puppies began to drink her milk.
SERGEY KUZNETSOV (born 1966, Moscow) is a pioneering writer, journalist and cultural expert. His writings include several novels, a monograph of Joseph Brodsky’s poetics and translations of Stephen King and Susan Sontag. One short story, Moscow Reincarnations, has been translated into English and is featured in the anthology Moscow Noir published by Akashic Books. His most recent novel, The Circle Dance of Water, was a finalist in the 2011 Big Book Prize.
It is good to kill in winter. Especially if it has snowed overnight, and the ground is covered with a delicate blanket of white. You put the bound naked body on it. The blood from the wounds flows more freely in the cold frosty air, and the warmth of life departs with it. If you are lucky and she does not die too quickly, she will see the solid film of ice cover what was flowing through her veins so recently. Red on white, there is no more beautiful combination than that.

They say freezing to death is like going to sleep. Put her head on your knees, watch as the pupils glaze over, as the eyes close, gently stroke the cooling skin, rouse her occasionally with searing blows of the knife, so that she shudders in pain and returns to life for a moment, catch the final glimmers of consciousness in her eyes, sing a quiet lullaby, touch her forehead like mum did when you were ill as a child and she checked to see if you were feverish. Repeat that gesture all these years later, check, feel the skin getting colder and colder every time, as if the Snow Queen is wafting her breath over her, notice that the blows no longer make her shudder. Then you can cut the ropes, take the gag out of her mouth, sit down beside her and cry, watching as your tears mingle with the blood that is already starting to congeal.

It is good to kill in spring. Especially when the first leaves are opening and the forest you look out at through the window is covered with the delicate green mildew of new life. On days like this it is good to gather fresh branches of pussy willow, full of spring sap, and go down into the deep basement where she is already waiting for you, crucified on ropes between the floor and the
ceiling. Take out the gag, let her scream, walk around her a few times, and then strike the first blow. Gradually, shriek after shriek, her thighs, back, stomach and breasts will be covered with a network of weals and a reddish mildew of blood. Then loosen the ropes, put her on her knees, lean down and ask what her name is. It's very important to know the girl's name in order to call to her when she's leaving, to keep her here as long as possible.

They say in China bamboo grows so fast that if you tie a man to the ground, the young shoots pierce right through his body overnight. I wish the spring grass had the same strength, so that the new life and the new death would fuse into one, and the red drops would freeze like flowers on the broad leaves of the snowdrops blossoming in her crotch, on the yellow inflorescences of the dandelions growing up between her breasts that have already been torn open by the thrust of the bitter wormwood. So that she would be lying there, still alive, among all the flowers that have grown through her body, and her final breath would mingle with their spring scent.

It is good to kill in summer. The naked body is at its most natural in summer—most natural and most defenseless. Hammer a dozen pegs into the ground of the yard, bring the weakened girl up out of the basement, tie her down quickly, without giving her a chance to gather her wits, spreading her arms and legs as wide as possible and not forgetting to check the gag properly, because in summer there are people everywhere and there will always be some do-gooder who will hear the screams and knock on the gate in the tall fence and ask what is going on here.

I would like to take him by the hand and lead him over to where the girl is lying naked, like someone on a nudist beach. She knows she is going to die soon. I would like to tell him to squat down and look into her eyes. That is what terror looks like, I would tell him, that is what despair looks like when it condenses so much that you can touch it. Do not be afraid, touch her hand, touch the slippery watering spheres of her eyes. I will give you one of them as a souvenir, if you like.

But if the gag is inserted properly, there will not be any scream, and you will have to look into her eyes alone and listen closely to the shuddering of the body that responds so subtly to each new stroke, each new flourish of the design that you burn into her skin with a magnifying glass. The heat of the sun, so highly concentrated that it can't help but move her. The flesh chars, the small pink mounds of the nipples darken in front of your eyes, the clitoris can no longer hide in the undergrowth of the hairs.
that have been shaven off, or in the hood of skin that has been cut away in advance.

Do not forget to wipe the sweat off her forehead, do not let it flood her eyes, let her see the sky, the sun and the green leaves. Have a damp towel ready, remember what mummy used to do for you when you were sick, wipe the sweat off her forehead, look into her eyes, try to find the glimmer of your childhood anguish in them.

It is good to kill in autumn. The blood cannot be seen on the red leaves and the yellow leaves float in the crimson puddles like little toy boats. Tie her to a tree, arm yourself with a set of darts and play at St. Sebastian with her. Remember, a dart lodges best of all in the breasts, and there is no chance at all that it will stick in the forehead.

Leave her tied there overnight, if you like. In the morning you will find her freezing cold, but still alive. Untie her from the tree, take her into the warm basement, take the gag out of the mouth torn by its own silent screams, let her cry a little, feed her the breakfast you have cooked yourself, and then take her tenderly, as if this is your wedding night, and you have been waiting for it for two years. Lick the drops of blood off the marks from your darts, in a certain sense they are Cupid’s arrows too. When you come, tie her up again, take her out into the yard and start all over again from the beginning.

Autumn is a time of slow dying. There is no need to hurry. The leaves will have time to shrivel, the branches of the trees will be denuded, the leaden clouds will drift across the sky. On one chilly rainy night go out into the yard and approach the unconscious body slumped helplessly in the ropes and look to see what is left of the woman you brought here a month ago. If you are lucky, she will survive the daily crucifixion between the branches of the old apple tree, the blows of the darts, the tender, stifling lovemaking in the cellar, your rough tongue licking her fresh wounds. Pick up a lump of soil swollen with rain and rub this mud over her tortured body. We shall all lie in earth like that sooner or later. Look at her one last time, take the gag out of her mouth and hope that the sound of the pouring rain will drown out her final screams. Take a knife and kill her with a few blows, before winter begins.

That’s what my calendar is like. My four seasons. Pictures from an exhibition. I’d like to write a book like that. A beautiful and bitter book, in which the beauty of nature and the beauty of death would merge into one. But unfortunately I cannot do it, for everything I have said is a lie.
When you kill, you do not think about the seasons of the year. When you kill, you just kill. And there is nothing inside you but horror. Horror and arousal.

In Moscow in summer you learn to move in short bursts, as if the street is a sea in which you have to swim from one island to another. Air conditioning in the bedroom at home, air conditioning in the car, at work, at the club. In the gaps between, your shirt instantly becomes soaked under the armpits, you’re the first to find the smell of your own sweat disgusting—and no deodorant will save you. Islands in the sea, yes, I’d prefer the Cote d’Azur or at least Greece, or even, if it comes to that, Turkey, where my friend Mike’s wife is on vacation right now with their seven-year-old son. Mike tells me Lyuba calls him and complains, says it’s tough for her on her own, and threatens that next year she won’t go anywhere without him.

Mike would be glad to go, the beach is better every way than a stuffy night club, where the air conditioning can’t handle the vapors exuded by hundreds of bodies, most of them appealingly young. If you think of this club as an island and the heat as water, then the place is about to suffer the same fate as Atlantis. Not much of an island, in other words.

I used to differentiate between the Moscow clubs, I used to think that was important. I used to think one was fashionable and another was outmoded. Now they’ve all fused into a single dance floor ablaze with lights where the young things dance—the new clubbing generation that has come on the scene. They skip around to music that I have no more clue about nowadays than I do about the clubs; they skip about like puppies having fun in a dog park.

Mike wipes the sweat off his face. Good old Mike, endowed with a figure that allowed him to impersonate his own “protection” during the post-Soviet capitalist frenzy of the early nineties: he put on a fierce expression, crossed his arms on his chest and sat there at negotiations without saying a word. I don’t really look like a gangster, do I? He used to say to me. I’m just a regular Moscow boy. Ever since those days he still has the habit of wearing a gold bracelet and signet ring.

We’re sitting right beside the dance floor, and I spot you straightaway: skintight pants down to just below your knees, glittering shoes with high heels, a short top, already wet with sweat. Hair dyed in streaks, ginger on light yellow—straw color, almost white. So far I can’t see your face, but the hemispheres of your buttocks are twitching rhythmically, sending me greetings. I pretend I haven’t noticed you, we order two beers and I sit there half-turned away, still following you out of the corner of my eye.
Mike would be glad to go, the beach is better every way than the swelter of the city, but in the construction business summer is the hot season in every sense of the word. So Lyubka and Sevka are down there in Turkey, and Mike’s here with me in a club with a name that’s not really important. He hangs his jacket on the back of his chair and straightaway I can see the spots under the arms of his light-colored shirt. No deodorant can save you. No, he says, you should never stay in this city in summer.

I look at you, you’ve turned in three-quarter profile and in the beams of light wandering around the dance floor I can make out a snub nose, rather sweet, and a two-tone bang that falls over your eyes every now and then. Before Igor went away to America to get his MBA, he had a little dog like that, one day he had it clipped, and the poor thing spent two weeks behind the curtain, with the fringe falling over its eyes instead of the hair that had been cut off. What kind was it now? A fox terrier, was it?

Mike is complaining about builders who don’t want to work and clients who set impossible deadlines. He can understand the builders—you can’t put air conditioning into an unfinished building. In that respect my office is far more pleasant. The waves of heat beat against the glass like the waves of the Mediterranean on the cost of Turkey where Lyubka and Sevka are suffering so terribly—if, that is, you can believe what she says on the phone.

Right then, Mike works in the construction business, but I wonder where you work? I used to differentiate between girls, I preferred educated professionals, I used to think that was important. Now that I know a lot more about women than I ever did before, I realize there’s no great difference between a homeless tramp (provided you give her a wash, of course), a secretary and a successful business woman with an MBA of her own. Women are differentiated by the texture of their skin, the shape of their nipples and their lips, the density and size of their breasts and how easily the skin comes away from their muscles. Stop, I tell myself, stop.

Lyubka and Sevka are suffering by the sea down in Turkey and on this sweltering Friday evening Mike is sitting on the edge of a dog park and eyeing some girl, like a regular Moscow boy. In hot summer Moscow it’s not that difficult to find yourself some girl, especially on Friday evening, especially if you know how to look. So far he hasn’t noticed you, the fox terrier girl with the twin-tone bang, red and straw-colored, red and white. Now you’ve turned to face me, little mouth, big eyes, snub nose, top tight across your breasts. Size C, probably. A pity I can’t see the color of your eyes.

The music falls silent for a second and I can hear the noise of the air con-
ditioner vainly struggling to transform the sweltering Moscow air into a pitiful simulacrum of a sea breeze. The sea is too far away, the wind can’t reach this far, maybe that’s for the best, it means it can’t carry the news to Lyubka on her Turkish beach about the way her husband is eyeing the twenty-year-old girls skipping about in a dark night club where the air conditioning can’t handle the sweltering Moscow air.

I’ll go have a dance, says Mike, and I nod to him as if to say go on, maybe you’ll pick someone up.

It would be good if you had a girlfriend. Mike likes tall thin blondes, Lyubka used to be one once, but after Sevka was born, first she plumped out, and then she stopped dyeing her hair, saying everyone thought blondes were fools and that interfered with her work. Bearing in mind that she’s a lecturer in some College of the Humanities it’s hard to understand what it could interfere with. As if anyone could make a brilliant career there.

It’s not easy for Mike to find a tall thin blonde, even in hot summer Moscow. Even on Friday evening. Tall thin blondes aren’t very fond of men who are over thirty and weigh more than 220 pounds. On the dog park of the dance floor Mike looks like a bewildered bear. He suddenly turns out to be almost a head taller than everyone else, or maybe he’s just bigger. He dances the way they once used to dance at college discos: waving his arms around, stamping up and down on the spot, jerking his head, which many years ago used to be surrounded by long, flailing hippie hair, but now it looks as if a bear has just climbed out of the water and is trying to shake itself dry. Drops of sweat go flying in all directions—I guess that’s not very sexy either. The little hares, doggies and pussycats cringe out of the way, watching Bruin with a mixture of fear and mockery. The way the guy gets it on is a gas, but who the hell is he: what if he turns out to be a gangster and starts a shootout? I used to differentiate between gangsters and regular Moscow boys too. I used to think it was important.

The fox terrier girl squeezes her way through toward the bar, but she can’t get to it. She looks round, trying to find someone, I wave to her and point to an empty chair. Naturally, she comes over. You’re a great dancer, I say. The fox terrier girl smiles with her little mouth and says “thank you.” She has a high voice with just a bit of a whine to it, exactly the kind a little puppy ought to have. What can I get you? I ask.

You look at the menu, adjusting your two-tone bang. Your skin’s just a little bit dusky, or maybe that’s the lighting, but two glittering silver rings stand out on your ring finger and index finger. You choose a martini with juice. Now that
you’re really close I can take a good look at you: a yellow top soaked in sweat, big gray eyes, snub nose. I wonder what kind of noses fox terriers have and, by the way, what your name is. You say “Alice” and I smile in reply as if to say that’s a beautiful, wonderful name. Without waiting to be asked, you start telling me about yourself.

When you speak, it’s not important what it’s about. What’s important is your intonation, which words you put in what order, the way you wrinkle up your little nose, the way you pick up your glass of martini with your dusky fingers. I can see straightaway that you’re a good little girl, not some kind of little scrubber, just a good little girl who’s used to obeying her elders. You’re used to obeying, so when I say, an hour and a half and four martinis later, let’s go to my place, you won’t object, you might just ask for my cell phone to call your mum, if you live with your mum. I can spot obedient girls anywhere in any crowd. Stop.

Mike comes back—alone, just as I thought he would. Listen, you don’t happen to have a blonde friend, the peroxide giraffe type? My friend’s bored and he’d like to have a dance or even just have a drink with someone. Take no notice that he’s such a big brute, in actual fact he’s a regular Moscow boy. You half get up and start looking round the room for someone. Your dusky stomach shows under your short top, gathered in below the navel by the elastic of your red panties, which creep out half an inch above your tight pants, in the style of this summer.

Mike sits down on a chair, you introduce yourselves. Your hands lie beside each other: Mike’s big hand with the signet ring and massive wedding ring, and your little hand with the cheap silver rings on the dusky fingers. So you work as a secretary and you call yourself a “receptionist,” which sounds a lot better, of course, because you know what everybody thinks about secretaries. They’re wrong to think that, by the way. I would guard a good secretary like the apple of my eye and protect her—not only from my colleagues and partners, but from myself. It’s very hard to find a good secretary. In hot summer Moscow it’s much easier to find a girl who’s prepared to sit at your table and drink a martini—the third glass, by the way—and tell you all about her life.

Outside the heat has probably eased off, but in here the waves of swelter are still slopping about. When I was twenty and a bit it didn’t bother me either although, to be quite honest, there weren’t any clubs like this then. But you like it here, it would be unfair to drag you away so soon. Shall we have a dance? I say. Okay.

Right then, silver shoes, yellow top, already dried out a bit, dusky stomach
between the yellow top and red panty elastic, two-tone bang. Right then, a secretary. Immediately after school you tried to get into college, the economics department, and failed both times. But you’re going to keep trying anyway. It’s hard to find a secretary in Moscow who isn’t going to try to get into college to study economics or law, well, good luck anyway. I used to think a good education was important too.

You live with your parents and your elder sister, who happened to get into the law department at college, at the third attempt, in fact, but she graduates next year. At your sister’s age girls in my generation were already getting married and having children, but the new clubbing generation obviously isn’t in such a hurry.

Stop.

It’s as if someone is waking up inside, starting to toss and turn inside my chest; as if he’s getting ready to break through my ribs and come shooting out. But I only came to the club to relax. Like any regular Moscow boy. But all evening a phrase, a glance, some minor detail has kept throwing me back into the danger zone, where there’s nothing but stop, stop, stop. As if you’re walking along an endless corridor, opening new doors all the time—and suddenly you fall through one of the doorways into hell. And until you open it, you don’t know what’s behind it, but when you do open it, it’s too late and you can’t even understand straightaway what happened, what it was that Alice said.

Ah yes, she studied in the department of law at Moscow University. Like Alice’s sister. I took the student ID out of her purse, big, short-sighted eyes, she couldn’t see a thing without her glasses, I had to try to find her new ones, take the risk, for that week when. Stop, I tell you, stop.

But I can see you’re a considerate girl you ask: are you feeling okay? No, little Alice, I’m feeling monstrously not okay, but in your place I wouldn’t try to find out any more about it. It’s stuffy in this club of yours, I say, which happens to be true, by the way, and we go back to the table.

Right then, she’s a little puppy dog. She’ll be a puppy even in the old age that she still has to live to see. Her bang will be gray, her skin will dry out, but maybe she’ll keep the way she walks and the way she laughs. How much more does anyone need, really?

An hour and three martinis later I make eyes at Mike to let him know it’s time for us to move out, and Mike also gets up, with a sigh, and says he’ll go and dance for a while, although it looks like it’s obviously not his evening in this club tonight. Alice says in her shrill voice that she was glad to meet him and Mike gives a confidential nod in my direction and says: you watch yourself with him, he’s a real psycho.
Stop, fuck it, stop! I can feel myself starting to turn red. You could blow your cover like that, stop, tell yourself to stop, and smile like this, the way people smile at a tired old joke that has nothing to do with reality.

An air-conditioned island. Genuine coolness. Silk sheets, a bottle of champagne beside the bed. Little post-pubescent fox terriers are into stuff like that. Modern female fashion keeps no secrets. You even know the color of the panties in advance, the only surprise in store for you is the angel tattooed on her left shoulder. That’s my guardian angel, Alice says, and starts kissing me, sucking my tongue into her little mouth. Pausing to catch her breath, she explains that she doesn’t like fingers down there, she likes it with the tongue, her breasts shouldn’t be squeezed too hard, but her nipples are a genuine erotic zone, and she can hardly ever come without having her clitoris fondled, so I shouldn’t be offended if she helps herself out at some point.

The new clubbing generation. Girls who know their own bodies the way the girls of my generation knew the discography of Pink Floyd. Life is too short, why waste half the night on exploration? Better tell him up front, so he knows exactly what to do, because in hot summer Moscow it’s so hard to find a man who understands you without words.

Night, but the heat’s as bad as ever. You find the smell of your own sweat disgusting. The waves of sweltering heat pound against the windowpanes, maybe you should take a trip to the sea? Take the fox terrier girl Alice with you, stay in some small hotel, screw in the evenings and in the afternoons lie on the beach, dripping with sweat, just like you are now, as if you hadn’t taken a shower. Alice the fox terrier girl obviously sweats a lot in general, that must be the way the way the glands are arranged under her dusky skin (stop), or maybe she always gives it everything she’s got, no matter what she’s doing.

There was a time when I really liked all this sexual acrobatics and I differentiated between my partners according to their flexibility and inventiveness. I used to think that was important. But just recently I find I prefer the banal missionary position. If all we’re doing is having sex then, at the end of the day, that’s pretty boring. Stop. Stop.

Right then, we’ve already been moving in perfect synchronization for a long time already, Alice’s red and light-yellow braids of hair have become completely tangled together on the pillow. As always, I don’t come for a long time, lots of women actually like that. Then Alice starts howling like a dog, and in response I start feeling cold. I ought to get up and turn the air conditioning down, but Alice clings on tight with all four paws, lying on her back with her big eyes
closed and her little snub nose wrinkled up. Suddenly her entire body shudders, look at that, we managed it without stimulating the clitoris, we carry on.

I used to think it was very important for the girl to come at the same time as me. Then it was explained to me that a skillful partner could simulate orgasm so well that even she couldn’t tell the difference. Yes, sex is an artificial thing, too, like the coolness in this bedroom. There’s too much falsehood in it. Stop.

The obedient little girl Alice, the fox terrier–girl, a puppy to old age. She keeps going, she can’t stop, although she’s gasping for breath and she’s soaking wet, so that any moment now she’ll slip across the silk sheets straight onto the floor, onto the shaggy carpet, there now, I knew it. She doesn’t even open her eyes, trembling all over.

The little girl Alice whimpers as she lies on the floor, a dusky little body on the light-colored carpet. She twitches spasmodically, especially if I wave my hand through the air. Like an electric shock. Stop. Like the shock of a sudden blow. Stop.

Where is she now? Because she’s not in this body. Where has she gone? Stop. Stop.

This has happened to me a few times before. If the girl is easily aroused, I can’t come for a long time, and she remains in that state of arousal ... well, in short, this is pretty much what it looks like. Quite an impressive sight, but today for some reason, I feel sad.

Alone in my own bedroom with a dusky body on a light background lying at my feet, trembling and whimpering. A little fox terrier on a rug.

Alone.

There are tears in my eyes.

I walk to the remote that I left by the door, push the buttons, walk into the kitchen, pull open the drawer of the kitchen table (stop), pour a glass of water and ponder for a moment, then down it in one and walk back into the room with a second glass. I pick Alice up in my arms, sit her on the bed and give her a sip. Again, again, that’s a clever girl, well done, good girl.

I put my hand on her forehead. When I was little, my parents only ever touched my forehead to find out if I had a temperature. But I like simply to stroke. Stop. Simply to stroke.

“Shee-it,” Alice says in a hoarse voice. “What was that?”

I shrug.

“It happens,” I say, “you kept coming too long.”

“Shit almighty,” she says, “at one point I was looking down from the ceiling. How do you do stuff like that?”
“Well,” I say, “Mike told you I was a psycho. I guess that’s what he meant.”
She’s trembling all over, and I wrap her in a blanket, swaddle her up tight and sit her on my knee. Two-tone bang stuck to her forehead, snub nose. How I love her like this, tired, drained, exhausted. Little Alice puts her head on my shoulder and I feel that now she is like the daughter I don’t have.
I don’t have a daughter and I haven’t seen my son for eight years.
I run my hand over the damp two-tone hair and there are tears in my eyes. I press myself tightly against Alice, and at that moment she sees the condom dangling limply off the end of my prick.
“What d’you mean, you still didn’t come?”
I hastily roll the rubber off and reply guiltily:
“Oriental techniques, you know.”
I told you: women think I’m a good lover because I can manage not to come for a long time. Stop. Stop. Stop.
Leaving in the morning, she left behind
Her little silver ring. On purpose probably.
She left her number on the back of her company card
Red and light-yellow hair,
Dusky skin, big gray eyes
Feeble yelping in a cool bedroom
In the middle of hot summer Moscow
Three days later it hit me
Remembering her, suddenly I saw
All the things I could have done with her
She had elastic skin
I told myself I mustn’t think about it
Nipples with large aureoles
A little mouth the gag would have ripped and bloodied
I don’t know myself why it hit me so hard
It doesn’t often happen retrospectively
I guess it was the way she came that did it
An orgasm is called a little death
There were so many, I wanted to see the big one
I thought it would only be fair
She came so many times and all the evening
I just kept repeating “stop, stop, stop”
Now we could balance our accounts
I would ejaculate time after time
And she would tell me “stop!
Please stop and let me go!”
She probably couldn’t come like that
Not even if I touched her clitoris.

(I like touching girls’ clitorises too
Cigarette lighter, pliers, scalpel
And other quite surprising instruments)

I pictured how her face would look
When she realized what was happening
I would bring her to my dacha
Without any drugs or ropes,
She would walk downstairs of her own accord
And only in the basement would she realize.

The little mouth would form a perfect circle
Opened in a helpless scream
The red and yellow hair
Would instantly be soaked in sweat, but cold this time.
Horror would make the big gray eyes grow even bigger
Then she would squeeze them shut and maybe cry.

Although in general it was against my rules
When I picked Moscow girls up in the clubs
I never took them to the dacha
Like any regular Moscow boy.
First of all, it was quite dangerous
In general I tried to separate the two halves of my life
Many serial killers do the same.
William Heirens thought up a doppelganger for himself
His name was Mr. Murman, that is, Murder Man
I also have an alias for my second self
Or, perhaps, my first.

When I picked Moscow girls up in the clubs
I never took them to the dacha
Like any regular Moscow boy.
But dusky little Alice, the fox terrier-girl
Haunted my mind, and the little ring
In the bathroom kept catching my eye
I really ought to give it back—and I started wondering
Where I could have put the card with the cell number
And the name of the firm.
Maybe my cleaning lady threw it out
An old, but energetic woman
Who comes to me on Wednesdays.
Perhaps the air-conditioned breeze
Carried it off to the Mediterranean Sea
Where Lyubka and Sevka are on vacation.

Or maybe the tattooed angel
Really can save
The secretary girl who calls herself
A receptionist

You were lucky, sweet Alice
Fox-terrier girl
And now, after all this time
I’m truly glad. A little death
Is quite enough for a little girl
Live to be old, eternal puppy,
Gray bang, dry skin, children, grandchildren. And education
Since you think it’s so important.

Some day on vacation by the sea
A grown woman, running through your one-night stands
The same way other people count sheep or elephants
Remember me, the sugar daddy from the club
The silk sheets and the cool conditioned air
The heat outside, the way suddenly you saw the room
From a bird’s-eye view.

It’s called out-of-body experience, dear Alice
There are other ways of inducing it apart from sex
I wanted so much to show you them, but it didn’t happen

Believe me, the silver ring you left behind
Is too small a price to pay for your good luck.
MARGARITA KHEMLIN (born 1960, Chernigov) writes novels and stories about her native Ukraine, often focusing on Jewish themes and experiences. Two of her books—the short story collection *The Living Line* and her first novel, *Klotsvog*—were shortlisted for, respectively, the 2008 Big Book and the 2010 Russian Booker awards.
In 1969, the whole country was preparing to celebrate Vladimir Ilich Lenin’s hundredth birthday. There was still a year left before the anniversary, but there was an awful lot left to do.

Basya Solomonovna Meerovskaya had her own thoughts about the impending anniversary. She lived in a state of certainty that the Third World War would start in 1970, on the morning of April 22.

Basya Solomonovna sang “Only God knows meine suffering” as she sat at her Singer sewing machine, scheming up yet another dress for chubby granddaughters who couldn’t squeeze into Soviet children’s sizes.

Basya Solomonovna went outside to chat with the neighbor women. They listened to her attentively because Basya Solomonovna was considered smart. She shared her suspicions. “Well, see, they will definitely make it coincide with the hundredth anniversary. Because it should be unexpected. People have a holiday, the birthday of a great leader. Everybody in Moscow will celebrate it, so they’ll strike here.”

“They,” naturally, meant the Americans. The neighbors were interested. “They’ll drop a bomb or what?”

“Various ways. A bomb in one place, something else in another. Oy, vey is mir!”

“Yes . . . of course, we’ve lived a while. But the grandchildren . . . Lord, Lord . . .”
After grieving for a few minutes, the conversation changed course. “So how much sugar do you put in the plum preserves?” Basya Solomonovna responded in detail. Then she explained how to make a compress: how much vodka to pour on the cotton, and that the paper over the cotton should be parchment so it wouldn’t leak.

The neighbor women agreed about the paper but had doubts about the vodka: if you buy a bottle for a compress, a husband or son will surely lap it up. Was it possible to think up something instead of the vodka? Basya Solomonovna answered that a compress is possible without vodka. And it’s even better: boil potatoes in the skin and just mash them right in the skins. The neighbor women nodded. Basya Solomonovna’s ideas were as good as gold.

After talking like that for a while, Basya Solomonovna went home and sat down again at the sewing machine.

Her daughter Vera, a physical therapy instructor, came home.

Her son-in-law Misha, a foreman who didn’t drink because he was Jewish, came home from work.

Basya Solomonovna started in as she set the table. “Misha, what are they saying about the hundredth anniversary?”

“Everything’s good, Basya Solomonovna. We’re getting ready. A hundred and two percent. We’ll finish building the movie theater in the center of town. We’ll finish up the clubs around town. We’ll make it. And I even thought up the idea of gluing cardboard egg containers on the ceiling of the movie theater. Well, and painting it, of course. In light blue, for example. I told the bosses. They approved the idea.”

Basya Solomonovna was very happy, “You thought of it yourself? Good job, Misha, Will they give you a bonus?”

“I don’t know.”

Basya Solomonovna held the ladle over the soup tureen for an instant and, carefully placing a full bowl of borscht across from her son-in-law, said, “Eat, Misha. You have nerve-wracking work.” Then she ladled borscht for her daughter, then for her chubby granddaughters. Then half a bowl for herself.

At tea, after the granddaughters had crawled out from behind the table because they were convinced that nothing more sweet or baked could be expected, Basya Solomonovna returned to her pet topic. “Misha, the situation is serious. There will be war soon.”

Misha noisily mixed sugar in his cup and looked expressively at Vera.
Vera expertly flipped the switch. “Misha is tired, Mama. He’s going to rest now, read the paper. You can talk later.”

Basya Solomonovna pursed her lips. She didn’t plan to speak with her daughter about current events, and her daughter knew it. That meant having to wait for an hour or hour and a half while Misha read the paper, and not discussing the problem until after that.

But Misha fell asleep with the paper. There was no conversation.

The relatives from Kiev—Basya Solomonovna’s brother Ovram Pogrebinsky and his wife Lyusya—came to visit. It was useless speaking with Ovram about these things because he could only reason about football, but it was worth trying with Lyusya.

Lyusya, a chain-smoking veteran of the front and Don Cossack who looked more Jewish than Basya Solomonovna, listened attentively and asked her “not to worry Ovram because he has diabetes, as you know, Basya.”

Lyusya was never at a loss for words: Basya Solomonovna had already established that this was how Lyusya won over Ovram Solomonovich at the front, where they met. Ovram Solomonovich’s wife and four children died in the occupation and Lyusya’s child died before the war, so they both knew misfortune.

Lyusya went for the Americans. “Well, if you think, Basya, what they’re doing in Vietnam . . . Well, that’s Vietnam! People there are illiterate, poor, worn down. But here in our country? And what, the scoundrels will start a war against the Soviet Union? You know, if they so much as toss a bomb, we’ll find a bomb, too! So then it’s already neither us nor them! Just so they know, those slithering vermin! Those Ku Klux Klammers! They’re down but not quite out!” Lyusya added the last words with gusto. Basya Solomonovna agreed that it would be neither us nor them.

Basya Solomonovna didn’t doubt that Lyusya would share her thoughts about the Third World War with the public in Kiev. Basya Solomonovna only regretted that Lyusya wouldn’t mention her, Basya Solomonovna. Even though Lyusya was a good woman, she was a little jealous when it came to the intellect of others.

A while later, Misha’s older brother Vova, who’d been demobilized as a captain in 1949 and worked ever since in supplies at a military factory, came to visit from Kiev. He and Misha hardly communicated, so Vova’s visit was unexpected. And now Vova came from Chernigov to visit
Misha without calling first. After a wordless lunch, he asked Misha to go for a walk.

Misha was out for forty minutes and said when he came back that Vova had gone home and didn’t stop back to say good-bye because he didn’t want to be late to the bus station.

Misha was silent all evening. It was quiet in the house, like before a storm. Finally, Misha invited Basya Solomonovna to the kitchen.

The following conversation took place:
Misha: “Basya Solomonovna, you know how I respect you.”

Basya Solomonovna: “Yes, Misha, I always know that.”

Misha: “Basya Solomonovna, Vova told me that you have been spreading rumors that nobody will pat you on the head for.”

Basya Solomonovna: “What rumors, Mishenka? Vey is mir! What did Vova tell you?”

Misha: “Certain rumors, Basya Solomonovna, that during the Lenin centenary the Americans will start a war and drop bombs on all of us.”

Basya Solomonovna: “Vey is mir, Mishenka! I never told Vova that! I don’t even talk with him around you, and it would never occur to me to say a single word to him without you! You saw everything!”

Misha: “Basya Solomonovna, did you say this to Lyusya? About a war?”

Basya Solomonovna: “Well, I said . . .”

Misha: “Basya Solomonovna, do you know Lyudmila Ivanovna well?”

Basya Solomonovna: “I know her well.”

Misha: “Then why did you tell her these things? Vova said she’s talking all over Kiev about how the Third World War is a sure thing and that she has definite information. And Vova works in a defense factory. And his job is the type that he’s involved with all sorts of military secrets. Anything could happen . . . You know yourself that Lyusya won’t stop. She’ll scribble up a letter for someone so they take measures about the war. And they could ask Vova. And they’ll immediately think he blabbed military secrets to Lyusya. How could you act so irresponsibly, Basya Solomonovna? And they’ll follow the thread from Vova to me, you know how that all happens.”

Basya Solomonovna froze. Horror seized her. She sobbed. Wiping her nose on a corner of her brown, postwar (World War Two) sweater, she wailed, “Mishenka, forgive me . . . but everybody is saying . . .”
Misha finished, “Now everybody’s saying, Basya Solomonovna. But you were the first to say it!”

Basya Solomonovna proudly threw back her head. A transparent drop hung on the end of her nose, and she thought, “Yes, exactly. I was the first, not Lyusya!” Basya Solomonovna had difficulty controlling herself to not say it out loud. The next day Basya Solomonovna set off for Kiev. She wanted to speak with Lyusya.

Lyusya swore she hadn’t “specially” told anyone about the Third World War. Only Frieda, Vova’s wife. As for who Frieda might have told, that was risky business. In other words it was clear that Frieda had called everyone. Including, of course, her uncle the tooth doctor. And all those clients of his, oho ho.

Basya and Lyusya thought about what to do. Ovram came into the room. The women told him about Frieda and what she’d done. Ovram decided to go to Frieda’s uncle, whom he’d never seen in his whole life, pretend to be an ordinary patient, and find out what the uncle knew. Frieda’s uncle worked out of his home and only took referrals. Nobody on the Pogrebinsky side of the family had ever been his patient or seen him with their own eyes because he commanded high fees.

Lyusya called Frieda right away and asked for the uncle’s address for “a highly placed person I know well.” Frieda gave it. A half-hour later, all three—Ovram, Lyusya, and Basya—were in the uncle’s reception area. Ovram held his cheek and moaned naturally. They took him ahead of the other patients. Five minutes later he bounded out, grabbed the women by the arms, and ran out to the street with them.

Ovram told them he’d barely begun to hint about the Third World War when the uncle began yelling, pulled him out of the chair, and called him a panicker. Obviously Vova had conducted an explanatory discussion with him, too. The matter took a serious turn. If Vova had decided to talk about such a ticklish topic with Frieda’s uncle, danger really was hanging over everyone that knew about the beginning of the Third World War.

Ovram, Lyusya, and Basya came home and began debating. Above all, they determined that Lyusya hadn’t just shared her thoughts with Frieda. She’d also talked with her pals at her shoe factory. And in line at the dairy story on Borshchagovka. And in the meat store on Podol—they had good pork, after all, so there was a lot of standing, you couldn’t keep quiet! And in the haberdashery on Kreshchatik. And on Bessarabka.
And at the hospital, when she handed in Ovram’s tests. And at the bank on Pechersk, when she paid the apartment rent. And at the bus stop in Darnitsa. And on the metro, but she didn’t remember at which station.

And, of course to Frieda, who told her uncle the tooth doctor and Vova. And that was it. Basya became agitated. All Kiev already knew. Including, of course, Comrade Shelest, first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine.

As for Chernigov, the Party’s regional committee knew long ago because the mother-in-law of an electrician who worked for the regional committee lived in the same building as Basya Solomonovna and had gone to her for advice about taking apart and reconstructing clothes. And Basya, it stands to reason, spoke with her about the Third World War.

And if that’s how things were, people knew in Moscow, too. The bosses in Chernigov and Kiev wouldn’t stand to keep this kind of information to themselves.

And the information percolated in the other direction. American spies were no doubt operating in Chernigov, where there were two aviation units and the largestworsted fabric mill in Europe was about to start operations. Not to mention all the spies located in Kiev. So in America itself they’d probably heard—from their Chernigov and Kiev spies—that Basya Solomonovna had figured out the plans for the Third World War.

But if everyone knew everything, that meant our people were forewarned and, it stands to reason, on alert. So the Americans, having lost the advantage of a sudden strike, wouldn’t dare to try anything. Basya Solomonovna saw no reason to blame herself. They could only blame her for one thing: that she was impeding the responsible authorities, who already knew, without her, what to do.

When she bid Ovram and Lyusya good-bye, Basya Solomonovna meekly said, “I’ll take the blame.”

Basya Solomonovna decided not to talk anymore with anyone since things had turned out this way and her tongue had proved so dangerous for her relatives. Dangerous because of her wretched, self-serving view of things.

She got back to Chernigov and kept quiet. She was quiet for half a year. Just “yes,” “no.” And she melted like a candle. Misha and Vera were
worried, though they didn’t have much time for that because of work and children.

Basya Solomonovna passed away in the beginning of 1970. And on April 22, nobody thanked Basya Solomonovna, not even posthumously, for averting the Third World War.
M ARIA GALINA (born 1958, Tver) is one of the most fascinating authors to emerge in the turbulence of the 1990s. A poet and novelist, she has also published more than ten science fiction books. Galina's writing contains strong elements of magical realism and shows consistent attention to themes of gender and the scientific world. The English version of her novel *Iramifications* won the 2009 Rossica Prize for translation.
She placed the clean plate with the others, small faithful allies standing side by side, but ready to die one by one. Sunlight was dancing on the glazed tile. Two extremely unpleasant spots had taken up residence right in the corner; how had she not seen them before? She glanced briefly at the window. The outlines of the branches were a little blurry, as if someone had traced around them with a damp brush, and a crow’s nest bristled in the fork of the tree.

Her hands weren’t what they used to be.

“The Tums were on the nightstand,” said Gabe.

She took a dishrag and began scrubbing the tile. The spots remained. If they weren’t scrubbed away, black mold would start creeping out from them. Supposedly it ate away at any smooth surface and just kept growing and growing.

“And now they’re not there.” She sensed hidden triumph in Gabe’s voice.

“So,” she said, “look on the table.”

“This is the table.”

She wiped her hands with a kitchen towel—the striped one, the white waffle weave was for dishes—and crossed the room. The sunlight followed her, bouncing across the linoleum like a springy yellow ball.

“I found it!” Gabe stood in the middle of the room, victoriously clutching a cylindrical package. “Can you believe it was in my jacket pocket? Why was it in my jacket pocket?”

“Oh Lord, Gabe, you probably—”

“You put it there. Yesterday. Now I remember. I said I felt sick all of a sudden yesterday at work and you—”
“Okay, me.”
“So why didn’t you remember?” said Gabe reproachfully.
Truly, she thought, why don’t I remember anything?
“I’ve already complained,” said Gabe, pressing his hand dramatically to his solar plexus. “I’ve had heartburn for two days already. Panayev shakes my hand and I just want to disappear. You know how much depends on him.”
“Good Lord, Gabe, I put it in your pocket. You could have taken it.”
“So you admit it.” Triumph sounded in Gabe’s voice.
“What did I admit?”
Time to wash the windows, she thought. Everything looks sort of grimy on the outside.
“There was a hole in the pocket. It almost fell through into the lining.”
“But it didn’t. Give it to me, I’ll sew it.”
“Are you kidding? I was supposed to leave a half an hour ago, while I was looking for the damned Tums.”
She went back into the kitchen, filled the glass with lukewarm water from the faucet, and carried it back into the room.
“Take it now.”
“Is it from the faucet?” asked Gabe suspiciously, looking at the water swirling with sediment.
“No, of course not. It’s been boiled.”
Gabe swallowed the tablet as he went, placed the glass on the ledge beneath the hallway mirror and lingered there, looking at himself in the mirror. He turned sideways, pulled in his stomach, and squared his shoulders. Rehearsing for Panayev, she thought. But all the same he bore a resemblance to a frightened bird. Even the sideways glance he threw at his reflection was birdlike; Iraida’s glance, all he’d inherited. And why were his shoelaces frayed again? I just bought them!
“Well I’m off,” said Gabe tentatively.
“Good luck,” she sighed, shaking her head quietly. “Tie your shoes. My goodness.” Gabe also sighed, bent down cautiously, and carefully tied his shoelaces into a bow. As he’d probably had to in school, poor thing, she thought. And she tried to summon the usual feeling of pity, but there was none. Only irritation.
“Well I’m off,” Gabe repeated.
“Okay, okay,” she answered absentmindedly.
The door banged shut, but she heard the elevator cables screech and the metal cage door slam. Then another groaning, almost a howling, began,
forced and lingering. The mirror reflected her face, with its dark, widened eyes and almost unreal features blurred by a patina. Is that me? She adjusted her hair, making the woman in the mirror do the same. Gloom swirled behind her.

He was too grand to allow the elevator to scrape heavily, straining up between the floors. And he didn't ring the bell; she simply felt His presence, like you feel the heat of a fire on a winter's night. Striding hastily to the door, she flung it wide . . .

. . . her hands were beautiful.

“Oh no, no.” Stepping back slightly, she moved her hands backward as if afraid they would give her away, but that made her breasts rise shamelessly, “No, this isn't good!”

“What do you mean, it isn't good?” He asked. The space around him seemed to be melting from the heat, and within that space everything was nice. “Is he gone?”

He stepped across the threshold and she saw His face clearly in the dark opening, as if it gave off an elusive light.

“He's gone,” she answered quietly and took a step backwards.

She'd met Him while returning from the store. Strands of limp greens protruded from her bag, the onion tops dangling plaintively like withered arrows of Cupid. Her shoe had ruptured at the seam. That was when he approached her.

It doesn't happen that way.
Yet he approached her.

Now he ran his palm along her neck and back, and she arched herself to meet his palm, like a cat seeking warmth.

The buttons on her robe had unbuttoned themselves; when did that happen?

“When will you finally make up your mind?” He asked.

She shrunk briefly. It wasn't the unknown that frightened her, but the complete certainty of it: Gabe's tears and hysteric's, the sickly smell of spilled heart medicine, Iraida's metallic voice in the telephone receiver. She shook her head, chasing away the vision.

“It would be good if your Gabe caught us,” He said. “Everything would be decided.”

He snickered quietly. “My goodness, Gabe!”

She felt wounded for some reason, yet sensed a strange excitement seizing her.
Gabe would fall on his knees and start to cry. No, he’d be ashamed to start crying at once. First his neck would turn red, and he would scowl and clench his fists. Then he’d fall on his knees and start crying. But he’d be ashamed to be crying, so he’d cover his face with his hands. His necktie would be crooked, my goodness! And he’d crawl toward her on his knees, on his knees. And she’d laugh and push him away with her bare foot.

My God, she thought, what an idea!

He whipped off her robe with one movement and she felt the rustle of her silk slip beneath his fingers. The broken strap slipped off her shoulder like a snake and she stepped back slightly.

“I’ll do it,” she said hastily, “I’ll do it.”

And even then she didn’t realize what she was referring to.

They missed each other only by a minute; the landing had two elevators. She ran her hands over her robe mechanically, from top to bottom, making sure all the buttons were buttoned.

“How was work?”

“How could it be?” Gabe replied wistfully “They’re downsizing, everybody’s downsizing. Who has any use for us? Nobody.”

“My goodness,” she noted absentmindedly, carefully draining a ladle of soup into a bowl.

“It all depends on the top,” explained Gabe. “A smart manager looks out for himself but protects his own too, fighting tooth and nail. How else could it be now? But ours . . . he has an uncle, but what is the uncle going to do? If it weren’t for Panayev . . .”

She turned toward the stove without even getting up from the stool.

“More soup?” “Are you listening?” “Yes.”

“You are so beautiful,” said Gabe, timidly. “Eat, eat. So what’s with Panayev?”

She had the vivid feeling of superiority a person feels who is carrying a secret, and even poor Gabe seemed more pleasant to her than otherwise.

“What did he say? And what did you say?”

“That’s what I’m telling you. Goodness, what are you thinking about?”

Truly, what am I thinking about? she whispered. She was sitting at a table beneath a striped tent. The sea was breathing rhythmically beyond the white railing, and an opalescent gold wine shimmered in her glass. The bottle sat nearby in a glistening silver bucket. She’d only seen that in movies, but it didn’t surprise her; everything was as it should be.
“How beautiful you are,” He said.

She smiled mysteriously, on the outside, and triumphantly on the inside; she felt weightless, like someone else, with a new body, where nothing ached or hurt or held her to the ground or called attention to itself, a body that could dance until it collapsed and make love until dawn on a sun-warmed beach.

There you have it, she thought, there you have it. It’s only like that in childhood, when of course everything’s going to be all right, when you have nowhere to hurry and nothing to wait for except the next wonderful thing, the next holiday that will surely come, because the grownups have said so, and they always keep their word.

The warm planks of the veranda smelled of pitch and wax, the sea curled around the pier, and the masts of the lightweight boats at the dock traced unseen arcs on the pale sky.

“Let’s go,” He said. “Let’s go quickly.”

He took her hand masterfully, as always, grasping her dark, tanned hand in his dark, tanned hand, and she stood up, filled with peace and happiness and joyous anticipation.

“I have a surprise,” He said. “We’ll go down to the dock; they’re already waiting for us.”

Gabe moaned in his sleep, and the midday sun around her contracted to a single blinding point that settled on her retina. She lay in the darkness, swallowing her tears.

When the frail second hand had made three circles, she removed the egg and placed it upright in the egg cup.

Gabe took his watch back and looked at it anxiously.

“If you’re late once,” she noted, “nothing will happen.”

“That’s what you think,” Gabe responded absentmindedly.

“Good Lord, Gabe, you’re probably the only one who still comes on time. You’re probably the only one who comes in at all. Next you’ll say the entire division depends on you!”

“These days,” said Gabe, “nothing depends on anybody anymore.”

“What about Panayev?”

“What about him? If he manages to get funding, then he’ll be... Panayev.”

“The money is running out.” She tried to make her voice sound as neutral as possible.
“You need to spend more carefully. Why did you have to buy this sausage?”

“I didn’t buy it. My mother sent it. Sausage and clarified butter, homemade and fresh.”

She tried to remember what she had dreamed, but she couldn’t. All that remained was a vague sadness for what was and what could be, even for her, but not here and not now.

“And what did you buy that for? That thing, what’s it called?”

“A negligee.”

“What did you buy it for?”

“It’s five years old already,” she lied coolly. “What, don’t you like it?”

“Sure,” said Gabe, limply, “I like it. But it’s kind of . . . It’s only for . . .”

“Yes?”

“Don’t wear it out . . . you could put it away for better days.”

“Where am I going to wear it?” she said, smiling ironically. “Outside?”

And added pensively, “What better times, Gabe? Now the Belousovs, there you go! They have better times! They’re going to the Canary Islands, did you know? Lily called me yesterday.”

“Why?” asked Gabe vaguely.

“Why did she call or why are they going? For a vacation of course. Why else?”

“The Canary Islands,” said Gabe. “That’s a cheap place. A vacation for the lower middle class.”

“We’re not even low middle, Gabe.”

Gabe pushed his stool back and stood, pulling on his jacket.

“You should find some work,” he said, already at the door. “Better than climbing the walls at home. You want me to ask? I’ll talk to Panayev.”

“In the fall,” she said hastily. “In the fall, all right?”

She was still standing like that, leaning against the door jamb, and when she heard the ring she only had to stretch out her hand.

“Mother called.”

She had just washed her face in cold water but she still felt her cheeks burning.

“Yours or mine?” asked Gabe.

“Yours, of course. Long distance isn’t too feasible right now.”

His hands, she thought, his hot fingers . . . how strange they didn’t leave burns.
“She’s very lonely,” said Gabe. “Be a little kinder to her, all right? I realize she’s been a little . . .”

“Just recently?”

Gabe shook his head reproachfully. “It’s since she began to get old. It’s been very hard on her. Do you know how beautiful she was when she was young? My father adored her; he wouldn’t let her lift a finger, he did everything himself.”

“No wonder he died before he turned sixty.”

She placed a plate in the sink and turned on the hot water. “What do you want? He had a heart attack.” Gabe’s voice sounded guilty for some reason.

“Your mother could be helping us. Even a little.”

“With what, bunny? Now she’s completely . . .”

“Come on, she’s not that poor. Did you hear her talking about how they lived after the war?”

“How long did they live that way after the war? Nothing was left!”

“What about that thing? Remember, you told me about it?”

“Oh,” said Gabe, “the lizard. But it’s a family heirloom, you know. From generation to generation.”

“If it’s a family heirloom, then it belongs to you too, no? She could have made use of it!”

“It’s for a rainy day.”

“What kind of day is this? We could have bought a decent apartment outright.”

“What if it’s not worth that much?”

“Then we could do some repairs. Or go on vacation.”

“To the Canary Islands?” asked Gabe spitefully.

“Or anywhere!”

“This is your idée fixe, right? Just wait, we’ll manage to get funds with Panayev’s project—”

“Is it really a Fabergé?”

I don’t know,” said Gabe uncertainly. “I think my mother . . . exaggerates a little. But it’s definitely valuable, that much I know. It’s the size of my palm. There’s a malachite base with a tiny lizard sitting on it the size of my little finger. The work is just amazing; it has tiny ruby eyes and a crown on its head. It might not be a Fabergé. My great-grandfather supposedly took it to a World’s Fair, from the Demidov Factory. They’re all from the Urals on my grandfather’s side.”
"It could be appraised," she said. "Maybe."

"My mother sort of had it appraised. During Soviet times. After my father died. But she wasn't offered much for it then, it was some museum. She decided to wait. It might be worth more now."

"She won't show it to anyone now."

"What do you want from her? It's a memory! It's a memory from her mother, my grandmother. My grandmother was also beautiful, even later on. I've seen the old pictures. It was Grandpa Vasya's wedding present to her. My mother said he was handsome and lighthearted. Their unit was stationed in Minsk, and he sent her and my mother to Kislovodsk. He told her he'd come soon, just wait... but he never did come. I don't know how they got out of there, but she kept that lizard like the apple of her eye."

"And?" she asked impatiently.

"She traded everything for bread, all her diamonds, her dresses, everything except that lizard! She was very fond of it. She kept one dress though, my mother said, a yellow silk. That's how he met her, in evacuation. She was standing in some line, either for ration cards or for registration. Everyone was wearing headscarves and dressed in rags, and she had her gloves on, with a purse and a yellow hat. That's when he approached her. He asked her, 'Excuse me, are you an actress?' She said 'No, I'm a musician, a violinist.' He said, 'Well all the same. Let's go.' And he took her for his wife. Although she had a child. He was a big boss. Very big. And again, such love they had. Again there were spas, and my mother had a German-speaking governess. And when they came for him—my mother was twelve already—my grandmother heard a car pull up to the entrance in the night. She woke my mother up, pulled a coat on her, slipped the lizard into her hand, and pushed her out of the apartment. 'Go up to the attic,' she said, 'and sit it out there, then go to Moscow to Aunt Liza, she'll take you in. Get there any way you can!' So Mama did. And they all perished, all of them, Grandpa Vasya, and her stepfather, and my grandmother too."

"So it's Grandpa Vasya's lizard?"

"Yes... it's all that's left. Isn't that strange? My grandmother loved her second husband but she still kept Vasya's lizard."

Gabe, she thought, was the child of a tragic age. A descendant of giants. Who would have thought then that it would all eventually end this way? With him in particular?

Outside the window a heavy fog clung to the glass, probably saturated with heavy metals and other filth. She went over to the window. Before
pulling the curtain she froze for a moment, gazing into the darkness. A lonely lamppost spread a dim cloud of light around itself, and in the shade of that light a lonely figure with a raised collar stood on the wet asphalt.

She made an involuntary gesture with her hand, either an invitation to come in or a demand to leave, but the man under the lamp didn’t move. Head lowered, he continued to stand motionless under the fine drizzle that was falling from the miserable skies.

“Who’s there?” asked Gabe behind her.

“Nobody.”

She lowered the curtain.

“It depends,” said the antique dealer, “on a lot of things. It’s not the materials, but the mark that matters. In the work. If it’s truly an antique, as you say—”

“Yes,” she said, “it is.”

“Still, if there’s no maker’s mark, you won’t get much for it. A decent amount, yes, but not a lot.”

“And if it’s a Fabergé?”

“That’s a different story. But how can I say for sure without seeing it? You understand.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Yes, I understand.”

A blue appeared in the breaks between the clouds—one so bright it was somehow unpleasant to look at it. She walked, her bag weighing down her arm, and kept turning around like a thief, to see if she was being followed and overtaken by the quick steps of a dark figure in a wide raincoat.

No, she thought. No, it just seemed that way.

“You don’t look so good.” Iraida gave her an evaluating glance. There was something birdlike in the way she turned her head, and her bones were also birdlike. The joints in her wrist seemed to be threatening to break through her dry skin. “At your age . . . stuck inside four walls . . .”

It would be better to tell that to your son, she thought. What’s the point in telling me?

“A woman should know how to keep busy and not let herself go. It’s important to a man that his wife stay attractive, you know what I mean? Did you bring the potatoes?”

“Yes.” She pulled a heavy package out of her bag.

“The farmer cheese?”

Iraida squinted nearsightedly, examining the date on the container.
“Gabe said your mother was beautiful,” she said, surprising herself.

“Yes,” said Iraida. “She was beautiful. People used to turn and look at her on the street, I remember it myself. She was lighthearted, always laughing, like a glass of champagne instead of a woman. A lily of the field. She always wanted someone strong to lean on, and look how things turned out for her. At that time strength was unforgivable.”

“But—”

“It’s terrible to be strong, my dear. Lightning strikes the highest trees. Her entire family . . . They weren’t little people either, they were laureates. And my father’s family . . . The resorts they visited! My stepfather fed us black caviar by the spoonful! And what’s left? Not a thing!”

“What do you mean, not a thing?” she repeated mechanically.

Iraida gazed at her from beneath her heavy eyelids. Her gaze was also birdlike, sharp and cold.

“Not a thing,” she said, enunciating. “The next time you buy farmer cheese, look at the production date. My liver, you know. And only buy fresh for Gabe; they say it’s genetic.”

Bitch, she thought, old bitch. You’re afraid of the strong; that’s why you hold on to the weak. Are they any better?

But aloud she said,

“All right.”

“Did you see my mother?” Gabe stretched out in the uncomfortable chair with delight.

She nodded silently.

“How is she?”

“The same as always. She’s limping a little, but not complaining.”

“She never complains,” agreed Gabe. “She’s an amazing woman. Made of steel! Why do you think she has arthritis like that? It’s from the typewriter. After she buried my father, she started taking work home. All these manuscripts, piles of manuscripts.”

“Do you think that’s good?” she jumped in. “To be made of steel? Is it worth straining yourself like that? What does she need that lizard for, tell me please? At her age? She could go to a spa, even live there year-round, and why not? Really!”

“She’s already lost everything,” said Gabe. “And not just once, but twice. Her home, her family. Since then she’s tried not to put too much of her soul into anything. To always keep something in reserve. Just in case.”
“No wonder I don’t see her grieving too much over your father.”

“Leave my mother alone!” said Gabe angrily.

“Fine. But Gabe, you’re her son. How can she not love her own son? I realize I’m an outsider, a daughter-in-law, but you! She won’t even lift a finger to help you!”

Gabe’s lips trembled noticeably.

“Enough,” he said. “Did you hear me? Enough!”

“My folks at their age hobble to the train every week to send us all these packages, and what else do they have besides high blood pressure and a postage stamp of land outside the city? But your meek and mild father catered to Iraida Yevgeniyevna his whole life with nothing in return.”

Gabe had his mouth open and was about to say something, which gave him an amazing resemblance to an offended carp, but she had already grabbed the garbage pail and stepped out into the stairwell, slamming the door.

Poor Gabe, she thought with a victor’s generosity, he knows full well his beloved mother isn’t terribly attached to him. And never was. But it’s embarrassing to admit it. How could it be, his own mother? That’s why he’s so hurt.

He was standing on the landing near a broken window. She started from the surprise; the dark shadow fell across the tile floor and fell at her feet when He moved.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Have you been crying?”

She realized then that she had indeed been crying, or at least had been ready to start crying, and now she said, smiling through her oncoming tears, “No.”

“Well, enough,” he said drily. “Enough. Let’s go away from here!”

She shivered.

“Yes! Now, right away! Why not?”

Because I feel sorry for him, she thought. Because I still don’t know where you live. Who knows why?

His embrace made her gasp. The landing, which stank of cats, seemed a stairway to heaven, encircled with ivy.
Everything suddenly became as it should be. My God, she thought, if it could only last . . . please, just a little more!

“I’ll take you away,” He said. “Very soon. Hold on a little, all right?”

She gave a sob, wiped away her tears, and said, “All right. But now, go!”

“You won’t cry anymore? You promise?”

“Yes,” she said, “Yes. I promise.”

“What took you so long?” asked Gabe.

“It just did. I ran into Nina Ignatiyeva.”

Gabe sat, pursing his lips in offense.

“So you were badmouthing my mother just now, and she called.”

“So?” she asked warily.

“And she’s decided to sell the lizard. On her own, you understand?”

“I see! For no apparent reason? Is it a blue moon?”

“She asked me to sell it, turn it into hard cash, so to speak. She’ll give us a third.”

“Why a third?”

“She wants it for a rainy day,” explained Gabe. “Maybe us too . . . who knows?”

“No time like the present.”

“You’re dissatisfied again,” said Gabe with regret. “Why are you always dissatisfied?”

She began to feel sorry for this singular trinket; the legend would be gone, leaving only money behind, another matter entirely.

“She said,” continued Gabe meanwhile, “she can’t take it with her. And then . . . You know, bunny, she thinks there’s someone watching her.”

“What do you mean, watching her?”

“Oh course, she likes to embellish. But she’s sure there’s someone lingering all the time, the same person, right under her window. She’s nervous, you know.”

“Maybe call the appraiser to her place?”

“How would she know he was a real appraiser? And not some faker? I’ll take it quietly to the antique shop; it’s more reliable than looking for a random buyer.”

“They won’t cheat us?”

“It’s individuals that cheat you! And then you can’t find them. But the antique shop is right there, in one place.”

“So much money,” she said pensively.
“Yes,” sighed Gabe. “I think we’ve never held such a sum in our hands. Although she might have exaggerated its value a little, so let’s not get our hopes up too much, all right?”

“But we could at least go somewhere? To the sea, to see the world, like normal people?”

“I don’t know, bunny. I think we should hold on to it for a rainy day, fix up the apartment. If we spend it, what will be left?”

“Memories,” she said. “Life.”

“But all this is life. Just wait, we’ll make a go of the project, and then we’ll start living. It’s not small change! In the next office they’re always flitting over to Paris—or not Paris, but what difference does it make?”

“Let’s not nickel-and-dime ourselves! Let’s allow ourselves something at least once in our lives, Gabe, please!”

“What can I do with you?” said Gabe.

The glittering thoroughfare was unbelievably bright; there are no such colors in the real life. Or are they? The weightless white buildings descended steplike to the sea, the waves washed over each other in dovelike purple and blue, and olive fronds fluttered in the wind like silver waves. Nighttime restaurant lights, lanterns in the trees, and ship lights in the harbor are the finest jewels in the world, the toys of giants, too grand to belong to a mortal.

And time floated above everything, unhurried, like a cloud.

Gabe looked spectacular in his new suit and carried himself with such dignity. That’s what it means to feel yourself the master of life even for an instant. She was wearing something weightless and cream-colored that set off the sheen of her tanned skin.

How tenderly her bracelets jangled each time she reached out her hand toward her goblet.

The telephone rang.

“Yes?” she said, pushing the receiver to her ear with her shoulder, unable to release the glossy flyer. “Yes?”

“Excuse me,” said a deep, powerful voice, the voice of a man who did not know refusal, “May I speak with Gabriel Borisovich?”

“He’s not in yet,” she said. “May I take a message?”

“This is Panayev. I called him at work but they said he didn’t come in today. I’ve just come from the Minister’s office. Tell him I’m very sorry, but . . .”
“Yes,” she said, more quietly.
“Please tell him not to be upset. I will definitely try. When all this chaos settles down . . . But it’s difficult now. I told him from the beginning there was practically no chance. But I will try. All right?”
“Yes,” she repeated mechanically.

“Boy am I tired today,” said Gabe.
She looked at him seriously, was silent a moment, then asked, “Where were you, Gabe?”
“At work,” said Gabe, surprised. “Where else?”
“Really?” she said coldly. “You—”
She fell silent.
“No, wait. What do you hear about Panayev’s project?”
“Everything’s moving right along,” said Gabe authoritatively. “The assistant’s on leave, but he’s coming back this week and—”
“Gabe,” she said. “Panayev called.”
“Really?” Gabe looked past her, “And—”
“It was a no-go from the beginning, Gabe. A flop.”
“That’s what he said?”
“That’s what he said. And that you knew it too. From the very beginning.”
“Bunny . . .” said Gabe uncertainly.
“Don’t touch me! You haven’t even been going to work! I called! Nobody’s seen hide nor hair of you for at least a week!”
“But I—”
She turned away in silence.
“Bunny,” repeated Gabe imploringly. “You know how difficult everything is right now. You think I’ve been just loafing? I was making connections, looking for orders. That entire story with Panayev; what am I supposed to tell people? That we don’t have any chance at all? Any day now I’d have managed to get an order.”
“Don’t hold your breath!”
“No, just listen . . . I can see you haven’t been yourself recently. First you’re laughing, then your eyes are glistening and you’re crying! You think that’s easy for me? But what can I do?”
He fell silent.
“My mother must have sensed this, with the lizard. It’s true I hoped we could put that money away for a rainy day, you know? But what the hell—
let’s take a vacation! When else will we have the chance? Where do you want to go? To the lousy Canary Islands?”

She gave a sob.

“No . . . I don’t know.”

“If we’re taking a vacation, let’s go first class. The French Riviera, a five-star hotel, cognac, champagne, lobsters, riding a white horse, all of it. Call the travel agency, okay? See what they have coming up.”

“I already . . . here are the brochures.” She wiped away her tears.

“You sure are quick,” said Gabe disapprovingly.

She threw a glance across the dresses laid out on the bed; not a single one would do. They were all acceptable; these days anything you wear is acceptable, but they weren’t quite appropriate for the Riviera. Buy something there? Of course Gabe would probably not approve, but it would be a trifle compared to the rest of their expenditures. You didn’t even have to buy something in the designer stores there; digging through the merchandise was its own pleasure.

The sweltering lane was crossed by the sharp shadows of striped curtains, the splashy shop windows striking to the eyes, a refreshing wave of air conditioning flowed from the open doors, and hanging over it all the smells of wine and the sea, and fruit, and decaying algae.

The doorbell rang.

“My goodness, how fast he is, she thought, hurrying to the door.

But it wasn’t Gabe.

“Not now,” and she laid a trembling palm on His chest, pushing Him back from the threshold. “Please go away. Gabe will be back any minute!”

“I saw him.” He made a peevish face. “He was in such a hurry, your Gabe, splashing through puddles.”

He threw a glance over the colorful pile on the bed. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going away,” she gasped briefly, “with Gabe, to the Riviera, or to Italy, or France, or wherever!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” He said coldly.

“Why not? I’ve wanted to for so long.”

“I told you to wait a little. I’ll take you away myself!”

“Oh!” She looked at him absently. “But that was just a conversation, a game . . .”

She felt her legs being doused with a wave of cold air.  
“What do you mean, he’s not going?” 
“Just that. You’re going with me. I won’t be taking you away for two lousy weeks, but for your whole life! Do you understand?” 
“But I . . .” she faltered. “I don’t want it to be for my whole life.” 
“That’s not what you said before.” 
“It was a game!” she exclaimed in despair. “Don’t you understand? A game!” 
“That’s what you think.” 
She put her hand to her throat to quell a spasm. 
“How could I . . . What do I do now? Please, go away, go away!” 
“I don’t think so,” He said coldly. 
She was listening to the sounds of the elevator, the screeching of the cables and the forced bang when it stopped at their landing, which was why she didn’t hear Gabe running up the stairway, jumping like a boy and flying over the stairs. 
And also because he didn’t open the door with his key, but pressed on the doorbell and held it until she ran to the door, holding her hands over her ears, unable to bear the bloodcurdling mechanical shriek. 
Gabe stood at the threshold, gasping for air in despair, which made him look again like a fish out of water. His tie was crooked. 
“What?” she asked quietly. 
“The lizard!” Gabe exhaled finally. 
She looked at him silently. 
“I’d just come out of Mama’s entranceway. He attacked me. He hit me, from behind, on the back of the head, and I—it was in my jacket pocket, the breast pocket . . .” 
He slid along the wall, covering his face with his hands, forcing out through clenched fingers, “The lizard is gone. What am I going to tell her?” 
“Her?” she screamed hysterically. “Tell her! What does she have to do with anything? You’re a nobody,” she cried. “My God, a nobody! You can’t do anything, nothing at all! No matter what you try it falls apart in your hands. No wonder your entire life your dearest mother—” 
“Be quiet!” he wailed. 
“You be quiet! My God! I ruined my entire life—for what? For this here, this squalor—” 
“Be quiet!” he wailed even more loudly, no longer resembling a fish. “I wanted the best. I wanted, for you—”
"For me?" she gasped again. "If you’d been thinking of me, I’d have . . ."
She fell silent again, as if an unexpected realization had suddenly thrust her words back into her mouth.

Then she turned around, brushing the crying Gabe with her shoulder, which made him slide even further down, and flung herself inside. The room was empty. The bright pile sprawled mockingly over the bed.
She flung herself toward the balcony. She knew somehow with utter certainty that He was on the balcony.

He was standing and leaning his elbows on the railing, looking down at the garbage-strewn courtyard as if something very interesting was happening there.
She grabbed him by the shoulders and began shaking him with a strength she hadn’t expected from herself.
“Give it back!” she screamed. “Give it back . . .”
He turned around and tore himself out of her hands with unexpected ease.
“Give what back? What’s with you?”
“You’re out of your mind,” He said with distaste. “I didn’t take any lizard.”
“You!” She latched on to him with the mechanical persistence of a praying mantis. “It was you, you started all this because of that thing, that was why you tracked me down! Because of the lizard! You were following Gabe! When did you find out about it? Back when she took it to be appraised, right?”
Gabe was standing in the doorway to the balcony, his face completely white.
“You—” he barely managed to say. “What is this? Who are you talking to, for God’s sake?”
“Who?” she burst out laughing hysterically. “Him, of course. There he is. Let me introduce you. Ask him where your lizard is! Ask him!”
“You’ve lost your mind,” He repeated. “Let me go.”
Gabe was suddenly also nearby; she didn’t know how.
“What are you doing?” he said timidly. “Calm down. My God, I didn’t think . . .”
“Yes!” Now He was yelling, his face contorted, not like Gabe’s, but differently. “Yes! I took it! It was for your sake, you fool! Everything was for your sake! I told you . . . Let me go, wench!”
Gabe’s arms were suddenly quite near; he was trying to drag her away, the fool.

And then He tore himself out of her hands and made just one movement.

“Bunny,” murmured Gabe in surprise. Then he flapped his hands awkwardly, gave an awful, plaintive wail, tumbled over the flimsy railing, and plummeted downward. He kept waving his hands and legs, as if swimming in thick gray water, going further and further down, to the very bottom. Pressing her hands to her throat, she saw him hit the asphalt and even seem to bounce, like a rubber ball. Only then did she turn around, and the same awful, plaintive wail that Gabe had emitted, choked her, because there was no way for it to come out.

The balcony was empty.

So was the room. Stumbling, she crossed it and headed into the kitchen, then into the hallway, where Gabe’s jacket with its awkwardly dislocated sleeve was lying, like an empty cocoon. The key was protruding out of the lock. She threw herself at the door in one despairing movement.

It was locked.

From the inside.

Locked from the inside.

She went back the way she had come, in silence, through the completely empty apartment, glancing under the sink in the kitchen, under the couch in the room, and even in the wardrobe which, freed from the pile of colorful rags, was mockingly empty.

Then she sat on the bed and propped her head up with her hand.

Ring!

She dashed toward the door and turned the key in the lock, breaking her nails.

Nobody was there.

Only then she realized it was the phone on the stand under the mirror that was ringing. Keeping a hand on the wall, she went over to it.

“Is that you, my dear?” Iraida’s voice sounded in the receiver. “Where’s Gabe?”

She made an indecipherable sound.

“He promised me yesterday he’d stop by. I called a locksmith; it’s always better when a man does these things, you understand.”

“He . . .” she forced out with difficulty. “Did he . . .”

“Forget? Gabe? Although he does seem kind of lost recently, don’t you think? Is work not going well? He’s proud, though; he won’t mention it for anything. Be a little kinder to him, honey.”
“Iraida . . . Yevgeniyevna,” she realized she could still speak. Not for long, but she could. “Gabe told me . . . you were planning to sell the lizard . . .”

“A lizard?” Iraida said coldly, surprised. “What do you think I have here, a terrarium?”

“No, the Fabergé . . . the jeweled one.”

“God bless you, honey! Where would I have jewels from? You’ve been hinting around lately. I don’t know what you’ve gotten into your head, but if you think my mother left anything behind, you’re greatly mistaken, my dear. After they went to prison I was panhandling on trains! My mother gave everything she had to buy off the investigator; my stepfather was caught embezzling big time. What she didn’t give away, they came and took when they confiscated everything.”

“What do you mean, embezzled?” she said with difficulty. “But he, he was a big man, a factory director. It was for being an Enemy of the People . . . ?”

“Yes, exactly, the one who was a factory director. Except he wasn’t the director of the factory but the accounting department. He was a vile man, I’ll tell you. He pulled my mother into his machinations; she was ready to do anything for him.”

“But Gabe told me—”

“Gabe told you what I told him. And not even him, but Boris, his father. A family should have a legend, you know? It’s we women who can look truth in the eyes. A lizard, my goodness! Where did he get that? Although I do remember him reading Folktales from the Urals over and over. I can’t stand that pseudo-folklore. Are you sure everything’s all right with you, honey?”

The balcony door slammed. She raised her head, listening cautiously. No. The wind.

“Yes,” she said calmly. “Everything’s all right.”
ALEXANDER GENIS (born 1953, Ryazan) is a writer, essayist, literary critic and broadcaster who emigrated to the USA in 1977. A shrewd and observant writer, Genis pioneered the trend of cultural “essayism,” combining a lyrical narrative with methods used in cultural studies. His numerous award-winning books reflect his interest in bi-culturalism, and frequently compare American and Russian society. His works have been translated into a number of European languages as well as Japanese.
The funny business started as soon as we crossed the river. Greeting us on the opposite bank of the Hudson was a gang of puke-green birds with hooked beaks no less imposing than my own. Their voices, however, were somewhat shriller. To this day I have only seen these characters in cages. But these fellows were flying free, enjoying their hard-won liberty.

“And what are these called?” I asked the natives, hoping not to seem a fool, even though I did anyway since the birds were obviously parrots.

“Well, according to the Audubon,” said the local amidst a shimmering flock “they are ‘monkbirds,’ but this is quite the exaggeration—look how they’ve bred!”

The parrots settled in this coastal town not too long before I did, but in much more dramatic circumstances. Nobody really has the story footnoted and documented, but the most popular legend of these creatures starts with a daring escape from an exotic animal store, where they were doomed to while away their days amongst silent iguanas. With an active temperament, quite unlike the lizards, the parrots wanted their freedom and attained it. The founding fathers of the present colony opened their cage and flew out the window.

“The important part,” explained an old-timer, “is that the escape occurred in the summer.”
It’s true; in August, New York and its environs differ little from the parrots’ home. Without their proper understanding, they were brought from South America to North, and things looked similar outside the window—the heat, the humidity, the currency devaluation. Unsurprisingly, the parrots flourished. They ate what they could, fighting off sparrows for crumbs and gulls for minnows and pigeons for everything else. What they lacked in size they made up for in number and unity of purpose.

Having proven their place in the pecking order, it came time to stake a claim on some real estate—preferably with a skyline view. After all, they were New Yorkers now. The parrots seized a beachhead on the Hudson, occupying our own Edgewater, NJ. And then came autumn.

In the beginning, one has to surmise, the birds thought it would be over soon. They figured the cooling was temporary and stoically tolerated the weather’s tomfoolery until snow fell. For the parrots the Ice Age began overnight, leaving them unlike our own ancestors who had generations to shop, no time to gradually acclimate themselves.

All in all, the parrots had only two weeks. They could not even return, shamefacedly, to the pet shop, since it had gone out of business—not without their help, one might add. Standing at the threshold, or perhaps windowsill of extinction, the parrots performed an evolutionary leap. They discovered the nest.

They initiated their foray into architecture with a fortress. Woven out of spiky branches to repel cats and hawks, the nest resembled a termite hive suspended in the sky. Unapproachable in appearance and indeed it was sturdy, roomy and subdivided. It was up to building code, with corridors, reinforced exits and ventilation. Critically, it was warm inside. We know this because the parrots survived the dreadful winter, of which they had not a notion in their tropical home. In the spring the first generation of freeborn US parrots hatched, and by fall there were new nests.

I migrated to Edgewater at the most crucial of times for my motherland. Soviet power was breathing its last, and my guests from Moscow believed that the Russian people would not survive without it.

“The poor Baltic republics,” they wriggled. “What will they do without Moscow?”

Instead of answering, I simply pointed to the parrots’ nest.

“What is Russia without the Crimea?” exclaimed another.

We went to see the birds, who knew a bit about equatorial nostalgia.
“And what of people, the moujiks? How will they work without a collective to organize them?” asked a third.

There really wasn’t much to say, so I just took them to see the nest. In any discussion, the freedom-loving parrots were the debate-ender. It’s hard to argue with nature.

The guests were numerous; Gaidar was imposing reforms, the factories were shuttered, prices rose, wages were not paid, and I was visiting the parrots so often that the neighbors got suspicious.

Then the Edgewater parrots attracted the attention of the scientific community. Amazed by the parrots’ evolutionary progress, the scientists decided to gather them up and study them in captivity, hoping to learn a thing or two about property development, I suppose.

Armed with good intentions and nets the ornithologists showed up in Edgewater for a safari. They were met by angry townspeople. Forming a human chain around the threatened nest, they took turns discouraging the invaders all through the night and into the morning. They would not permit the birds to be enslaved once more after they had proven their mettle so convincingly. The economic-biologists retreated, but the locals lost their faith in science and did not trust any further interest in the parrots. My Moscow guests were suspect too. The natives only came around after I explained about Gorbachev and Yeltsin, glasnost and perestroika. Their Westernizing was known and liked in America at that time.

The years pass but the parrots remain the same. They are just as social and, well, loud as ever. And there are a lot more of them. A flock of a hundred parrots is an imposing sight for a man witnessing it on a hangover morning—especially in the winter. One particularly indulgent friend of mine almost swore off drinking when he saw the birds take flight from a snowed-in suburban baseball field. I brought him back to his senses when I reminded him that it was the pink elephants he feared and not green parrots.

I understood the marvel best myself when I made the acquaintance of a certain bird by the name of Hans. My brother picked him up as a fledgling when he fell from his nest out of pure agitation, something which happens to adolescents from time to time. As soon as his leg healed, Hans made my brother’s home his own. He flew around wherever he wished, returning to his cage only to sleep at night. During the day Hans craved social intercourse and would not leave people alone for
a minute. He took a shower with my brother, drank beer with him out of a bottle cap, and ate pea soup while acrobatically balancing on the rim of the bowl. Having learned to expect only good from life, Hans greeted every stranger with joy. He was happy to see the postman, the neighbor, and in blessed ignorance, the neighbor’s cat. Upon meeting me he perched on my bald spot, familiarly stuck his beak in my ear and left a friendly, whitish pile on my shoulder.

Hans may have only weighed a few ounces, but he had enough curiosity in him to fill a fully-grown Einstein. He wanted to know everything, taste it and take it apart. He scraped the keys off a laptop and the numbers from a cellphone. The world was a challenge to Hans, but instead of trying to understand it like me, he attempted to change it like Marx. With more success I might add, since everyone liked Hans. Nobody ever heard an ill word out of him, because unlike a trained parrot, he did not speak.

Meanwhile, clouds gathered over his kin. On the whole, the citizens of Edgewater appreciated their exotic and deafening neighbors. In this ecosystem they had no natural enemies except for the power company. Evolution had continued, and the birds were now nesting on top of utility poles. Despite being conveniently smooth, the transformers were pleasantly warm and emitted a frisson of electric charge.

“Each nest,” announced the lineman, “can cause a fire and must be destroyed, without mercy or delay.”

“Don’t even think about it before the chicks hatch,” was the town’s answer, as they formed the human chain again.

The parrots’ opposition ended in complete victory . . . for the birds. The nests remained on the top of the poles while the power lines were especially well insulated (against pecking) to prevent the immolation of the parrots and Edgewater. The town was looking stranger than ever, and we started to get tourists. They come doubting and leave converted. The birds inspire a belief in a brotherhood of the clever, stretching across species towards liberty.

“If the crisis,” the economists pontificate, “is a failure of nerve in the market, then fiscal health is just a collective illusion fed by a simple tautology: the future is the sum of our belief in it.”

The parrots are not too worried about it. I get this with my own eyes—and ears, definitely ears. Last fall the birds built a nest right under my bedroom window. In the rosy dawn they won’t let me sleep as they cackle
over their plans. In the evening they don’t let me watch television as they discuss the events of the day. But I don’t complain. The birds are sacred in our town. Especially now that the Dow is down, unemployment is up, and people are turned out of their nests in this winter that just won’t end.
ANDREI RUBANOV (born 1969) was a successful businessman in the post-Soviet “new Russia.” In 1996 he was convicted of fraud and imprisoned, but after three years was exonerated and released. His book, *Do Time, Get Time*, which documented his experiences in prison, was praised by *The Times* (London) as “an involving mediation on Russia, avarice and the nature of liberty.” He has published several highly regarded novels.
I love gonzo. It’s fun, and it shakes off the useless, ponderous freight of meaning from reality like cigarette ash from the sleeve of a suit. After all, Will Self shot up heroin onboard the UK Prime Minister’s plane. Who are those prime ministers and other heads of state anyway? Those politicians, public figures? Billy Clinton “smoked, but didn’t inhale.” And Barack Obama, according to hearsay, is no stranger to stimulating substances. People forgive them for it. They are fallible, they stumble—they’re just like us. Like everyone else.

The term “gonzo” was coined by Hunter Thompson. The guy who came up with the best title for a novel in the 20th century. If the greatest title in world literature is *The Idiot* (you have to be an idiot not to read a novel with a name like that), Hunter Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a solid runner-up. The book is devoted in its entirety to gonzo.

My understanding of gonzo is that it means putting up appearances at any official place or event, while in a completely unofficial condition. Take Boris Yeltsin for example—a great man, he was a consummate master of gonzo.

An interrogation prison is a very official space. They kick you with their boots for any lapse into an unofficial condition. Still, we were rarely sober. I devoured anything and everything that came my way. Except for heroin. The whole system of sticking cold mean steel into your flesh always seemed tasteless to me. There are guys who manage to masturbate while half-strangling themselves with a noose to boost the effect. You can just picture what it looks like to someone else. It’s the same with intravenous maneuvers—all those tourniquets and cotton balls disgust me.

I did smoke opium on occasion, though. It’s the same drug, but in a less concentrated form. If I didn’t have hashish, I smoked opium. If I had hashish—and I almost always did—that’s what I smoked. But sometimes opium, too, along with hash. We mixed stuff together: we swallowed stuff, sniffed stuff, shot stuff up, puffed stuff into each other’s mouths, you name it. That’s how we lived.
The idea was not just to get wasted, but to get wasted and keep up the momentum. Anyone can smoke marijuana and collapse onto a couch. But if you try to smoke a bit, for instance, and then take some Benadryl, then some tar, and then all night long, with breaks for superstrong tea, filch sugar by shoving fifty pounds of it into canvas tubes, each one ten feet long and no thicker than a garden hose (so it would go through metal bars)—now that’s when you see the strength of a man. The last one to fall down won everyone’s respect. Whoever didn’t know how to get high properly, whoever got stoned too soon, or started giggling after two tokes of mild weed, or slumped down in front of the TV with puffy eyelids—those guys were gradually removed from the center of gravity. To load yourself with a monstrous dose and still look absolutely sane, to act, to keep a lookout, to play every game imaginable, and then excuse yourself to your buddies and sleep for thirty hours—that’s how we lived.

By the third year I started getting bored. Friends got their sentences handed down one after another and were sent off to the camps to do time. I was sick of everything. They say the third year is the hardest—then you adjust, and you can stay in for five, for seven years. I was beaten down by a dull sadness. Especially when I fell asleep or woke up. The transition state between sleeping and waking was always hard for me to bear, and at the same time it beckoned me. I think that when you pass over from one world to the next, you experience both this one, and the other one, most intensely.

Opium helped. It replaced a lot of things for me. I guess you could say that I wanted to eat, sleep, breathe fresh air; see trees, flowers, or grass; swim in the sea; I wanted clean sheets and cold beer—but instead I had opium. On the other hand, it wasn’t really so much about wanting those things anymore, either. After spending two and a half years in brick holes of all shapes and sizes, I forgot what flowers and air looked like, not to mention cold beer. I had left all that far behind. In a situation like that it’s more honest and sensible to live with what you’ve got in the given circumstance, and not to think about what you haven’t got. I’m not talking about opium here. That’s a necessary high, is all. If you’ve got opium, great; if you don’t, to hell with it. I never really liked it, it makes you sweat. On top of that, on that day I really wanted to sleep. Twenty hours before I had knocked back some Aminazin and walked around feeling like someone was banging the back of my head with a heavy pillow—bam, bam, bam. Just when I was about to take a nap I had to lend a hand in a shakedown to take care of a breadcutter who had been caught playing favorites. Someone had gotten too small a bread ration, and someone else got too much. I don’t like getting even like that. I’m too soft. I’d rather give away my own ration to someone unhappy with theirs.
than to see all those faces contorted with hunger. You can deal with one or two, but when there are twenty—and all of them look just alike, like pieces of caramel stuck together—and half of them are there just for the ride, to watch someone get punched out, and you're totally wasted and getting eaten by lice—well, it's hard on you.

So you smoke opium. We finished at five A.M., then smoked. And at nine I got summoned. I hardly had time to drink my tea.

The guard didn't notice that I was high. He was drunk himself, and mixed up Russian and Mordvinian words. Even if he had noticed, he wouldn't have said anything. He was one of us, but fattened up. One of the guys who lives by the "you treat me good, I treat you good" principle. He took me to the next building and locked me in the sardine tin. Walking and physical activity of any kind weaken the effects of the drug on the brain. On the other hand, when you're immobile, especially if you squat down by a wall for a smoke, it'll come back on you, double. In any case, it kicked in again, topped with the buzzing in my brain.

Then they stuffed the sardine tin with more of us. Being a decent guy, I had to stand and free up about ten square inches of space. A Georgian dude who still had some fat on him squeezed up next to me. Hairy and gloomy, he was panting and sweating like mad (it was about 95 degrees). Suddenly overcome with fellow feeling, I started up a conversation, trying to be funny by calling him "buddy" and regaling him with innocently ridiculous phrases, like, "How about a good glass of cold white wine right about now? Or better yet two, or let's say three, and then a dash of cognac to top it off . . ." The Georgian wasn't at all offended. Even if he had been, it was all the same to me. I wanted to cheer him up. The opium had placed me inside a cozy bubble, and everything that wasn't actually me glittered from without, trembled, seemed to nod at me with a friendly wink, and didn't pose the slightest danger.

A minute later—or half an hour (I wasn't aware of time passing)—a new batch of naked or half-naked miscreants was shoved in. One of them was stripped down to his underwear, plus his shoes: winter boots with their tongues lolling out. I had to take in a deep breath of air to give my own rib cage a little more personal space. The gloomy Georgian was shunted aside, and now there was a hefty Asian guy with an expressionless face next to me. I had never seen a 6' 5" Asian, so I said, "Where you from, big guy?"

"Vietnam," my neighbor said, without any accent.

"You're pretty tall for a Vietnamese."

"You people all think we're short," the giant said politely. "But we're not. The short ones live in the country. I'm from the city, from Saigon. There are lots
of things you don’t know about us. We’re a strong country. There are 80 million of us. We have our own oil, and our beaches are some of the best in the world.”

We chatted. The giant turned out to be mature and intelligent. He was a veteran of the war with the Americans. As a fourteen-year-old boy he had killed the Yanks with Russian howitzers. He received medals of honor. After he had fought, he had a choice: to go to his relatives in America and work in a laundry, or to go to the USSR to study engineering. He opted for the second. Sometimes he regretted it. I remembered Once Upon a Time in America and asked about the opium dens. The veteran smiled shyly.

“Sure we smoked. After every battle. It was good to smoke opium after a battle. Not every day, though. After we won the war I almost never smoked. Well, maybe once a month.”

“And here in Moscow? Are there opium dens? Real ones? With couches and curtains? And a silent old man who gives you a massage, while you’re out?”

“Of course there are. We’ve got everything here.”

“How do I get into one?”

“You don’t. You’ll never find them. Members only. Chinese for the Chinese. Vietnamese for the Vietnamese. Russians don’t understand opium. Russians love heroin. But heroin is garbage—it’s laced with other stuff, impure and too concentrated. Opium is tar. You smoke opium just a bit at a time, then you rest, drink some tea, and go to sleep.”

“I see,” I said, taking another deep breath. “Hey, I’ll bet it’s as hot and humid in the jungle as it is in prison, right?”

“No. Much hotter. But the air is fresh there. Here—”

“Here,” the Georgian piped up from somewhere off to the side, “there isn’t any.”

Another hour, or five minutes, went by, and they led me away.

I was friends with the investigator. If you meet someone every week for two hours over the course of two years, you get on a friendly footing with almost anyone, whether you want to or not. I think that sinners who are burning in boiling oil for all eternity suffer terribly at first, but with time they get to know the devils stoking the fire pretty well. “You treat me good, I treat you good.” I felt some sympathy for the investigator. He wasn’t a bastard, and we had agreed on everything already long before: I sit down, he writes up my case. I take my road, he takes his. Occasionally—most likely after a dressing-down by his superiors—he was out of sorts and all officious when he came in. That’s how it was this time. But his problems seemed insignificant to me through my opium haze.
The first thing I did was dash over to the window. In the Matrosskaya Tishina detention facility the windows of the interrogation building face onto freedom. You can glimpse scenes that thrill a detainee—in particular, girls in skirts passing by.

My tormentor blamed me for not giving any testimony and complained about the difficulties of establishing “the truth of the case.” I smoked a filter cigarette, sat down on my butt, and launched into deliberate, verbose B.S.

Opium is a very creative drug. I spun out the B.S. with finesse, resorting to inspired turns of phrase and phonetically complex terms.

“We don’t know and we never will.” This is what the ancient Romans said about truth. Correct me if I’m wrong, Inspector. Which segment of the ultimate truth constitutes your “truth of the case”? Is not this ultimate truth jurisprudentially predetermined? Do you believe that the testimony of witnesses and the accused will get you any nearer to the truth? They are rocks that drag you to the bottom of the ocean of ignorance. Time will pass, and you will piece together a charge out of it. With your logic you will link up subjective pictures of what happened at some point. My lawyer will compose his own compilation. Mind you, the pictures are subjectivized repeatedly—first through the mind of the one interrogated, mine in this case, and next through yours. What relation does this bear to truth? If truth is partial or discrete it loses its credibility—

“Your eyes look kind of red,” the Inspector said with concern, cutting me off.

“That happens sometimes,” I said. “The lice give me a hard time. I’m in jail for nothing, it’s so humiliating it brings tears to your eyes.”

“What do you mean ‘for nothing’? What about tax evasion?”

Oh, taxes you say! That’s an old story. It was told in a certain very well known book.

I remember some of it by heart. It is written thus: “And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, ‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?’ And when he said, ‘from others,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Then the sons are free.’”

I hadn’t slept for two nights. I was a wreck. Added to that, I was in jail for the third year running for something I didn’t do. Why couldn’t I pull off a gonzo on that July day? Why couldn’t I taunt that frowning, buttoned-up uniform of an officer about his system that stank of army boots and pounded the daylights out of living people with a sledgehammer (jump out of the way, you live; a second too late, too bad for you)? I had no rights but moral ones. I couldn’t even answer the calls of nature like a human being. In the place I defecated, there was a special hole in the wall, so that a representative of the law could observe unhindered the state of my anus—what if I pull a gun out of there and attack someone?
So I just kept on playing the fool and mouthing off.

Let us turn now to Luke, Inspector. There we read: “And they began to accuse him, ‘We found this man corrupting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that he is the Messiah, a king.’” And after that it was “crucify, crucify Him!” . . . That’s why they did it, actually—because of money, you see? All of them were circling around him, throwing their bait out. And how do you teach us about whether to pay taxes or not? They provoked him! But the publicans, the publicans . . . he was surrounded by publicans, or tax inspectors in modern parlance. They were outcasts in their time. They were despised in the eyes of society for their manifold wicked practices. Calling a person a publican in those days was like calling someone a “reeking douche bag” now.

Of course, at some point the investigator guessed that I was raving, but he didn’t let on, good boy. He could easily have turned me in and gotten me thrown into solitary. And when I realized that he knew, I felt ashamed, and at the same time that the effect of the poison was wearing off. But I had to play out the scene to the end.

I had to step up the pace.

So it winds up with Jesus arriving, and they all surround him! The refrain is the same in all the synoptic gospels: “publicans and sinners.” They represent a special group of inveterate apostates. One of them, Matthew the Levite, son of Alpheus, wrote down the events about nine years after the death of Jesus. He created the first canonized Gospel. You understand? The first author of the holy book of all Christians was a tax inspector! Everything’s there in Matthew. He did understand a lot, and he revealed the clash of various financial interests. Everything must be clearly determined, said Jesus, and you take only what is set apart for you. More than that, more than what is set apart, is not for you. You find the same thing in Luke: “The publicans also came to be baptized and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them: ‘Collect no more than you are authorized to do.’” Of course they had it in for him then! He was troubling the waters, rocking the boat, he held forth on the subject of taxation, as a result of which the tax collectors dropped what they were doing and followed him in droves, mouths agape. And in the city of Jericho one Zacchaeus, who was none other than the chief publican, also dropped everything, burst out in sobs, and set off after him! You can just imagine, Inspector, what would happen today if the chief tax inspector of, say, Saratov, with the rank of general, joined a new faith, abandoned his career and family, and set off after his guru? A very dangerous fellow, this Jesus, was what they thought back then. He could damage the system. So they drag Jesus to Pilate, and Pilate’s sitting there like the king of the roost:
the governor-general of the Roman Empire, I’ll have you know. He’s got a direct line to Rome. And along they come, some two-bit story, 30 didrachmas, and some ragamuffins and ragtag beggars. Naturally Pilate didn’t understand a thing. The financial system he had been used to from childhood was orders of magnitude more complex and superior. What’s their problem, he thought, what do these aborigines want, why are their eyes glittering so? When everything is fixed up and organized, like in Rome—roads, the postal system, the police—their problems will go away naturally. What exactly do they want? Sanctioned liquidation? Execution? For what? A rabble-rouser? King of the Jews? The Son of God? That might well be. What else? Propaganda leading to massive tax evasion? The collapse of the taxation system? Possible paralysis of the fiscal mechanisms? Now that’s something serious. Order an investigation. And so on and so forth. To sum it up, they all considered themselves to be intelligent and farsighted people, and they killed him . . .

The investigator nodded.

“I get the picture, Andrei,” he said. “They won’t kill you, don’t worry. You’ll do your time, and that’ll be it. Now, go with God. Back to your cell, that is. But to conclude, I want to give you my own little example from history. Once upon a time there was a man who also knew how to love, like Jesus Christ. Only he didn’t love people, he loved money. He killed for it. Right and left. All the big-shot killers, criminals, and marauders considered him a monster. He collected the money of his victims, and soon he became rich. Then he hired assistants, businessmen, and accountants who multiplied his capital. He subjugated an entire megalopolis. He loved the fame, he always dressed to the nines. For a long time the smartest brains couldn’t figure out how to bring him down. But eventually they did. They turned his account books upside down and inside out, they checked and double-checked his numbers, they found mistakes and inconsistencies . . .”

“Al Capone!” I said triumphantly. “Al Capone!”

“They counted and calculated, and found $215,000 worth of unpaid taxes between the years 1924 and 1929. They tried him for it and he got eleven years hard labor. He served his whole term, got out, and lived for only seven more years. Then he died of syphilis. But the Russian criminal code is far more humane than the American one. Here you only get five years for tax evasion.”

Well, so be it, I said. I’m in good company. Jesus Christ, Al Capone—and me, a poor sinner.

“You know what? Go to your cell, sinner. There’s something wrong with you.”

“With me? No, Inspector. Everything is fine with me. Couldn’t be better.”
Dina Rubina (born 1953, Tashkent) is one of the most widely read Russian authors alive today. Her work has been translated into 12 languages and adapted for radio, stage, television and screen. Her novel *Here Comes the Messiah!*, a dark yet comic depiction of life in the West Bank, is available in English and was nominated for the Russian Booker Prize.
Here’s the thing. So many times I’ve wondered why a naked person standing on a platform in a studio looks so respectable, as if she were doing something important, but no sooner does she step out into the hall to the fuse box—when a fuse blows—than she’s not a model anymore, she’s just a naked woman, a former electrical engineer. A naked person is truly a negligible creature.

The fuses are at the studio where I pick up extra cash life-modeling some of the time. Artists are a simple people, great people, but their hands end in brushes. The slightest thing happens and it’s “Raya!” Especially since in my past life I was an electrical engineer.

As soon as the light goes out I slip off the platform into the hall, grope my way to the box, and a second later all’s well. Then Avi Cohen—that’s the director of the studio, such a dear old baldie—gives me his arm, helps me back up onto the platform, and says, “Az anakhnu mamshikhim—so, let’s get back to where we were.”

Fifteen rubles—I mean shekels—an hour. That ain’t hay. Twice a week, three hours at a crack, figure it out. Before his army, Sergeant and I ate on that—on my naked ass.

They pay Israelis more, of course—twenty-five. But Avi Cohen promised me starting Passover to slip me another ruble, I mean, shekel.

Apart from me, though, I don’t get it. These artist types—ours, theirs—they’re all poor. Especially in the winter when the tourists don’t come so there’s no one buying pictures. Naturally, they make money any way they can.
Sashka Kornyakin from Voronezh comes to us to draw. His connection to Israel is through his ex-wife, a real sweet guy.

Here’s the thing, he grinds flour for matzoh in a small private factory in Mea Shearim for six rubles an hour—shekels, I mean. He hurt his arm a little while ago, his right one, and that blood just spewed, he says. He missed three classes. It’s okay, though, he turned up all cheerful. Now, he says, let them try to prove they don’t add the blood of Christian boys to the matzoh. Russians here live like Jews in Russia.

We also have Fabritsius van Brauver, a sweetheart of a guy. A great big muzhik, a blond. A Dutch Jew. Actually, he knew he was Dutch, but he only found out he was a Jew six years ago when his mama started dying. Then she ceremoniously informed him that he came from a family of Marranos—you know, the ones who converted to Christianity five hundred years ago but kept being Jews in secret, even though the Inquisition didn’t exactly pat you on the head for that.

So here’s his mama explaining to him who he is. And since they lived together—like me and Sergeant—she makes him promise after she dies to sit shiva and then shake a leg to Israel.

That’s what someone can have dumped on him in one instant. Just imagine this innocent Dutchman facing these crazy Jewish circumstances. He sat shiva and came and it’s okay, he’s getting along. He likes it. He just can’t manage the Hebrew, he’s always using English. He himself is such a big strong Dutchman, he says, “My father’s a goy.”

He works as a guard at the Wailing Wall.

Then there’s Avi Cohen, a fairly well-known avant-gardist, always wearing some ratty sweater. An official from the tax administration showed up at his house a few days ago pretending to be a buyer. Those are their little tricks, you know . . . So when they’d agreed on a price, instead of a checkbook he pulls out his I.D. But this doesn’t throw our Avi. He gallantly takes this guy by the arm and walks him over to the refrigerator. There, on the nearly empty shelves, lies a crusty piece of cheese on a saucer. The guy from the tax administration stands there and stares at that tired little piece and goes away without saying a word.

As Avi says in cases like that, “Az anakhnu mamshikhim!”

As for me, I’ve always looked well-off. Even now I look like I’m well-off, even when I’m working on the platform. I have a lifelong rule: never owe anyone anything. You usually sleep much better that way.

A few days ago in the supermarket I was short thirty kopeks—I mean
agorot—and some muzhik, a Moroccan obviously, paid it. A hundred percent
Moroccan, no doubt about it.

I’d filled my basket—oh, I had good shampoo, a navy blue polka dot cup
I liked, ketchup, which Sergeant loves (he was home from the army for Sat-
urday)—and this, that, and the other. . . . When I got to the cash register I
suddenly realized I’d left my checkbook at home. And I didn’t have enough
cash. The checker at the register is so sweet, she says, What you do is, you
get rid of what’s less important. I’m thinking—all right, the cup, to hell with
it, the dietetic crackers, to hell with them, but the shampoo and ketchup,
no. She says, well, you’re still thirty agorot short.

That’s when this muzhik—you could tell he was obviously a Moroccan—
he’s standing behind me, and he takes out his change purse and says, “How
many gveret do you need?”

That throws me for a loop. What do you mean? I say, motek, thank you,
of course, but don’t you worry about it, I’m very well-off. And he counters,
Oh come on, there’s nothing to discuss!, and he throws the change down.
He’s a classic, a hundred percent, just like they paint them in the Russian
papers: gold chains around his neck and wrists . . .

So what I’m thinking is, why is he doing this? Is he trying to humiliate
me? Or is he just in a hurry and I’m holding up the line. Or maybe he’s just
decent muzhik and I’m blowing on water . . . After that . . . little bit of milk.

Certainly not. In principle that whole incident doesn’t affect me one way
or the other. It’s funny that what’s really been eating me is that written un-
dertaking not to leave the country!

As if I were just about to apply for a visa. First of all, what exactly have
I missed seeing over there? Secondly, Sergeant and I have better ways to
spend our money. But it’s been eating at me! I lie awake at nights and it
gnaws at me, and gnaws. What on earth is this, I think? What kind of place
have I come to?!

Although I should be objective about it. What do they base themselves
on in the police? The facts. But what are the facts? Was I cleaning for that
lady? Yes. Did she lose her diamonds the way she wrote in her statement?
Damn if I know, I guess she did.

At the interrogation I say to the policeman, “Look at me. I even look
well-off. What do I need her diamonds for?”

And he looks at me kindly and says, “Listen, give back what you took
and you can go wherever you like.”

I say to him, “I have a higher education, I’m an electrical engineer.
Do you know how many muzhiks like you I had under me at the plant?"
And he says to me, “I don’t have time to study our ‘korot kham.’ Give
back what you took from the gveret and you can go free. But if you’re going
to be stubborn, we’re going to suggest you take a lie detector test.”
That actually made me laugh. “Go ahead,” I say. “Bring on your lie de-
tector. That’s really going to scare a Russian Jew. Only that sweet little old
bitch has to take the test, too.”
This is what he wrote in my file: She agrees to take the text on the
“mekhonat Emet.” All-l-l right.
Then it turns out my little old lady is refusing to take the lie detector
test. Because of her high blood pressure.
Then I start to remember our heart-to-hearts. Sometimes I’d be all
bowed over swiping a rag under the couches and cupboards, and she’d be fol-
lowing me around and bemoaning the fact that we Russian Jews had aban-
donned the great traditions of our people. She’d be stepping on my heels
giving me orders about where to wipe and constantly trying to talk me into
returning to my traditions.
Well, needless to say, we’re pretty lousy on the traditions. Sergeant and
I came out pretty confused about the whole thing in general. As soon as we
got here, our neighbors gave him a tallith. They knocked at the door one
morning, walked in, and ceremoniously draped it over his shoulders. Ser-
geant was very touched.
“Look, Ma,” he says. “Look at the pretty towel they gave us.” So as far as
traditions go, it’s only fair.
After the interrogation I suddenly remembered how right before this
incident she’d been trying to show off her diamonds to me. “Look what riches
I have!” she says. But I was late for the studio that day, and I was in no mood
for diamonds, especially someone else’s.
And when I remembered that . . . Well, let’s just say it all became crystal
clear to me. And I felt like just asking her, What about the great traditions of
our people? Just asking—hey, what about those traditions?
So I went to see her. She has a smallish house in Khar-Nof. I rang at the
gate, as usual. Her grandson came out on the porch, a boy of about sixteen,
real good-looking, wears an earring.
“Get out of here,” he screams, “you Russian thief!” Yeah, except he said
it “Khushum thiekh!”
Well, I don’t give a damn about that. I’m invulnerable to words like that.
I’m basically not an emotional person.
He also let the dog off its leash, but that’s completely stupid. First of all, I’m not afraid of dogs, thank God, I’m not a local, and anyway the dog knows me. She ran up to the gate overjoyed, wagging her tail.

I have to admit, I did pick up a stone. A nice hefty little stone . . . Then I thought better of it. I might break their window. Then I’d have to pay for the glass myself. So I went away.

The main thing is I’m not telling Sergeant anything. I’ve never kept him posted on my troubles. Ever since childhood my Sergeant’s been a thoughtful kind of a boy. His thoughtfulness is why I never got married, so as not to give him extra reasons for thinking. I just realized it wasn’t in his best interests. And now I could care less about marrying. I’ve seen my fill. They may offer you the same glass of water, but what the price of it is and whether or not you’ll ever live to get the glass . . .

It’s a sin to complain. Sergeant brings nothing but official commendations back from the army. A little while ago they even rewarded him with a radio. I ask him, “Well, are they going to give you some other kind of material incentive?” And he says, “They did.”

“What?”

“The general had me sit next to him at dinner.”

“Did you smack your lips?” I ask.

“No,” he says. “The general did.”

Just a few days ago they suggested he take a test for some kind of officer courses. He did. The army psychologist calls him in. “You know,” he says, “judging from the results of this test, with your world view not only should you not take officer’s courses, you shouldn’t stay in the army. Go on, in two months you can take another test.” Sergeant says to him, “Do you think the world is going to give me a chance to change my opinion of it in that time?”

He bursts out laughing and says, “I’d never take you for an officer. But I might for a friend.”

Sergeant’s my first. I mean, my private first-class.

He’s supposed to be promoted soon. But he has no interest.

He says, “I don’t feel like it.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Well, you’ve got to steam off your stripes,” he says, “and then sew on new ones.”

Well, that’s how I live in my not-leaving. Oh well, I don’t really need to. Only every morning I run to the mailbox so that I won’t miss a summons from the police.
And here in the studio something’s come up. Our Fabritsius, our van Brauver, contracted with a gallery in Amsterdam to exhibit our little fraternity. Now, the pictures have to get there, but there’s no one to take them. Sashka Konyakin is grinding flour for matzoh; Passover’s right around the corner, it’s his busiest season. And Fabritsius is busy handing out kerchiefs to the ladies at his post by the Wailing Wall and can’t get away either.

So well, they say to me, “Why don’t you go, Raya? Why don’t you take the pictures? We’ll all chip in for your expenses and tell you what to do.”

That was all I needed. How many times had I told myself I don’t care, I have no plans to go anywhere, and the slightest inkling and I feel like I’m going to die I want to go to Amsterdam so bad. I feel like Amsterdam is exactly where I’ve been wanting to go since I was a little girl.

I tell them, all well and good, I’m always ready to lend you my friendly padded shoulder, muzhiks, but at the present moment I’m on the books at the police over a little matter of some stolen diamonds. Weil, I told them about the old crone, basically.

My artists were literally blown away. They got on my case and swore at me for not telling them. I have a lifelong rule, I reply, never to owe anybody anything. You usually sleep much better that way.

Avi Cohen actually grimaced at this story, as if he’d bit into something sour. “Visa-shmiza,” he says, in Hebrew, of course: Eize shtuyot!

He went to the police with me and sat in the supervisor’s office for a long time. And I don’t know whether he signed some guarantee or something else, but they gave me a three-day pass.

Avi and I came out on Yaffo Street and each bought a shuarm. The sun was shining, the crowd was bustling, it felt so good. And he tells me, he says, “It’s nothing, Raya, you see? Ba-Israel is just like home, and the main thing you have to know is that there’s always somewhere in ba-Israel where people will take care of you.

“You know,” he says, “maybe that old lady’s crazy? Maybe her grandson’s been poking around in boxes and she thought it was you?”

“You know,” I tell him, “I wish she and her grandson would just take their boxes and their crazy ideas and go away.”

Avi finishes his shuarm and says, “Az anakhnu mamshikhim.”

Do I really have to say something about Amsterdam? What’s there to say, anyway? I walked around there for three days thinking about Fabritsius van Brauver the whole time. This is how it is, I think, when a man’s fate
whisks him away. And I tried to picture our flying Dutchman by the Wailing Wall handing out kerchiefs to the ladies.

What’s bad was my English had rotted away. I want to say literally two or three sentences worthy of a human being and flick-flick... all of a sudden my Hebrew becomes very strong. The main thing is you get unconsciously irritated at whoever you’re talking to: there he is, see, the stupid jerk, flapping his gums, and not a word in ancient Hebrew.

I earned my pay and collected the money for the guys. The gallery owner bought three pictures right away and took five more on commission. I had to take the other four back with me.

I order a taxi to the airport. A Dutchman comes, he smells good, of perfume, he’s very elegant. “Excuse me,” I say in English. “These pictures I have probably won’t fit in the trunk.” “Oh,” he says, “nonsense. Don’t worry, miss!” He takes the pictures back to the trunk, which won’t shut, so he gets out a hook of some kind from somewhere and latches it on, secures it, gets in, and we’re off. All very quick, precise, and elegant, the foreign snakes.

I tumble out of the plane at Ben Gurion Airport at two in the morning with all my gizmos—paintings, suitcase, etc. I rush over to a flat-fare taxi. “How much to Jerusalem?”

The stringbean standing there, a gold chain around his neck, is chewing gum and looking at something far away.

“A hundred shekels.”

“What?” I ask. “A hundred shekels flat? For that kind of money I could take that taxi over there all the way to my house!”

He stopped chewing. His face turned to stone and he spit the gum out to one side.

“What!” he shouts. “A hundred shekels for a taxi to Jerusalem? Come on, show me who’s going to take you for that kind of money! I’ll give him a hundred shekels myself if he says he’ll do it! Get in and don’t give me a hard time!”

“Twenty,” I say.

“Listen up, you batty Russian! Eighty and let’s go!”

“Twenty,” I say.

“Are you making fun of me? Do you think you’re back in Russia? Sixty, and say thank you!”

I get in his car. We wait for more passengers, but there aren’t any. Ten, twenty minutes. I jump out and scream, “That’s it! I’m taking a taxi. There’s an empty one waiting.”
He grabs me by the arm and shouts, “You’re quitting on me?! Me—a Jerusalemite—you’re quitting on me! You want to let that stinking Tel Aviver make the money!”

He points his finger skyward and says with passion, “Listen to me! The planes are in the air! They’re going to be here soon. All the people. Those are our passengers. Do you get it? Sit still and wait!”

I’m so tired and drained after everything that I don’t even notice I’ve fallen asleep. As I open my eyes it’s already growing light and we’re sailing over a cloverleaf into Jerusalem. On the left, Ramot spreads out in circles and rocks as if it were under the wing of an airplane.

I’m looking at the driver—Lord, how could I not have recognized him immediately! Of course! It’s him—gold chain on the neck, just like they paint them in the Russian papers. We’ve driven up to my building, I’m getting sixty shekels out of my purse and putting change—three tens—into his open hand.

He’s taken aback. “What’s all this?”

“Remember?” I said. “You made up thirty agorot for me in the supermarket. I’m a well-off person and I don’t like to owe anyone anything. That’s my lifelong rule.”

“Oh,” he says. “So that’s you? I didn’t recognize you.”

He helps me drag out the pictures and carry them up to the third floor. He’s standing there watching me unlock my door.

“Listen,” he says. “Since that happened, maybe you’ll invite me in for a cup of coffee?”

“Oh no,” I say. “I have no intention of feeding your local folklore with a story about Russian prostitutes.”

Well, he starts going down the stairs, very slowly. On the lower landing he stops and watches me dragging the pictures into my apartment.

It’s that Sashka Konyakin of ours who works big, whereas Fabritsius, he’s just the opposite, like the minor Dutch painters.

Yes . . . He stands on the landing and looks up at me. I’ve forgotten the last time someone looked at me like that.

Anyway, I’m only thirty-nine, and I guess I’ve still got my figure. But it feels to me like I’m three hundred and eighty. I was a student back in the age of blotting paper. A little while ago a student sociologist stops me on the street. “We’re conducting a flash opinion survey by age groups,” he says. “What group do you belong to, the fifty to sixty group or the sixty to seventy group?”
“I belong to the one hundred to one hundred and twenty group,” I say. And I look at his silken cheeks. Well, he doesn’t get humor at that level. He says, “Nut,” and walks away. So you can look at me or not, it has no effect on me. I am basically not an emotional person. You usually sleep much better that way. I bring the pictures into the apartment and shut the door.

In the evening Sergeant comes home from the army, and we’re sitting, drinking tea with Dutch candies. And all he can say is, “Come on, tell me! Tell me about Amsterdam!”

“Well,” I say, “there are houses that look like a drunken model builder cut them out with scissors and glued them together.”

“Would you like to live there?” he asks.

I don’t say anything. I’m thinking, tomorrow I have to stop by the police station and report I’m back or else they’ll lock me up and throw away the key.

But Sergeant, well, he’s like a little kid. “And where,” he asks, “where would you like to live?”

When you come right down to it, I don’t want to live anywhere. I’ve already lived my fill, so there!

But I have Sergeant. And it’s in his interest that I do, Az anakhnu mamshikhim!
Yuri Miloslavsky (born 1948, Kharkov) emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1973, and now lives in New York. The critic John Bayley praised him as a successor to Gogol, describing him as “of all the post-1970s Russian writers, the blackest in humor, the most streetwise, most nihilistic and disillusioned.” Urban Romances, a hard-hitting collection of stories and sketches depicting Kharkov’s delinquent street-life, is available in English.
When they knifed Shamil on the Tyurinka the cops didn’t come anywhere near the place for a week. Instead (in threes) people from Gorky Park, and Pushkin and Lermontov streets, muslin mourning bands ‘round the sleeves of their shirts and suit jackets, came looking for who did it.

They rolled a bottle of vodka under Shamil’s coffin, and a pack of Dzhebel cigarettes. Shamil didn’t smoke Dzhebels, that I remember clearly. One Sunday he was going by the Dynamo restaurant with his girlfriend Zorka, Ukhan and I were standing near the fence. Shamil sent Ukhan to the Dynamo to get a pack of Feminas from the doorman (extra-long Bulgarian cigarettes with a gold tip; red box with some gal smoking). Shamil gave a cigarette to Zorka, lit up one himself, and handed one to me. I tossed my own half-smoked stub behind me and took a Femina.

Ukhan asked, “What about me?”
“Tough shit!” Zorka smirked.

They knifed Shamil after the dance at Shevchenko Park. Zorka yelled at the top of her lungs, not understanding what she was saying: Shamily, Vlady, why didn’t you kill him? Tell me who laid his hands you, I’ll tear his heart out myself, but you’re not going to tell me, my Vlady, you’re not going to say anything, you won’t tell me, why won’t you tell me?! And nobody thought to ask me.
Everybody knew Shamil was murdered, but no one knew a thing when Manon hanged himself.

Manon was about thirty-five.

There was a wood-burning stove in my late aunt’s apartment—no central heating or gas lines had been installed in what used to be the monastery’s main building for housing pilgrims. The brown rings heated up slowly, cemented in from underneath. Each ring had three filaments. First the rings would darken, without changing color. Then the middle rings would swell scarlet, glow bright gray. But only when the heat was highest would the outer rings turn a deep cherry. And that was it for them—and that was the color Manon was: his neck, his ears his cheeks, his hair—all the same color, no distinctions.

Manon didn’t do anything—he didn’t want to. He’d stand by the gates of his house number fifty-four in that bright blue coat—he snatched it off an actor from the Kiev Drama Theater, so he still looked like some dude out of the Sputnik era, a village thug with patch pockets.

Now you’ve got to have a black coat, fitted, tailored, with lapels like on a suit jacket, with three buttons and slanted slash pockets, no vents.

In winter you can wear a “Moscow” jacket with a straight collar.

Spring-summer: a pinkish or light gray raincoat with belt and epaulets—from the Friendship factory in China. But Manon would stand there in that Kiev actor’s coat, and the toes of his shoes weren’t pointed.

“My toes’ve got frost bite,” Manon was saying. “They hurt, they hurt, they wanna flirt. You’ve got this buddy. And your buddy decides to treat himself to labels like ‘Made in Whoreland,’ and our Liova will help his buddy. Right Liova?”

And Manon stretched out his hand and grabbed hold of the passing Liova Kantorovich—the one who can get you Italian loafers with hollow aluminum heels. Manon sort of embraced Leo pressing his palms on Leo’s shoulders—and Leo’s eyes filled with tears, he smiled and tried to embrace Manon too—you do it to me, I do it to you—but he couldn’t get his cham-ois-gloved hand up to Manon’s shoulder. And Manon pressed down on him and sang:
Ya gotta have money to get a good lay
I've thought a lot about that one
I figured that stealing was the easiest way
To dress like someone who had some.

That happened once in a blue moon.
Manon would stand by number fifty-four and not say a thing; no one knew how things were going for him—they didn’t ask. You have to be careful about that—talking with Manon. It was hard for him to approach you, your language, your life; he’d dump you in a minute. And he’d start fooling around in that special way of his: he’d lock his fingers together and smash his fists into the shoulder of the guy he was talking with. His interlocutor would run off, Manon would guffaw, but keep on hanging around. He wouldn’t say another thing. Once in a while, guys his age would come over from other sides of town—one guy from each neighborhood. They’d stand in a quiet bunch, smoke, and spit on the ground. And when they’d left, behind in the darkness remained the big, white, filterless stubs—no one here smoked western cigarettes.

I didn’t know what Manon was up to. Skull from the Park would start in, “That Manon is something! Professor!” Any time you met him he’d be bragging. “I went boozing with him yesterday.” Once Skull came over to our neighborhood to play chess with redhead Mishka Abrasimov. Skull saw Manon from the other side of the street, all the way from number fifty-four, and yelled, “Hey Manon! How ya doin’, you fuckhead!” This was meant with due respect, even fear—but Manon turned and faced us, looked us up and down and said, “Come here, jerk.”

Skull started to cross the street and go over to Manon. He walked over and came up to him. Manon said something to him (we couldn’t hear it), and then Skull laid down at his feet, face up, and opened his mouth. Manon unbuttoned his fly and pissed in his mouth. Then he stepped on Skull’s stomach and jumped on him. Skull went like this, “Ugh—ugh!” We heard that, and we were about to scatter while Skull was sobbing, “How can you treat your friend like that? Your best friend!” Well, with that word “friend” Manon kicked Skull in the teeth. Skull didn’t get up from the pavement, his hands gripped his face, and he rolled over on his stomach. Manon wanted to do something even worse to Skull, but some neighbors were leaning out of the windows and shouting, “Call Nadka! Call Nadka!” Nadka was Manon’s invalid
mother. So they led her over to the neighbor’s window—Manon’s was blocked up with plywood—and she yelled, “Son, son, come home, son. I’m awful scared, I can hear your daddy.” She wasn’t fooling, and she wasn’t trying to help Skull, she hadn’t the vaguest about him—she’d been hearing her husband’s voice—Manon’s dad—who, they say, was was almost home when they knocked him off with “cultures”—sections of pipe wrapped in newspaper. She and her son Manon were drunk at the time and didn’t even come out. It was only a year later when Nadka started hearing a voice she hadn’t heard then. “You cunt, I’m dead!” Then Nadka decided she wanted to save her husband. But Manon wouldn’t let her jump out the window—he kept her in the room with her leg tied to a table. So the neighbors had untied her and taken her over to their place, and she was yelling to Manon that the two of them should try to save his old man. Manon was scared that the neighbors wouldn’t keep her away from the window. He screamed, “Don’t move, Nadka!” and raced up to the apartment. Skull got up, twisted up his big gut, pressed his forehead against the wall of number fifty-four and puked out Manon’s piss.

But that happened once in a blue moon, because Manon hardly ever reacted to outsiders. All his meetings were taking place inside himself, he’d talk with them himself—I myself saw it one time I passed close to him. He was having a chat with someone inside himself, laughing and arguing, barely audible. And he’d sort of shake his fists and wave his hands, convincing the other guy.

Manon had a golden ring on his right index finger. He’d started wearing it a long time ago, before his fingers swelled up—so you could tell what they must have looked like ten years ago. But now he couldn’t soap that ring off, and I think he forgot that he had the thing on him. Otherwise he’d have sold it for three bottles of booze. He wouldn’t have bothered to haggle with Liova Kantorovich, who was a gold scarp.

People think that a drunk will kill for booze. It’s not true. It often happened, of course, that both of them—murderer and victim—had already drank a bit; the murderer drank without knowing he was going to kill, the victim unaware that he was drinking his last. I’ve seen murderers and victims when they were still together. I heard the sound of the knife when Volchok stuck the patrolman—the knife flashed out and then remained motionless in the outcurving of the ribs. The blade was only
about eight inches, but its voice split into three: the gash in clothes, the
gash in the skin, the scraping of the cartilage.

The patrolmen drank more at headquarters than Volchok did, they
had plenty of booze as gifts and confiscations. Every night-shift they’d
arrest about a liter and a half for every patrolman, but for Volchok, every
ounce cost money. During the day he worked at the “Miner’s Light”
factory, but at night he’d mug a few, emptying their pockets covered his
personal expenses. He didn’t kill the patrolman because he was drunk,
but over his sister—his sister Katya had TB, chronic TB, she’d done well
in school.

I’m looking out the window now, and I can see Katya. She’s wearing
a green cardigan. But then I see all the dead like that—walking the
streets at night, hurrying to my place.

The patrolmen caught Katya when she was coming home from a craft
club where they taught her how to make green cardigans. They felt her
up and decided she was okay, took her back to the station and gang-
banged her until blood ran from her mouth. Then they threw her out of
the station in a snowdrift, green cardigan and all.

Manon drank so much he couldn’t kill anyone. Anyone who drinks
that much becomes docile and confused; he’ll ask people for strange little
odd sums—nine kopecks, twenty-seven kopecks. Sums we find strange,
but the alky keeps his own accounts, financial and spiritual, and those
accounts are sad and fussy. The twenty-seven kopecks get clubbed
together with the two two-kopeck pieces he got from the phone. That’s
thirty-one. So you just need nineteen, and that’s a glass of wine at “Wine
and Soft Drinks.” In a few hours you’ll get the price of another glass
together.

Perhaps I’m mistaken, but what all the killers I know possess isn’t
strength or spite, but an ability to carry things through, they could make
a decision. But a drunkard is no decision-maker.

So, Manon stopped making decisions and didn’t kill anyone—because
he was drinking.

At first he drank at home with his Mother Nadka. But Nadka stopped
drinking pretty soon—she just wasn’t up to it. From morning to night her
man was down at her window screaming, dying, and she could do nothing
to help him. Her son didn’t hear the screams and wouldn’t believe her.
He wouldn’t take the plywood off the windows, didn’t let her go outside.
Nadka got tired; she sat quietly under the table, naked, tied to the cross bar. She ate and slept there, too. She’d almost decided not to sleep at all; she was ashamed to have been so loaded when her old man died, but she couldn’t help it, and she trained herself to catch his death cries in her sleep. So now he couldn’t complain: “Your husband’s being killed, and you’ve fallen asleep.” After all, he couldn’t know that she was asleep, since Nadka could hear his voice.

Manon would drag his mother out from under the table, sit her on a stool, and set a green glass in front of her—though it was no fun for him to drink to the constant refrain, “O son, my dear, he’s out there screaming, let me loose, I’ll just take a look. I won’t do anything, I’ll be good, I’m just a damned whore…”

Manon paid as little attention as he could; he’d sing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Pot belled, snot picking} \\
\text{Fucked-up—a real gas.} \\
\text{Sticks his nose up your behind} \\
\text{And tongues your pimply ass}
\end{align*}
\]

And his mother would keep on bugging him while he got more and more noisy.

He’d drink at home until the new neighbors from downstairs would come to curse him out about the noise. Manon was sitting at the table alone, Nadka in her place, accidentally untied. “Son, dearest, he’s really out there screaming.”

The new neighbors were wearing T-shirts and crew cuts, they didn’t know who Manon was. They just threw the door opened and bellowed, “You shit, what the fuck are you making all this noise for?! We’ve gotta get to work tomorrow, morning shift, you shitty sponger.”

“Nadka, sic!” said Manon.

And Nadka jumped out from under the table at the head neighbor, ripped off his T-shirt and hung on his shoulders, sinking her toothless gums into his Adam’s apple.

The neighbors retreated to their own floor, to sleep until the morning shift, but Manon went off to drink in the courtyard with guys he hardly knew who wandered by. He didn’t want any interference, or anyone to stop him from singing about the fat snot-picker. The year before, he
would have eaten the neighbors alive, kicked the shit out of them, but now he drank and couldn’t kill over booze.

Once we were sitting in the Cafe Youth—Vic from the machine-tool Technical College and our chicks. At Cafe Youth they served coffee with liquor—the coffee in white pots and the liquor in a little carafe, just like in Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius. We plied our chicks with this Baltic drink—trying to take advantage of them—and smoked one cig after another.

And then Manon appeared on the yellow plastic circular staircase—the cafe was in the basement—in his heavy coat, a white silk scarf, a cloth cap down to his eyes and no gloves. He came halfway down the steps, stopped and looked around. Other people look around a few seconds, but he took at least a minute, and no one in the cafe recognized him except me and Vic. Just a few people who were sitting at triangular tables facing the entrance vaguely noticed his arrival, assumed it was a country bumpkin who had wandered in by mistake. Manon just looked on and was about to leave, but I pressed through to him and tugged at his sleeve. Manon started, then turned his eyes toward me and gave me a drawn out smile. “What’s up, kid?” I dragged him over to our three cornered table, though it didn’t really seat four. He came, didn’t ask any questions; but he bumped into some athlete’s table, a boxer apparently.

An exchange of looks.

Tall, tow-haired, a gaze of polished stone, the silver badge of a Soviet “master athlete,” and Manon’s whistling past, free of everything that kept the young athlete living comfortably in the world and forced him to wear the badge on his ribbed sweater. Athlete and chair moved closer to the table to let the man through while Vic brought a fifth chair to our foursome.

We ordered another round, and gave all the liquor to Manon: including his fifth shot, it was one hundred and twenty-five grams. Manon poured all the shots together—in the carafe, there were no glasses—and sort of chewed it rather than drank it, tried to strain the thick reddish liquid through his teeth, to hold it as long as possible, to separate the sugar, the dye—and whatever else there is in liquor—from the alcohol—drunk and fine. He finished chewing around on it and then started to speak. He spoke to the girls, to their feet in light colored stockings, their hairdos piled up on the backs of their childish heads, their stiff “Hungarotex” dresses. Like any other guy, Manon wanted the girls to see his
power and to give in to him because of that power. Manon started telling how he gave himself an ulcer when he was in prison: “You take a long thread with a knot at the end, you tie it to your last lower tooth, and swallow it.”

He was looking at Vic and me—not at the girls, but it was really meant for them, so that they dropped their lower incisors in delight, raised their ink-blue lashes at this plight of his, which not one of those hoots from the hospital could tell from a real one, and froze from the measured locutions of the terrible tale.

Manon’s sleeves knocked over a couple of shot glasses without his hands noticing; Manon was almost lying on the table, and now he was looking somewhere over toward the far wall, contemplating his own fate.

But he came out of it in about ten minutes. When he’d knocked back everything he hadn’t already put away, Manon got up from the triangular table and grabbed Vic by the tie. “You drunken faggot, you shitty bastard!” He slapped me across the face and again fell to contemplating the girls—but he didn’t do anything. They just got a blast of air from the flaps of his blue Kiev overcoat, that’s how fast he walked out and left.

A day later it started to blizzard, with strong ground winds and bluish ice on the drifts, where some water left from before crashed down from the gutters. Parents sent me out for bread: a 20-kopeck loaf of white, three rolls, and a round of black—we eat a lot of bread.

Mishka Abrasimov was standing by the store—his neck uncovered, no hat, in a faded pink raincoat—he didn’t have a “Moscow” jacket with a high collar, which would have been more seasonal. Mishka Abrasimov was poor, and bitter about his poverty. The ground wind got up his pants, and the upper wind got down his open collar.

“Gimme a smoke!” I cupped my hands and gave him a light as well as a smoke.

“Manon hanged himself,” said Mishka.

“What?!”

“Don’t what me, you piece of shit. They took him away yesterday. Nadka called the neighbors. She bawled all night until they came—they thought she was just hysterical. He tied her hand and foot, blindfolded her with a kerchief, and hanged himself in their room. There was a hook there for the curtain rod. Drunk as a skunk. But when was he ever sober.”
“And her?”
“Nadka? How should I know? Maybe they took her away too.”

Volchok’s sister Katya is walking down a street with no beginning and without end, unlit by streetlamps. And so are my grandpa and grandma, leaning on one another: they don’t fight any longer, but then, they don’t speak either. And with them walks Manon—always asking where his mother Nadka is.
ALEXANDER TEREKHOV (born 1966, Tula) emerged as one of the most talented young Russian writers of the 1990s. The controversial satire and striking use of language in his novels won him the Big Book Prize in 2009 for *The Stone Bridge*. His most well-known book, *The Rat Killer*, is a biting satire on provincial Russian life described by *The Times* as “funny, crazy and wonderfully unpredictable.”
A PROBLEM

I am fully thirty-eight years old. I have many gray hairs. I regard them with resignation, like snow lying on a roof, growing in size, or like a scar that is healing.

Five years ago: I was reading a newspaper in the metro, on my way to work: several thousand years from now (or several tens of thousands of years), the Milky Way, where we live, will collide with the Andromeda nebula. We are currently approaching it at the speed of 500 kilometers an hour. Or 500,000 kilometers an hour. But when we reach it, the Earth will have been a dead body for a long time. The Sun will run out of heat, and the Earth will turn into an icy rock.

This made me feel so terrified, the sort of terror I had only ever felt as a child, and only in the metro, and only when I thought about the death of my parents. I immediately thought of my daughter. I felt DEATH so strongly that it seemed that this feeling would never pass. But 10 minutes went by, and as I approached my work, I felt easier. But in summer . . . my daughter and I had turned off toward a ravine to look for mushrooms. “Pop, is it true what they say, that someday the Earth won’t exist?” Hopeless, triumphant time: “Who told you that?” and on the slope of the ravine I came to the full realization: yes. There won’t be anything left. Everything will die, like grass. But this seemed impossible to combine with the existence of my daughter next to me, with the dear, sweaty smell of her head. It turned out I wasn’t prepared for eternal nonexistence.
My affliction can be described in four words: I can not forget.
No, three: I can’t understand. And four more: I can’t accept it. And another four: I don’t want to!
Night and day I began to think about this. Sometimes, the punctured hole was covered over with a bluish, nauseating film caused by fatigue, overeating, depletion in a woman’s body, proximity to my son, running off to battle in his dreams; I moved carefully and tried to get more sleep, but—it wouldn’t splice; it looked as if the hole would never close up. Evidently, my constitution had become weak, and wasn’t fighting. Evidently, my time had come.

In my youth, the safety cushion that lay before me was the undiscovered country of “you’re still young.” In childhood life seemed like a wilderness, a dense forest, but here now the forest had become thinner, and between the trunks you began to glimpse . . . you climbed the next hill, and suddenly saw a black sea ahead of you: no, over there, further ahead, there are still some hills, they are smaller, but they will never again block the sea that you are walking toward.

I noticed about myself: I’m still not prepared that my son will die, that his elderly face will appear in an oval photograph, and then the cross will fall down and the grave will be dug over. I’m not ready to accept the appearance of a bunch of new boys who have managed to wait for their turn to live. I don’t want other boys, other old men, another spring, apart from mine, ours. I had to admit to myself: with all of this I wanted to rush to Mama, to snuggle, to take a running start and burrow into her—and I can’t, Mama is dead.

I looked into people’s faces, particularly old people—see how they smile, sitting on the benches in bathhouses and on the soft seats of shuttle taxis—evidently they know a secret that I don’t know. For the same death awaits them as it does me, even earlier: as soon as tomorrow! Then what are they smiling about, why aren’t they hurrying, why aren’t they showing that they are being devoured by fear? What do they hope for?

I saw death so clearly that nothing more remained before my eyes. My eyes were being seared by my life as it burnt down, in an instantaneous, constant and absolutely convincing flame, and I was unnecessarily surprised by questions: Why only now? How could I live without noticing this before?

Everyone’s life will end with my death, and consoling thoughts about future grandchildren and children are just an anesthetizing injection, so that
people will croak without causing unnecessary problems for the surrounding pack of youngsters, without screams of terror in the night, without grabbing the sleeves of nurses and doctors: don’t surrender me there!!! The fate of mankind does not bother me, there is no mankind anymore, there is nobody’s “I” in it, and what the hell is it needed for?! I am worried about my life, my breath, about me. I need me.

I don’t want to not be forever, I don’t want the borders of my time to waver and drift away: the blue school uniform with metal buttons, coin-changing machines in the metro, parades in Red Square, cosmonauts, the invaluable newspaper “Football-Hockey,” tram no. 26, the voices of Vysotsky and Levitan, recordings of “Time Machine” at the rock festival in Tbilisi, tanks driving. I don’t want our time to deaden, caught up in the tentacles of young predatory life, which has learned to suppress the voices of the dying and sick, and not to notice the hopes of the dead. These young people have frightened everyone, and forced them to live as if there were no death. As if everything ends well. Everything is well in general. There are no bad endings. There’ll be another episode. There’s always a reason to enjoy yourself. Everyone laughs. We’ll just take a short break for an advertisement. As if in the end we won’t all croak forever. As if there were something more important than this “no” on earth. People don’t talk about it, or sing about it, and children aren’t taught it—there is no death. The television doesn’t notice it—there is no death. Youth and merriment and new merchandise! There aren’t that many elderly people, there they sit on benches patting dogs, rosy-cheeked and slightly foolish targets for ridicule! freaks! and there aren’t any dead people at all. They’ve been carried off and buried. Life goes on. As if it were always going to go on. They’re not shown. They’re not taken outside. They’re the majority, but they have nothing to speak with. No one wants to release the decaying from the earth, no one admits they are equal to themselves. No one listens to this underground groan of the great majority: TAKE US BACK! As if the most important human desire, like death itself, does not exist, as if the only possible point has no meaning. As if the dead have someone to put their hopes in, apart from us.

What should I do, what should I do. . . . There is the curtain of “it won’t happen soon.” There’s the great “it hasn’t happened yet.” There is the desire for PD—powerful distractors. Alcohol. Skiing. Fan clubs. You can find inspiration in examples of healthy longevity and excellent working capacities until a ripe old age.
Are there any other calming remedies?!

Well, there is also the convenient form of taking death inside yourself, as “family,” “people” (a larger and somewhat colder form), “HISTORY”—although you are nameless, you remain in it—a mineral dissolved in water, a fleck of gold. Blood in the veins of your relatives. A hooked family nose.

Yes, I’ll glance at “family,” “people!” “history!” . . . A handsomely packaged and executed history, having a finished appearance to make it convenient for browsing. But I’m not willing to die forever, so that all of this can move forward toward its meeting with the Andromeda nebula!

Nothing could help, and can’t help, to block this out. Nothing can bring back the sleepy state of your eyes, when your vision of the future has the ordinary human limit placed on it: my son, my grandson, the apples that will grow without me, and the May beetles that will settle on the birch trees in the city park as they always have.

God—yes, that’s a good idea to console yourself—we’ll die in measured throes, sleep, and then resurrection in physical form, with skin and hair, although our age will be uncertain, and then eternity: a laborious, pricey solution: to stand through church services, to purify oneself as old age approaches, to repent and mortify the flesh, to guess at familiar words in Old Church Slavonic and parrot the singing . . . to bequeath a chandelier to the monastery! Although, I suspect, God doesn’t provide cherry trees and girls in short skirts, God does appear to be a rather large concrete sphere, inside of which everything is contained. But what does this sphere hang inside? What is around it? What if it’s this same eternity-universe-death? And this is disconcerting: it is written, and since it was written, then some purpose must have been followed, after all, people write for a purpose! So, you’re afraid of dying? Well, the veterans had a meeting and came up with this consolation, they wrote so that you would not be scared! So you wouldn’t demand immortality. So that the dead would be buried, to control the health and disease situation. And so you would behave decently—you’re being observed! But there’s this pathetic trade disagreement: billions believe in one thing, billions in another. Islam or something . . . Dalai Lamas . . . Catholics . . . And they don’t argue much, they don’t feel sorry for the people who walk past them—they’ve divided up the market. And it’s also somehow troubling when there is only one answer: there’s God, and nothing more. There’s nothing
to choose from, and there's an unreliability because of this, a fear, for there is no practical evidence, not even the Pope can heal colon cancer, and astrophysics does not confirm anything—there is silence out there, God doesn't scare us, God is silent for some reason. For some reason, it's a long time since anyone had any revelations. And the shroud of Turin proved not to be old enough. No, I believe that there is consolation, there are saints, the Russian Orthodox Church, the poor are given free meals, Orthodox nurses are kinder, as a rule, although they are much more expensive; and you feel somewhat easier when you place a candle for 50 kopecks, a bit fatter, and you light it “for the repose of,” when the crowd streams around the church on Easter night. Who would argue, it’s a necessary thing to do, but, I fear, there is no resurrection from the dead. It may not appear in the roster. Everything is made in China, and it’s not as if you read the garbled instructions attached when you're buying something.

One last thing remains. There is this hardy beast of burden—the future; it carries everything that we load on to it. In the future, in short, science will develop and angel doctors will bring us back to life! But that’s hard to believe. What if they only grant eternity to themselves, their relatives and friends? How do we, the dead, keep track, hold on, and force them to bring everyone back? We have no party, no “cover,” no resources, but they, the people of the future, are their own bosses—they will dismiss the Australopithecus first of all, and that’s just the beginning, after all it’s necessary to economize on the budget, they’ll add things up and dispense with the Middle Ages, and then—we’ll leave only the ones who are alive, and not all of them: just the lucky ones! Although if I were lucky, and the administration made me an offer: we’ll leave you personally, but not your grandfathers and grandmothers, sorry, no—I would agree, bastard that I am—what choice do I have? But then I’ll remember my own—every day! It’s still better than NOTHING AT ALL . . .

Nothing will remain except lies.

THE SEA

During my work on the Great Stone Bridge I had to rent an apartment. I slammed shut the atlas of Moscow streets and chose the city of Feodosia, at the end of spring.

I flew there to bury my thirty-seven years.
The plane descended: the roofs of barns, garages and houses, cars, a sprinkle of graves, and another sprinkle of the backs of sheep. And when I was already there, and began to walk along the endless Fedko street, I was amazed by the flawless silence: the rare passersby walked without their heels clicking, the air thickened, barbed wire snaked across the tops of fences, and at eight in the evening Feodosia was sound asleep. There was silence in the yards and gardens, the gutters had that smell that you wanted to recognize as coming from the sea, and the intoxicating silence was broken once by a seagull swooping overhead.

For some reason I went down to the embankment instead of going straight to the hotel. The city spreads out here like a flower on the last day of spring, waiting to meet the summer. Strings of lights were already blazing in empty cafés and bars, the lead detachments of the army of taxi drivers were waiting at their customary corners, empty discos were blaring music, and waiters from the country bar were out for a stroll, dressed up as cowboys. The sea breathed coldly, calmly and joyfully. I walked, a traveler unknown to anyone, across another land.

I shut myself in my room to read.

When I start a new job, I always read the lives of the fathers.

The acts of righteous people are written about by special righteous people, those who have been lucky enough to survive to the senility of old age, avoid the professional diseases of miners, described in an awkward patter on the second-to-last page: transferred to head the mines on Chukotka, dismissed for discrediting organs of government, sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment, excluded from the party, committed suicide, sentenced to pay the highest penalty, died during interrogation, was arrested and shot after a short investigation . . . “A difficult time ensued, characterized by distrust toward people, especially those who for a lengthy time had lived abroad. Half a year later, Muravkin was arrested by the bodies of the People’s Komissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). His subsequent fate is unknown”—of the first eight heads of the foreign intelligence, seven were shot, and one died in a car accident—like the apostles!

Those who managed to reach shore (“Ivan Andreevich Chichaev died on 15 November 1984 in his small apartment in a building on Serpukhovsky Val. After his coffin, his state awards were carried on scarlet cushions—the order of Lenin, two orders of the Red Banner, the order of
The stokers found it awkward to start dictation immediately, before shifting to the steely “by order of the court,” “the decision was made to ascertain, withhold in secret and correct”; “in the course of the interrogation Dagen categorically denied that he had spied for a foreign nation. Ten days later he died when he fell from the tenth floor of the building where his office was located”; “died under mysterious circumstances: was found unconscious with a fracture to the skull in a movie theater, and died two days later of pneumonia after an operation.”

To gain momentum they had to add something of their own, and they permitted themselves a few idle phrases “about nothing”—and in these non-obligatory words, the wind passes through, there is a smell of lavender, and fluff flies through the air, carrying seeds. This was simply the guileless invention of people who were unable to invent things well, but as is often the case, it was in the invention alone that something was left to which they had no right—the part of their life which was completely deleted by death—everything that was unnecessary; in other words almost everything.

This resembles photographs. A convenient method of preserving the past and reassuring yourself—there, the albums are ranged on the shelves. From the breathless first laugh in the all-powerful hands of a young mother to the stupefied silence over the coffin, from which a plastic nose sticks out, surrounded by carnations, with intermittent stops for portraits at school yards, wedding services and banquets. If you enlarge the eyes of the person photographed (the quality of even the first photographs of the 19th century makes this possible), you can see the world reflected in them, rooms, doors, the eternally faceless photographer, the sky and hills—everything they saw when they were still alive. Obviously, it is difficult to resolve to do this, and it is obvious why I only like the first paragraphs.

“It was a stifling August evening in 1950. The passersby in Tel Aviv, like sleepy flies, moved slowly along the streets. Perhaps the only person in the entire city who did not notice the heat or the stuffiness was the res-
ident agent of the Soviet foreign intelligence in Israel, Vladimir Ivanovich Vertiporokh . . .”

“A summer day in 1934 was drawing to a close. The head of the Foreign section of the Unified State Political Administration (OGPU) A.G. Artuzov approached the windows, drew the blinds and turned on the table lamp under its green lampshade . . .”

“January is not the best time of year in Shanghai. Cold winds from the ocean blow through the enormous city, and the city streets are often drenched in rain and snow. On a dreary day in January 1939, Soviet intelligence agent Nikolai Tishchenko stepped out into the street, having tightly wrapped himself in his leather overcoat . . .”

I got the keys for the “business center” from the receptionist—it was a room where a computer with an Internet connection was installed—and typed “Great Stone Bridge” in the Rambler search engine: there were over 2,000 results. Out of the first 100 I clicked on a link at random. It was for the newspaper “Top Secret.” A long article opened about a building on Romanov Lane (in the Soviet period it was called Granovsky Street)—where marshals and people’s commissioners of the times of Emperor Stalin lived, and after them their children and grandchildren.

“These children could carry pistols in their pockets. The head of the aviation industry, Shakhurin, a tall, blond man, had a 15-year-old son by the name of Volodya. The boy fell in love with the daughter of the diplomat Umansky, who was appointed as ambassador to Mexico. His daughter was called Nina, also 15 years old. They lived in a different building, the ‘House on the Embankment,’ where the apartments were larger, where guests were not bothered by security guards in the entry, and where the residents had inherited from the old Bolsheviks a habit of honest poverty and the reading of books.”

Nina and Volodya talked on the Great Stone Bridge, halfway between these two buildings, on the stairs that led down to the Vaudeville Theater.

Either he asked her not to leave. Or he was jealous. Or was simply showing off. In short, Shakhurin Jr. shot the girl, point-blank. And then he shot himself, and died a day later. This was in 1943.

The entire building seethed: “This is how those sons of bosses behave themselves.”

Stalin said: “Wolf cubs.”
The Invisible Man

A short, broken trail remains on the sand from the visit of Konstantin Uman-sk. Almost no one wanted to remember the dead father of the beautiful girl who was shot in 1943. I met Goltsman before breakfast, before the beach filled up with old women and children, and we literally crawled on our knees from one imprint to another of all those forty-three years, until the waves had licked them down into a sliver the size of the dash pressed into the concrete between the numbers 1902 and 1945.

He was a Jew. From Nikolaev by birth, the son of an engineer. After the revolution he found himself at Moscow University, but studied barely for a year. He displayed exceptional linguistic abilities. He knew English, German and French well. Italian and Spanish not as well. Without pausing, he wrote a book about new Communist art. For example, I’ll read you what he wrote about one figure: ‘And although Kandiinsky, as a consequence of his long period spent abroad, is often assessed by the Moscow circle as a western element, I have no doubt whatsoever about his purely Slavic roots, about his eastern-like decisive aspiration to break out of the fetters of the material, his purely Russian humaneness and universal humanity.’

The people’s commissar of culture, Lunacharsky, sent the seventeen-year-old boy to Germany “for the propaganda of new art forms.” One idiot wrote that the boy “was known as a famous art expert in Moscow.” In Germany, Umansky forgot the reason he had gone there, became an employee of the Russian telegraph agency and lived sweetly for thirteen years: Vienna, Rome, Geneva, Paris, from time to time making visits to the socialist world.

From 1931 he was in Moscow, and was the head of the press department of the people’s commissariat of foreign affairs. Foreign correspondents remember him as a savage censor: those who dare to write that there
is famine in the USSR don’t get tickets to the sensational trials of the first “saboteurs.” He accompanies western literary generals on inspections—Feuchtwanger, Shaw, Barbusse and Wells. He was noticed by Stalin. “On several occasions he acted as an interpreter for Comrade Stalin.” The people’s commissar of foreign affairs Maxim Litvinov called Umansky “a lucky hand”—the papers that he prepared were signed by the emperor without corrections.

In April 1936, Umansky was in the USA, as an advisor. Two years later, he was the ambassador. He was disliked there. Some historians believe that in 1939/1940, the ambassador acted as a resident agent for the foreign department of the NKVD. He was recalled at the start of the war, but was not shot. For two years, he was practically on an honorable pension as a member of the board of the people’s commissariat of foreign affairs, and finally he was promoted to ambassador in Mexico, to depart on 4 June 1943. There is one legend: when he gave the documents verifying his credentials to the president, Umansky promised that in half a year, they would talk without an interpreter. And in October he made his first speech (the Mexicans didn’t suspect that Umansky had studied Spanish from his youth).

In Mexico, Ambassador Umansky turned into a “national hero of the working people.” On 25 January 1945, as he flew out to Costa Rica, his plane blew up.

The historian Sizonenko has singled out seven versions of the catastrophe:

- Tragic accident. The pilot did not take off at the right time, flew into a rarefied air stream from the plane that took off before them, and lost speed. Or the pilot lost control of the plane, was unable to even out the tilt of the aircraft, and during takeoff the undercarriage caught on the guardrail of the landing strip.
- An act of diversion by German agents.
- An act by the Americans: to stop the “communist threat” to Latin America.
- The Poles. There turned out to be several hundred Poles in Mexico during the war years. The uprising in Warsaw, organized by the “London” Poles, was drowned in blood by the Germans, and the Polish capital on the very eve of Umansky’s flight was taken by the Red Army, bringing in the “Moscow” Poles. Agents of the London “government in exile” blew up the ambassador from the USSR in retaliation.
- The Trotskyists, taking their revenge on Stalin for the murder of their
leader. Umansky may have taken part in preparing the assassination of the emperor’s personal enemy—the operation was prepared by our people in the USA, and it is unlikely that they were located far from the embassy. And indeed, Umansky tried to release the nameless liquidator from the Mexican torture chamber. Trotsky’s widow Natalia stated directly that thanks to Umansky’s efforts, the killer was treated well in prison.

Umansky was killed by Mexican fascists—enemies of the USSR.

The NKVD. The emperor was preparing to crush the antifascist Jewish committee. Umansky’s connections with Mikhoels and Fefer, and his active work “under Jewish auspices” in America and Mexico could not go unnoticed.

Goltsman only drew two purple birds in his notepad, and after a long silence, he said more precisely, “That’s all that exists in open sources.”

He had shaved and had had his hair cut, and somewhere he had dredged up a light white suit and summer shoes with eyelet holes. In his working condition, Alexander Naumovich always looked like a slightly frightened person who had heard an unfamiliar rustle in the middle of the night.

“Don’t you find it strange, Alexander Naumovich, that no one remembered Umansky? Over sixty years, there hasn’t been a single publication about him personally. In diaries, memoirs, letters, commentaries on letters—zero. Not foreigners—who did he accompany there? Not Gorky at his banquets. Not his friends—Mayakovsky, the composer R-ov, or Yevgeny Petrov. The avant-gardists—also zero. And that Mikhail Koltsov—they were supposedly close friends, like brothers. Not even the White émigrés . . . Bunin could have written a few caustic lines . . . After all, our client was a very charming person. A prominent diplomat. A mysterious death in the prime of life. And the tragic story of his beautiful daughter . . . How could that not be remembered?!”

“They say that Gromyko didn’t like our client. He was subordinate to Umansky in Washington; when he became a minister, he forbade any mention of Umansky.”

“That’s not convincing!”

“We have one page with a glance at the life of Umansky as a whole. Nothing significant. Only the name of the author is noteworthy.”

“One of the repressed?”

“If only! Ehrenburg.” Goltsman handed me a photocopy of pages from a book.
Ehrenburg, Ilya Grigorievich, deputy of the Supreme Council of the USSR of the third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh convocations, winner of two Stalin Prizes and the international Lenin Prize, vice president of the World Peace Council, two orders of Lenin on his jacket, wrote several thick novels, not needed by anyone, and seemed to be the freest person in the Union of SSR.

He served the country of victorious socialism and the emperor, executing people when necessary, saving people when possible, while spending most of his life enjoying the comfort of bourgeois capitals—piercing the iron curtain with implausible ease in search of “material” for his creative work and asserting per instruction the interests of the government of workers and peasants in disputes with giants, cyclopses and monsters of world culture.

This said Ehrenburg became hugely famous during the war: kill the Germans! The defendants on trial at Nuremberg raised their heads as if on command when they were informed: Ehrenburg himself has appeared in the viewers’ balcony.

Witnesses described Ehrenburg as a “communications officer” between West and East, “Stalin’s court lackey,” “an unsurpassed master of life” and a “screen.” Even a tenth of the freedom that Ehrenburg received from Higher Authorities guaranteed a 100% chance of being shot as early as 1934, regardless of the results of his work. And a 10,000% chance in 1937. And a labor camp in the early ’50s, when the Higher Authorities adjusted the temperature of the national self-esteem of Soviet Jews. There came along numerous other suitable years and cases. And possible “ties to the top brass” and the probable implementation of certain “connections” could not change anything here.

But Ehrenburg lived out his pretty good seventy-six years without hindrance, having swum more deeply into the future than the emperor, and bequeathed three volumes of memoirs (he called the memoirs “People, years, life . . .”), in insignificant, hinting detail—about the bloody emperor (the fierce editors wouldn’t let him express himself directly!), but basically about his own purity and friendship (equally and from a height) with Nobel prizewinners and just plain geniuses, while admitting in passing that he didn’t know the answer to the question: “So why didn’t Stalin have you killed?”

The lack of a sufficient explanation (if we exclude the possibility that he sold his soul) left of the correct life of Ilya Grigorievich, who even
during his lifetime was called by newspapers the “conscience of the world,” a fractured, jarring echo, hiding something that it would be better not to know.

The fact that only Ehrenburg had examined Umansky’s life meant something.

He, the elder, made friends with the younger Umansky (their age difference was eleven years) at the beginning of 1942, and they met after work every night, at two or three o’clock. Kostya did not resemble most of the people in his circle. Owing to his youth, he had not fallen into the brilliant assemblage surrounding the disgraced people’s commissar Maxim Litvinov, but everything else, including his origin, presupposed that he would be close to Litvinov. He was not one of “Molotov’s people”—the next people’s commissar (a clumsy explanation of something evasive and slippery, which probably irritated many people . . .) and did not talk much about the past (why not?). Here is another book by Umansky—“New Russian Art,” which was published in Berlin about the following figures: Lentulov, Mashkov, Konchalovsky, Sarian, Rozanova, Chagall and Malevich. And the summary—he liked poetry, music and painting, everything interested him: the symphonies of Shostakovich, the concertos of Rachmaninoff, the paintings of Pompei, and the first babble of “thinking machines.” In his room at the Hotel Moscow on the fifth floor, there gathered such renowned people as Admiral Isakov, the writer Petrov, the diplomat Shtein, the actor and director Mikhoels, and the pilot Chukhnovsky (society figures of the Empire, the parents of the Jewish anti-fascist committee. But where are his wife and daughter? When is he at the apartment in the Government House?).

Ehrenburg remembered his unusually good memory and hatred of the bureaucratic spirit, and further he reproduced Umansky’s informal voice, a kind of imprint of his personality, and this is the only chance to hear, even in the hum of Ehrenburg’s rehash, what reached him through a twenty-year thickness of ice, besides his own voice reflected by time.

“We do not understand the things that we have the right to take pride in, concealing the best, arrogant as clumsy teenagers, but at the same time we are afraid that some bright foreigner will get wind of the fact that there are no washing machines in the town of Mirgorod.”

(Foreign correspondents, incidentally, hated Kostya personally for his sadistic censorship, “Kostya Umansky, the new censor, smiled with all his
gold teeth and flashed his thick glasses . . . I read in his golden smile: ‘I
don’t like you, because I am an egocentric Soviet official, but you’ll see,
I’ll be promoted to commissar;’ and he must have read in my smile: ‘A
pompous little careerist exploiting the benefits of the revolution. Hates me
because I can see who he really is. A little shopkeeper in the back alleys of
the revolution.’”

On the Americans: “Capable children. Sometimes touching, sometimes intolerable… Europe is in ruins, the Americans will be in command after the war is won. The one who pays the piper orders the tune . . . Of course, the rosy-cheeked Americans don’t like Hitler: why burn something if you can buy it? Don’t judge America by Roosevelt, he is far superior to the rest of his party” (if this is made up, it’s only half made up).

On Picasso, the client was enraptured by Picasso: “I mentioned his name, and I was barked at, told that he was a charlatan who mocked capitalism and lived off scandal. Try reading Shakespeare’s poetry to the secretary of an Oblast (Regional) committee (but did he even see one?) who doesn’t know English, and he’ll say: ‘Chaos instead of poetry!’ Remember Stalin’s comment on R-ov’s opera? And then there’s Zhdanov . . . Everything they don’t understand is esoteric for them. And their tastes are compulsory for everyone” (this is all that worried two well-off men, people of the emperor, in the days of the battle of Stalingrad. Not faith. Not doubts. Not friends who were mown down by the times. Only the timid chuckling of waiters behind the backs of the gentlemen dining at the table).

“It seems to me that he was born under a lucky star.”

But suddenly, the lucky star fell “because of a tragic and absurd accident” (what does Ehrenburg call an accident, one wonders?). “A teenager, a classmate” killed his daughter, “after a turbulent conversation he shot her and killed himself.” Umansky adored his daughter, she was the only thing holding his family life together. “I knew that there was great emotion in his life, that in 1943 he experienced the torments described by Chekhov in his story ‘The Lady with the Lapdog.’”

And then came the unexpected outcome of the drama.

“I’ll never forget the night when Konstantin Alexandrovich came to see me. He could barely speak, he sat there with his head lowered, covering his face with his hands . . . A few days later he left for Mexico. His wife (Raisa Mikhailovna) was taken away in a nearly unconscious state. A year later he wrote to me: ‘The sorrow I have suffered has almost com-
pletely struck me down. Raisa Mikhailovna is an invalid, and our condition is much worse than it was on the day that we said good-bye. How right you always were, and you gave me some good advice, which I—alas—ignored.”

Before concluding this section, forgetting about Umansky and continuing his memoirs, Ehrenburg shrugged. What advice did I give him? I don’t remember giving any advice.

The water is pure and smooth. The siren bursts into nightingale song on the railway crossing. Trains come into Feodosia from the north, and the local residents, with the satisfied look of hunters, take the new arrivals, bending under the weight of their suitcases, to apartments, like slaves bought at the market. The holidaymakers, despite the coolness of the last days of May, stubbornly flock to the gray beach—there won’t be another time for them. Seagulls unexpectedly plop into the water. Girls stick umbrellas into the pebbles and undress.

We sat facing the sea, feeling its breath and the spaciousness of emptiness, and the sea blended into the sky far away in the distance, like a kind, warm eternity.

“What do you think, Alexander Naumovich?”

“He was a tidy person. There are a lot of questions about him. The circumstances of his daughter’s death, it seems, are unknown to anyone in detail. What advice did Ehrenburg give Umansky? Could this advice have saved Nina’s life? Ambiguous twists in his biography... I’ll find out whether Stalin really did know Umansky. The plane exploding—that’s altogether a separate topic. I was mainly interested...” Golltsman turned away from the sea and looked at me (a tense, heavy face, bright blue eyes, with the transparency of old age). “Litvinov. Molotov. Gromyko. Three ministers. The entire foreign policy of the Soviet Union. And they all knew Kostya. Gromyko didn’t like him and tried to make sure that Umansky was forgotten. Litvinov and Molotov, as we know, hated each other. But why didn’t Molotov touch Umansky, when Litvinov was placed under house arrest, and all of his people were repressed? And when Litvinov was brought back and sent to replace Umansky in the States, Kostya was recalled, but again, he wasn’t touched. And two years later he was entrusted with Mexico. So whose man was he? Why did we start with him?”

“Shakhurin’s father and mother lived to an old age, from that side we’ll find some people who are still alive. But Umansky’s wife died with him in the
plane in 1945; there can’t be many people who saw them when they were living—we need to hurry here. The parents of the victim are more interested in an investigation than the parents of a killer. But something else hooked me. The crazy boy at the exhibition said that Nina was killed on the third of June. Umansky flew to Mexico on the fourth. Did he love his little girl so much that he didn’t stay behind to bury her?! Poor papa.”

We got up.

“This all needs to be checked. You already don’t like Kostya. He’s going to have a tough time. Perhaps you’ll find this interesting. Here’s what we removed from the archive of the foreign intelligence, from case 1300. It cost 200 dollars. I’m keeping a record of expenses.”

I shook twenty-two photographs out of an envelope: a skinny Jew with a slit for a smile and a thick head of hair; in this photo he had already gone flabby and hardened, in profile, with a bare forehead; and here was a younger photo—a pleasant actor’s face; with the gray-haired Bernard Shaw by a convertible, the Kremlin towers behind them; and here was the face of the deceased, at the aerodrome in Mexico; the mother of Comrade Umansky—a stout woman with a masculine face; a riverbank, a five-year-old girl with a rich head of hair walks through the grass, pulling up her white knickers, her father squints happily after her and—I paused—two newspaper clippings with almost identical photos on the 13th of April, Monday, Washington and the State of Nebraska, with a caption something along the lines of “Konstantin Umansky, the new advisor of the Soviet embassy, with his young daughter Nina photographed on board the liner ‘Paris’ after arriving in New York.”

I held the second-to-last photograph a bit longer in my hands. A beautiful girl in a fine, warm coat, a beret on the back of her head, pressed to her young, handsome father, having stuck her hand in the collar of his coat, Umansky is squatting down, and the girl seems to be taller than him, their faces shining, absolutely identical eyes looking out at the world.

“Their eyes are identical. So are their teeth.”

“Here’s another photograph. Look more closely.”

Umansky, wearing glasses, almost turned away from the photographer, is turning the tuning knobs of a radio with both hands. To the right, it seems, there’s a balcony. Either curtains or wallpaper. On top of the radio is a portrait of the emperor and a coffee cup on a saucer. The jacket is well ironed, the creases are visible . . .

“A portrait of Stalin,” Goltsman pointed to it. “See, there’s something
written on it, diagonally across the bottom. You can see ‘To Comrade Uman-
sky,’ but the signature and date are illegible. Could it be that Stalin signed his
own photograph for him?”

“We’ll have to find out.”

“And also: did Gromyko write memoirs?” Goltsman said evenly. “Incidently, they say that ‘The Lady with the Lapdog’ was Stalin’s favorite story.”
EDUARD RADZINSKY (born 1936, Moscow) is a celebrated playwright, scriptwriter, award-winning television personality and prolific writer of acclaimed novels and best-selling history books. Having trained as an archivist, he possesses a combination of unsurpassed research techniques and an accessible writing style that has made his works so appealing to readers.
In the seventh decade of our century, in Moscow, lived a strange old woman: her wrinkled face was plastered with a grotesque layer of theatrical makeup; her bent figure tottered on high heels. She moved almost by feel, but nothing could induce her to don glasses. Oh, no, she had no intention of looking like an old woman!

According to the *Theatrical Encyclopedia* she was then in her tenth decade.

This was Vera Leonidovna Yureneva—a star of the stage from the turn of the century. Once, her student admirers harnessed themselves to her carriage in place of horses to take her home from her performances. Now, yesterday’s femme fatale was living out her life in a communal apartment on a miserable pension. And she had rented one of her two rooms to me, a sorry student at the Historical Archival Institute.

Evenings, when I returned home, I often had long talks with her in the communal kitchen. The suites of Petersburg restaurants, the glamorous Yacht Club with its grand dukes, the palaces on translucent White Nights—this drowned world where she had once lived Vera Leonidovna ironically referred to as Atlantis. She scattered names: “Anya”—just Anya—turned out to be Anna Vyrubova, the empress’s fateful friend; and “Sana”—to the rest of Russia the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. Thus began our nightly conversations in a Moscow kitchen, our journey to a drowned Atlantis. I recorded her stories greedily. And now that I have read so many reminiscences by participants in those stormy events, her opinions retain a distinct
charm for me, precisely because she was not a participant. Participants are, after all, biased. It reminds me of the expression “He lies like someone who was there.” Vera Leonidovna was merely a contemporary, an interested but disinterested party.

Here is one of Vera Leonidovna’s stories about Atlantis’s demise:

“Only after the revolution did Mikhail K. become my husband. [Mikhail Koltsov was a distinguished journalist in Bolshevik Russia.] ‘Yet Another Bolshevik Victory’—that was what the émigré press wrote about our union.

“At that time many prominent Bolsheviks lived in the Metropole Hotel. For relaxation they often invited writers and journalists serving the new authorities. Koltsov, too, was often at the Metropole. Once he met two people there. One had been the head of the Ekaterinburg Bolsheviks when the tsar’s family was executed. The other had been in charge of the execution itself. And they reminisced about how it all had been. They sipped unsweetened tea through a sugar lump, crunched the cube, and told stories about how the bullets bounced off the girls and flew about the room. Gripped with fear, they had been utterly unable to get the boy. He kept crawling across the floor, warding off their shots with his hand. Only later did they learn that the grand duchesses had been wearing corsets sewn solidly with diamonds, which had protected them. Later Misha [Koltsov] used to say that there must be a photograph of that horror somewhere. ‘After all, they were very proud—they had liquidated Nicholas the Bloody. How could they have resisted taking their picture with the slain afterward, especially since the chief assassin had once been a photographer.’ He never did stop searching for that photograph.”

This picture: the tsar’s murderers drinking tea in a room at the Metropole . . . and the bullets bouncing off the girls and the boy on the floor, and the terrible photograph. I could not put it out of my mind.

Later at the Historical Archives Institute I heard about a secret note written by that same former photographer who had led the execution of the tsar’s family. His name: Yakov Yurovsky. In the note he purportedly told all.

Once I had completed my archival internship, I found myself in the Central State Archive of the October Revolution in Moscow. Immediately I made a naive inquiry about the Yurovsky “note.”

“There is no Yurovsky note,” my colleague replied brusquely, as if to point up the question’s lack of tact.

I was shown the Romanov archive, however. To my surprise, at a time when everything was classified, these documents were not.
First I looked through albums of Romanov photographs. The same colleague with the bloodless (archival) face carried in huge scrapbooks—Moroccan leather, with the tsarist seal and without—and carried them out, one after the other. She refused to leave me alone with those photographs for a second. At first she was cold, indifferent, but then, forgetting herself, she waxed enthusiastic and explained each one to me, as if boasting of this amazing vanished life. The dim pictures in those tsarist photographs were a window out of her destitute, boring life.

“They took pictures of everything,” she explained with a certain pride. “The whole family had cameras: they took photos of the girls, the tsar and the tsaritsa.”

Photographs, photographs. A tall, slender beauty and a sweet young man—the period of their engagement.

Their first child—a little girl on spindly legs.

The four girls sitting on a leather sofa. Then the boy, the long-awaited heir to the throne. The boy and his dog, the boy on a bicycle with an enormous wheel, the amusing bicycle of that era. But most often he is in bed, the empress beside him. She has aged so. She looks into the camera, she looks at us. A bitter crease circles her mouth. The thin nose now hooked—a sad young woman. And here is Nicholas and the future king of England, George. They are looking at each other—astonishingly, ridiculously alike (their mothers were sisters).

A photograph of a hunt: a huge deer with giant antlers lying in the snow. And here is a vacation: Nicholas swimming—he has dived and is swimming underwater, naked—his bare strong body from the back.

Since then I have often recalled those photographs—the dead deer and the naked tsar—when thinking about him lying dead and naked on the warm July ground by the mine shaft into which they later tossed his body.

Then I was given his diary.

In July 1918, the Czechs and Cossacks were advancing on Ekaterinburg. The Bolsheviks would have to surrender the town. Yakov Yurovsky left Ekaterinburg on the last train out. The “secret courier” (as he was officially referred to in the documents) was carrying the tsar’s leather cases—one of which contained the family archive of the very recently executed Romanovs.

So there he was riding the train, looking through the albums of photographs. The former photographer must have found this very interesting. But the main thing, naturally, was that he read the tsar’s diary. The diary of the man with whom his name would be linked from then on and always. Imagine
what he felt as he leafed through it on his long journey, trying to picture this life lived in full view of the entire world.

That is how the diary of Nicholas II, kept in the Romanov archive, came to be in the Central State Archive of the October Revolution. The Romanov archive. I call it the Archive of Blood.

Nicholas kept a diary for thirty-six years without interruption. He began it at the age of fourteen, in 1882, in the palace at Gatchina, and ended it as a fifty-year-old prisoner in Ekaterinburg.

Fifty notebooks filled from beginning to end with his neat handwriting. But the final, fifty-first notebook is only half filled: his life was cut short, and yawning blank pages remain, conscientiously numbered by the author in advance.

This diary contains no reflections, and opinions are rare. He is terse—this taciturn, retiring man. The diary is a record of the principal events of the day, no more. But his voice lingers on its pages.

The mystical force of genuine speech.

The revolution punished him without trial, not allowing him a final say. The portrait of this puzzling man was created only after his death—by his opponents and his supporters. Now he himself can speak in the words he himself once wrote. I leaf through his diary. One experiences an eternal yet banal sensation in the archive: one feels other hands, the touch of hands across a century. He himself will lead us through his life. He is the Author.

THE DIARY BEGINS

The author of the diary was born on May 6, 1868.

An old postcard: an angelic infant in long curls. Here Nicholas is all of a year.

Another photograph: a youth with his hair fashionably parted.

In 1882 Nicholas received a gift from his mother: a gilt-edged “book of souvenirs” bound in precious inlaid wood. This luxurious book became the first notebook of his diary. Nicholas was moved to begin keeping a diary conscientiously by a fateful date in Russian history: March 1, 1881.

On the dank night of February 28, 1881, in a Petersburg apartment, the light stayed on for a long time. All that day, from early morning, certain young people had been going in and out of the apartment. Since eight o’clock in the evening six had remained, four young men and two young women. One of them was Vera Figner, distinguished leader of People’s Will, the revolution-
ary terrorist organization. Subsequently she would describe that day in her autobiography.

The other woman was Sofia Perovskaya, who in the morning was going to take a direct part in the cause. They had convinced her to get some sleep.

Vera Figner and the four men worked through the night. Only toward morning did they fill the kerosene cans with blasting jelly. They now had four homemade bombs.

The cause was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, one of the greatest reformers in the history of Russia. That spring he had been preparing to give Russia its longed-for constitution, which would have brought his feudal despotism into the ranks of civilized European states.

But the young people were afraid that the constitution would create false contentment in society and distract Russia from the coming revolution. Also, the tsar’s reforms seemed to them too gradual. The young people were in a hurry.

By that time People’s Will terrorists had already made seven unsuccessful attempts on the tsar’s life. The price had been twenty-one death sentences. And now, once again, they were going out onto a Petersburg street—to kill Alexander II.

That day in the Pavlovsky Regiment barracks, which had a view on the Moika Canal and the Field of Mars, the young soldier Alexander Volkov was standing guard. From the direction of the Ekaterininsky Canal came two powerful explosions. Volkov saw the smoke disperse slowly over the canal and the police chiefs sleigh dash past.

Three Cossacks from the tsar’s escort were propping up the dying tsar: two standing to the side on the runners and one in front whose Circassian coat was black with Alexander’s blood. The savaged muscles of the tsar’s legs were gushing blood.

The sleigh was heading toward the Winter Palace. “I want to die there,” the tsar kept repeating. Alexander II had been mortally wounded by a bomb made in that same Petersburg apartment. The bomb that killed the Orthodox tsar had been disguised as an Easter cake, a fine-looking Easter gift—the young people had not overlooked the irony.

Then a coach under escort sped past Volkov. A huge, heavy, bald man and a thirteen-year-old boy were sitting in the coach—the new Tsar Alexander III and his thirteen-year-old son Nicholas, who that day became heir to the Russian throne.

The entire life of the soldier standing guard that day, Alexander Volkov,
would be linked with this boy sitting in the coach. His life would rush by between two regicides.

Meanwhile Vera Figner and her friends had already learned of the mortal wounds to Alexander II. Their gruesome success evoked a strange exultation in the young woman: “In my agitation I could scarcely get the words out, that the tsar had been killed, and I wept: the terrible nightmare that had oppressed young Russia for so many decades had been broken off. All had been redeemed by this moment, this tsarist blood we had shed.” And they embraced for joy—the young people who had killed the tsar-reformer.

“The revolutionary is a doomed man.” This is a quotation from Mikhail Bakunin’s famous *Revolutionary Catechism*, according to which the revolutionary must break with the civilized world’s laws and conventions and renounce any personal life and blood ties in the name of the revolution. He must despise society and be ruthless toward it (and must himself expect no mercy from society and be prepared to die), intensifying the people’s misfortunes by all possible means, spurring them on toward revolution. He must know that all means are justified by a single goal: revolution.

They had resolved to smear the stalled Russian cart of history with blood. And roll on, roll on—to 1917, the Ekaterinburg cellar, and the Great Red Terror.

Tsar Alexander II passed away in the palace in agony.

This picture: the murdered grandfather bleeding profusely. It would not quit Nicholas his whole life long.

In blood, he became heir to the throne.

“A tsar’s blood shed” gave birth to his diary. Nicholas was the heir, and now his life belonged to history. Starting with the New Year he must record his life.

**His Family**

As a result of countless dynastic marriages, by the twentieth century scarcely any Russian blood flowed in the veins of the Russian Romanov tsars.

But “Russian tsar” is a nationality in itself, and the German princess who ascended to the Russian throne and brought glory on herself in Russian history as Empress Catherine the Great felt truly *Russian*. So Russian that when her own brother prepared to visit Russia she was indignant: “Why? There are more than enough Germans in Russia without him.” Nicholas’s father,
Alexander III, was in his appearance and habits a typical Russian landowner who loved everything Russian. The proud formula “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality” flowed in the non-Russian blood of Russia’s tsars.

Nicholas's mother was the Danish Princess Dagmar; his grandmother, the Danish queen. He called his grandmother “the mother-in-law of all Europe”; her numerous daughters, sons, and grandchildren had allied nearly all the royal houses, uniting the continent in this entertaining manner from England to Greece.

Princess Dagmar was first engaged to the elder son of Alexander II—Nicholas. But Nicholas died from consumption in Nice, and Alexander became heir to the throne. Along with his title, the new heir took his deceased brother's fiancee for his wife; on his deathbed Nicholas himself joined their hands. The Danish Princess Dagmar became Her Imperial Highness Marie Feodorovna.

The marriage was a happy one. They had many children. Nicholas’s father proved to be a marvelous family man: his main precept was to preserve the foundations of the family and the state.

Constancy was the motto of Nicholas’s father, the future Emperor Alexander III.

Reform—that is, change and quest—had been the motto of Nicholas’s grandfather, Emperor Alexander II.

His grandfather’s frequent enthusiasms for new ideas found a unique extension in his many romantic involvements. Alexander II’s love affairs followed one after the other, until she—the beauty—appeared: Princess Catherine Dolgorukaya. To everyone’s astonishment, Alexander II was faithful to his new mistress. Children were born. An official second imperial family appeared, and Alexander II spent nearly all his time with them. And when the revolutionaries began their tsar hunt, Nicholas’s grandfather took an extravagant step: for their safety he settled both his families in the Winter Palace.

In 1880 Nicholas’s grandmother, Marie Feodorovna, Alexander II’s official wife, died, whereupon Nicholas’s grandfather married his mistress. Although the intelligent and punctilious Princess Catherine was quick to renounce all rights to the throne for her eldest son, who knew? Today, perhaps tomorrow, the impossible...Alexander II was sixty-two years old, but he was at the dawn of his powers and health. Nicholas’s father took a marked step into the background. But now, just a few months after Alexander II’s shameful marriage, a bomb exploding on the Ekaterininsky Canal carried Nicholas's
grandfather to his grave. Naturally, Nicholas heard what people around him were saying: divine retribution for the sinful tsar!

In the fall of 1882 Nicholas sang a song which so impressed him that when he got home he wrote it out on the inside cover of his very first diary ("The song we sang while one of us hid"). This folk song about the old hag death combing out the curls of the slain lad opens his diary. Yet another mysterious portent.

"Began writing my diary on the 1st of January 1882. In the morning drank hot chocolate, dressed in my Life Guard reserves uniform. . . . Took a walk in the garden with Papa. We chopped and sawed wood and made a great bonfire. Went to bed at about half past 9. . . . Papa, Mama, and I received two deputations. Presented me with a magnificent wooden platter inscribed 'The peasants of Voronezh to their Tsarevich.' With bread and salt and a Russian towel."

Games at Gatchina, visits with his cousins the grand dukes, who were his age. The large Romanov family.

"This morning the canaries were moved into a small wooden cage. . . . Sandro [Alexander] and Sergei . . . skated and played ball, and when Papa left we started a snowball fight."

Boys at play. A carefree life. Sergei and Sandro were the sons of Grand Duke Michael, his grandfather's brother.

Nicholas (or Nicky, as everyone called him) was especially friendly with Michael's sons. Sergei, Sandro, and George Mikhailovich were his diary's favorite characters, the comrades of his childhood games, his youth. The eldest was also a Nicholas, later the distinguished liberal historian Nicholas Romanov, who looked bemusedly on their play. He would always regard Emperor Nicky with gentle irony.

Later, outside at the Fortress of Peter and Paul, Nicholas Mikhailovich and George Mikhailovich would be executed, and Sergei Mikhailovich would lie at the bottom of a mine shaft with a bullet in his head.

"We worked in the garden. Cleared three trees that had fallen on top of one another. Then made a huge bonfire. Mama came to look at our bonfire it was so inviting."

Burning, burning, a huge bonfire in the dark of night. Many years later this gray-eyed adolescent would kindle another bonfire in which an empire would perish.
All this went on at Gatchina, where Alexander III shut himself in with his family after his father's assassination. The tsar appeared in Petersburg from the New Year until Lent, during which time he gave royal balls whose Asiatic splendor stunned the foreign emissaries. But this was window dressing. The family's real life was at Gatchina, where they lived in a magnificent palace whose formal rooms were empty. Alexander and his family occupied the mezzanine, once the servant's quarters. His numerous family lived in small rooms so narrow one could scarcely bring in a piano. The shade of his murdered father haunted Alexander III. There was a chain of sentries along the fence, guards around the palace, and guards inside the park. The life of the young Nicholas began with a prison accent.

Meanwhile, the young soldier Alexander Volkov was beginning to make a career for himself: he was brought into the inner Palace Guard. After midnight he watched the emperor fish on the lake.

A moonlit night over the Gatchina park. Volkov stood all alone on the bank, demonstrating the guard's small numbers. The real guard, comprising thirty men, was hiding in the bushes around the lake. Beyond the tsar's boat was another guard with a convoy.

In the tsar's boat the huntsman held up a lantern, the fish swam toward the light, and the huge, heavy tsar speared the surfacing fish.

Fishing and hunting at times even pushed back affairs of state. "Europe can wait while the Russian tsar fishes." This aphorism of the powerful monarch, the master of one-sixth of the earth's surface, circulated through the newspapers of the world.

Nicholas was taken hunting and fishing, but more often his father took Michael, the younger brother. The hardy rascal Michael was his father's and mother's favorite.

The tsar is drinking tea with guests on the balcony, and below Misha, as Michael is called, is playing. The father gets an idea for a bullyish prank: he takes a watering can and douses the boy from above with water. Misha is pleased. Misha laughs, the tsar laughs, the guests laugh.

But suddenly, an unexpected cry: "And now, Papa, your turn."

The tsar obediently presents his bald spot — and Misha douses him with the watering can from head to foot.

But the father's iron will broke Michael's childish independence. Both brothers would grow up good, gentle, and timid, as often happens with children of strong fathers.
This was when Nicholas grasped what is for an adolescent the bitterest truth: They don’t love me, they love my brother! His adolescent insight did not make him mean, sullen, or less obedient. He simply became reticent.

Alexander appointed the distinguished K. P. Pobedonostsev, chief procurator of the Holy Synod, Nicholas’s tutor.

Alexander III ascended to the throne with an understandable logic: there were reforms under my father, and what was the result? His murder. So Pobedonostsev was called to power. The desiccated old man with protruding ears had the dry wheeze of a grand inquisitor wasted away from fasting.

Pobedonostsev would explain that Russia was a special country where reforms and a free press would inevitably result in decadence and disorder. “Like frost he inhibits any further decay, but nothing will grow under him,” a Russian commentator pinpointed Pobedonostsev. But the frost-man was then already feeling the heat of the fiery luminescence advancing on the empire: revolution. Who was going to stand up to it? This kind boy whose nature was anything but that of a tsar? Pobedonostsev respected Nicholas as the future monarch, but he could not love him. Nicholas found no love in his tutor. Instead of love he got—the army!

Alexander III had the nickname “Peacemaker.” He avoided wars, but the army loomed over society as imposing as ever. The army, which had always made Russia strong. “Not by its laws, nor its civilization, but by its army,” as Count Witte, the powerful minister and adviser to both Nicholas and his father, wrote. “Russia as a state is neither commercial nor agricultural but military, and its calling is to be the wrath of the world,” said a Cadet Corps textbook. The army meant obedience and diligence above all else. Both these qualities, which the shy youth already possessed, the army would foster ruinously.

The heir to the throne did his service in the Guards. Ever since the eighteenth century Russia’s wealthiest, most distinguished families had sent their children to Petersburg and the Guards. The richest grandees, having retired to live out their days away from Petersburg in hospitable Moscow’s magnificent palaces, sent their children off to Petersburg and the Guards. Drinking, gypsies, duels—these were the Guards’ gentlemanly occupations. The Guards had been responsible for all of Russia’s palace revolutions. Guards had brought the Romanov empresses—Elizabeth and Catherine—to the throne and killed Emperors Peter III and Paul I. But the Guards had done more than plot against the imperial court. In all of Russia’s great battles, the Guards had been in the van.
Nicholas began his service in a mixed regiment of a Guards battalion. The first half of the company was commanded by the heir, and the second by Alexander Volkov, who was a noncommissioned officer by then. At Alexandria, the tsar’s dacha, Volkov taught the heir the art of marching.

Nicholas adored physical exercise, and he was indefatigable. During his trials with Volkov in the art of square-bashing, his middle brother George would watch from the bushes. George, chronically ill and painfully ashamed of his persistent weakness, followed his brother’s every move ecstatically.

“6 May 1888. Am twenty and becoming quite the old man. . . .

“7 May. Liked this costume ball very much. All the ladies wore white dresses, and the men wore red. . . . Danced the mazurka and cotillion.”

Balls, the regiment, a life without care.

Then on October 17, 1888, for the first time, miraculously, Nicholas eluded death when the tsar’s train had a terrible wreck at Borki, not far from Kharkov (and for the first time in his life the number 17 appeared in conjunction with calamity).

“A fateful day for us all. We might all have been killed, but by the Lord’s will we were not. During breakfast our train jumped the rails. The dining car and coach were demolished, but we emerged from it all unscathed. However, 20 people were killed and 16 injured.”

So the holiday resumed: 1889.

“Returned from the ball at half past 1. Slept through my first lesson. . . .

“A gay old time getting an eyeful of that gypsy. Returned home at 2. . . .

“Surprised at awakening in Catchina. The sight of my room lit by sunshine. After tea fenced at Mama’s.

“Couldn’t help myself and began to smoke, assuring myself this is all right. . . .

“At midnight went with Papa after grouse. Sat in the cabin, the mating place was remarkable. Slept until 10. . . .

“6 May. . . . Was made a member of Council of State and Committee of Ministers.”

The pleasure with which gentle, retiring Nicholas threw himself into the unruly world of the Guards was striking. Nicholas’s regimental superior was his father’s brother Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich. A powerful giant, the peremptory and strict commander was the unhappiest of men. Profoundly religious, he suffered endlessly from what he felt were unnatural inclinations: Sergei Alexandrovich was a homosexual.
The Guards, a closed male fraternity, encouraged pederasty and heavy drinking.

The tradition of the hard-drinking Russian Guards! The poetry of that famous hero and hard drinker the hussar Denis Davydov was set to music and his ballads sung all through the Guards’ barracks:

Old men! I remember you,
Draining differ round the fire,
Your noses red and blue.

“Yesterday [during training at Krasnoe Selo] we drank 125 bottles of champ[agne]. Was sen[try] for the division. At 1 took my squadron out on the battlefield. At 5 an inspection of military institutes under a pouring rain.”

But by that night he was draining the dipper again.

“Woke up and felt as if a squadron had spent the night in my mouth.” It was all as Davydov had devised: they drank “elbows” (filling a glass the length of a forearm and draining it at one draft), “the staircase” (setting glasses all the way up the stairs and emptying them one step at a time, ascending, but often falling down dead drunk before reaching the top), or “till the wolves” (stripping naked and jumping out in the savage frost, where an obliging barman carried out a tub of champagne for the gentlemen guardsmen, who sipped from the tub, howling all the while like wolves). People said this strange entertainment had been dreamed up personally by Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, who was famous for his remarkable, truly guardsmanly drinking.

“16 March 1892. . . . Have never seen such a profusion of gypsies. There were four choruses. We supped, like that time, with the ladies. Sojourned in vinous fumes until 6 in the morning.”

Amid these rather awful, noisy amusements Nicholas had the good sense to remain gentle, chaste, and lonely. There was the anticipation of love, ideal love.

“19 January 1890. . . . Don’t know how to explain it but a mood has come over me: neither sad nor happy. Almost over now, drank tea and read.”

Only she could break this loneliness.

A rather short young officer strides briskly with the crowd down Nevsky Avenue.

Meanwhile, the coach of Petersburg’s governor rolls down Nevsky as the governor searches the faces on the street.
Finally he spots the young officer, the carriage slows, and respectfully but firmly the governor transmits the father’s order to return to the palace.

Vera Leonidovna Yureneva:

“He adored walking... There was a rumor that he had met a beautiful Jewess on a walk... And a romance had sprung up. There was a lot of gossip about that in Petersburg. But his father acted as decisively as ever: the Jewess was sent away along with her entire household. Nicholas was in her home while all this was going on. ‘Only over my dead body,’ he declared to the governor. Matters did not go as far as dead bodies, however. He was an obedient son, and eventually he was broken and taken away to his father at Anichkov Palace, and the Jewess was never seen in the capital again.”

“Alix H.”

That was how he referred to her then in his diary: Alix H.

I’m sitting in the archive. Before me is a stack of papers. All that remains from the life of Alix H.

They too have made a journey, and they bear the dust of the terrible Ipatiev house.

Endless letters from Nicholas, hundreds of letters. Her diaries—or, rather, what remains of them. Evidently she burned her diaries early in March of 1917, when the empire perished.

What survives are brief notes for the years 1917 and 1918, the last two years of her life.

Notebooks with excerpts from the works of theologians and philosophers, lines from favorite poems she had copied out: Maikov, PET Lermontov, Pushkin, Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov (a well-known poet from the first part of the century who wrote under the pseudonym K.R.), a certain Bronitskaya, and again Pushkin, and again Fet, and again K.R.—her poets.

But here is one other particular notebook. It is also a collection of utterances, true from a somewhat unlikely philosopher who ruled over the mind and soul of the brilliantly educated Alix H.: the half-literate Russian peasant Grigory Rasputin.

The English Alix, the daughter of the Grand Duke of Hesse-Darmstadt, Louis IV, was born in Darmstadt in May 1872.

Hills grown up in forest descended into the misty valley of the Rhine, places beloved of Goethe. Here lay Darmstadt, the tiny capital of a tiny German state, the grand duchy of Hesse. At the season of Alix’s birth the town
would have been drowning in flowers, and in the palace museum hung a tender Madonna of Hans Holbein.

Alix’s father, Louis IV, sovereign of Hesse, was married to Alice, daughter of the English Queen Victoria. The Exalted English Alice was renowned for her fanatical (albeit wholly platonic) passion for the famous German philosopher and theologian David Strauss. Her worship of Strauss was a deification reminiscent of her daughter’s future deification of Rasputin. Both the nerves and the dreadful headaches—everything that led Alice to an early grave—remind us very much of the portrait of her daughter Alix. The mother passed down more than just her name.

To this familial exaltation was added the dark memory of the ages. In the blood of Alix H. flowed the blood of Queen Mary Stuart.

Alix’s mother died at age thirty-five, leaving a large family, of whom Alix was the youngest. Her oldest sister, Victoria, married Prince Louis of Battenberg, who would become commander-in-chief of the British Navy; her second sister, Ella, would marry Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich. Finally Irene, the third sister, became the wife of Prince Henry, her first cousin and the brother of German Emperor Wilhelm II. Thus, by forging familial bonds, these Hesse princesses would unite the Russian, English, and German royal houses.

After her mother’s death, Alix’s grandmother took the child under her wing. Her grandmother, the English Queen Victoria, observed the constitution scrupulously. Power belonged to Parliament, sage counsel to the queen. Alix H. was one of the liberal queen’s favorite granddaughters.

A pale blond little beauty. For her radiant nature her mother called her “Sunny.” For her mischief and recalcitrance, the German court had called her spitzhuhe (“scamp,” “troublemaker”). Was the orphan, taken away from her sisters, brother, and father, really so very lighthearted and gay? Or is that how her grandmother Victoria chose to see her? And did Alix, with the cunning of a child, make a point of playing up to her grandmother’s expectations? She was a troublemaker, however.

Queen Victoria did not favor the German princes, especially Emperor Wilhelm. And Alix, who spoke and thought in English, must have smiled at the old queen’s caustic jokes. But she must have missed them as well—her father, her brother Ernie, and the blooming Hesse landscape. And her family. That large family that fell apart when she was six years old.

When she married she would attempt to re-create the same kind of large family.
The lonely girl made the circuit of the royal courts of her numerous relatives.

In 1884 twelve-year-old Alix was brought to Russia. Her sister Ella was marrying Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich. Her cousin, the future German Emperor Wilhelm II (“Uncle Willy”) followed beautiful blond Alix’s debut at the Russian court closely. The wedding of Sergei Alexandrovich—the brother of the Russian tsar to a German princess—could have a reprise. The heir to the Russian throne was already sixteen, and the Hesse line occupied a special place in the history of the Romanov family. Emperor Paul’s first wife, who died in childbirth, had come from that line. And Empress Maria Alexandrovna, Nicholas’s grandmother, was also a princess of Hesse-Darmstadt.

This was how they came to meet for the first time: Alix and Nicky. It was an idyll: he fell in love with her at first sight. And there was a day when they found themselves in Peterhof, at Alexandria, the small imperial dacha.

Much later, a year after their marriage, Nicholas and Alix would come back to Alexandria, and Nicholas would write in his diary, “Rained the entire day, after coffee we went upstairs . . . we saw the window we had both cut our names into in 1884.” (She liked to draw on glass with the precious stone on her ring. One can see her signature on the grand windows of the Winter Palace.)

Subsequently they would come to love old Alexandria, which preserved a precious memory.

A window and a couple. They were looking out at that day in 1884. Standing at a window at the inception of their destiny.

It was after this that Nicholas spoke with his sister Xenia, the only one with whom the not very sociable English-Hessian princess had become friendly. And Xenia gave him her advice.

He asked his mother for a diamond brooch, which he gave to Alix. She accepted it. Nicholas was happy, but he did not know Alix H. Her consciousness had been formed in the puritanical English court. Uncompromising, militantly stern, and proud—these were the necessary attributes of an English princess. Alix decided she had acted improperly. The next day, while dancing with him at a children’s ball in Anichkov Palace, she stabbed the brooch into his hand. Silently, without a word.

Also without a word, Nicholas gave the brooch to his sister Xenia.

Only to take it back ten years later.

This brooch would know a terrible fate.
DMITRY BYKOV (born 1967) is one of Russia’s most prominent and admired writers and public intellectuals. His often controversial and always engaging insights can be found in newspapers, magazines, television and radio programs and, of course, his own polemical novels. Regardless of his ubiquity and capacity for provocation, Bykov is recognized as a superb critic, essayist, novelist and poet, whose outstanding talent has been widely recognized.
Dmitry Bykov

Mozharovo

Translated by James Rann

In Memory of Valery Frid

“Right, I’ll say it one more time and that’s it,” said Koshmin, a tall, humorless man, more like some big-deal detective than an aid administrator. “We’ll be stopping in Mozharovo for five minutes. That gives them enough time to decouple the carriage with the aid. If you make any attempt to open the windows or doors, I will proceed as ordered. So don’t take offense afterwards.”

Vasiliev was scared enough anyway, and now there was a July storm thickening outside the window too: the lilac clouds had swollen up, almost touching the solid mass of thick pine forest. The gray uninhabited little villages along the side of the tracks stared out gloomily: no wildlife, no people, just a large-headed boy sitting in a porch, seeing off the train with an unwelcoming stare which had nothing childish about it. Vasiliev sometimes saw this same stare from the incurably insane, as if they were aware of their pitiful state but incapable of changing it.

“Okay, I won’t,” Vasiliev said with irritation. “You already warned us five times in Moscow.”

“We warn everyone,” Koshmin said gruffly, “but there have been some who have opened the door.”

“Well in here that window doesn’t even open.”

“Which is why Gorshenin, who made the trip before you, broke the window with a bottle,” Koshmin informed him darkly.

“Well there’s no bottle in here. And there’s those bars there on the outside.”
“You could easily stick an arm through those bars. To hand over some bread or something. And there are people who have stuck their arms through. You haven’t seen it, but I have.”

Vasiliev got annoyed by the way Koshmin had seen so much but never explained what had happened. He couldn’t bear lack of clarity.

“You’d be better off telling people beforehand, Georgii Valentinovich.” Vasiliev was only twenty-five and he addressed the inspector respectfully. “Who are these sirens that are impossible to withstand? Honestly, it’d be easier. Forewarned is forearmed.”

“But what don’t you know?” Koshmin eyed him warily. “You’ve been told everything: at the station people will come up to the train and they’ll beg you to let them in, or open the window, or take a letter for them, or give them some bread. You must not accept anything, and opening the windows or doors is not permitted under any circumstances. Mozharovo is on the list of localities at which exiting the train is forbidden—what’s not to understand?”

“Yeah, I know. But you could at least say what happened there. If it’s an infected zone or whatever.”

“When you were sent here, did they give you a briefing?” Koshmin asked.

“Yeah, they did.”

“And did they go through the list of localities?”

“They did.”

“So what don’t you understand? What infected zone? Just an ordinary humanitarian aid zone as determined by the national project for the support of the Russian countryside. Everything’ll be alrightio, but there are certain rules, you understand? We don’t just sit here twiddling our thumbs. Our operations are part of a government project. We have to follow the rules. If you’re not going to follow the rules, then I can take you through the consequences.”

“Got it, got it,” said Vasiliev. He couldn’t bear it when people went through things for him. He went through the roof. He also couldn’t bear words like “yok” and “alrightio.” “So why don’t you just shut the windows during that time? Lower some iron blinds or something, shutters, I don’t know.”

“How would that work?” Koshmin frowned. “We’ve got press like yourself on the train. We’ve got international observers on here too. What, should we put them in sealed wagons like cattle? We’ve got a representative of that children’s fund, Meyerson or something. He’s already been making a fuss
about the bars. He doesn’t like looking through bars. He doesn’t know, but I know. He should be praising the Lord that those bars are there.”

People like Koshmin are always convinced that everyone else should give them a deep bow to thank them for their bars, because otherwise it’d be even worse.

“And later it’s not all like this,” he added in mitigation. “There’s just one zone like this on our route, overall there’s only six of them, well, seven. We’ll go through it, and then it’s fine up until the Urals. You can get out, get some boiled potatoes, with dill . . . have a little chat to the inhabitants if you like . . . Nature reserves, wildlife . . . Everything’ll be alright! What do we need shutters for? There’s just two places where we have to be careful, Mozharovo and Kroshino, and the rest of the time you can go where you like, help yourself, I won’t say a word.”

Vasiliev tried to imagine what went on in Mozharovo. Back when his group—a three-man TV crew in the next carriage and him from Vedomosti—had been briefed prior to the departure of the first aid train crossing Russia as part of the national project, their instructor had clearly kept some things to himself. Each journalist was assigned a guy from MinAg, the Ministry of Agriculture, who looked and behaved like a professional bodyguard—what’re all these precautions for on an ordinary trip? Of course, it had become dangerous to travel between towns recently: local trains were being torn apart, freight trains attacked. There’s nothing you can do about that, that was a national project too—making the seven megalopolises priority development zones, leaving pretty much wild, untended countryside between them, we don’t need all that land. Everyone who could made their way into the cities, and as for what happened to those left behind in the vast expanses of Russia, Vasiliev had only the vaguest of ideas.

But he was a reporter, and one with military experience to boot, and they had sent him on the first aid train to write a report about how the megalopolises were divvying up their surpluses with the rest of the expanse of the country where, rumor had it, they were already even having problems with the electricity supply. True, back in Moscow no one had warned him that at certain stations you wouldn’t be allowed to even poke your head out of the window onto the platform. The cute one from Vesti certainly wouldn’t have gone—she was already complaining about the fact that no bathroom was provided in the carriage. The only bathroom was in the special Meyerson carriage, because he was a philanthropist and God knows how big a billionnaire, makes Gates look like nothing.
The landscape which floated past outside the window was uninhabited and utterly unremarkable, which is what made it especially terrifying: all the time the same empty gray villages, the occasional lonely goat with a red rag on its neck, the occasional quiet man with a scythe, mowing a gully on his own—the mower also looked in the direction of the train, he didn’t see trains often these days, and Vasiliev didn’t manage to see his face; a field flashed by, with a tractor rusting away in solitude—and then the gloomy pine forest stretched on again, the lilac cloud billowing above it. The remains of a factory flashed by quickly behind a half-collapsed concrete wall—rusty pipes, a gantry crane; there was a stretch of sparse woodland through which Vasiliev managed to spot a former military installation behind rusty barbed wire on which someone’s quilted jacket had been left hanging—some lads had probably clambered over to get at the equipment. The train slowed down.

“What was there before at least, in Mozharovo?” Vasiliev asked to distract himself from the creeping sense of horror. He knew that MinAg didn’t just appoint bodyguards randomly—the people that worked there now were serious guys, a bit tougher than even the hardline generals. “Maybe some businesses or something?”

“A brickworks,” Koshmin replied grudgingly after a pause. “It went broke a long time ago, about thirty years back. And little things, a shoe factory, a furniture factory . . . A puppet theater, who knows . . . I didn’t go there then.”

“And is there anything there now?”

“If people live there, there must be,” Koshmin said with such irritation that Vasiliev thought it better to stop talking.

“Basically, I’ve warned you,” Koshmin said after a pause. “You’re better off keeping away from the window. If you’ve got weak nerves, I’ll lower the curtain. But, basically, as a journalist, you should look. Just stay put.”

“Okay, okay,” Vasiliev said automatically and fixed his gaze on Mozharovo station as it slowly floated past outside the window.

At first there was nothing. He was imagining all sorts—monsters and freaks flinging themselves at the bars of the carriage, but all there was was a solitary old woman wandering down the platform holding a bucket, looking imploringly through the windows.

“Crabs!” she shouted. “Who wants some crabs? Who wants fresh crabs!”

Vasiliev really loved crabs and suddenly desperately wanted some, but didn’t move a muscle. The old woman went up to their carriage and brought her kind, haggard face up to the glass. However much Vasiliev examined it he couldn’t make out anything horrific about it.
“Crabs!” she repeated gently. “Come on, who fancies some crabs?”

“Quiet,” Koshmin said through gritted teeth. His face was twisted in pain—all the more terrible, because, in Vasiliev’s opinion, there was absolutely no reason for it. It was impossible that he wanted crabs so much and was torn between his appetite and his instructions. The old woman turned away and wandered on sadly. The station gradually filled up with people—they were sluggish, clearly exhausted, moving slowly, as if in slow motion. A young mother with a child in her arms came up to the window; the child was yellow, wrinkled, and limp like a rag doll.

“Spare us something, please, for the Lord’s sake,” she said, quiet and plaintive. Despite the thick glass Vasiliev heard every word she said. “I’ve got no job, no husband. For Christ’s sake, anything.”

Vasiliev looked with shame at the provisions which he had not had time to tidy away. The food on the aid trains was fantastic, MinAg did not spare any expense. Spread out on the little table in the compartment were two types of sausage, Dutch cheese, “weeping,” as it’s called, and pâté de foie gras with walnuts, so called Strasbourg pâté. It was too late to hide the food—the beggar girl had seen everything. Vasiliev sat there all red. A little girl walked along the length of the train: she had a bright, moving little face, as if she’d come straight from those Christmas prints in which the freezing little girls selling matches all had to look like angels, all pink, as if before they ended up on the frozen street they’d lived in well-off families with filling dinners and baths every morning. Vasiliev even reckoned he’d seen this little girl on a postcard that his family had kept from prerevolutionary times—on this postcard his great-great-great-grandad had wished his great-great-great-grandmother a happy new year in 1914. The little girl went up to the window, raised her eyes and said trustingly: “My mummy ’s sick. Really sick, she can’t get up. Misters, even just a little something, eh?”

She didn’t whine when she begged, but smiled, as if she didn’t want to pressure them into pity and was ashamed of her position.

“I know a song,” she said. “I’ll sing you a song. Winter has not past, and there’s snow upon the gro-o-und, but the swallow’s homeward bo-o-ound, o’er oceans deep and vast, fly fly, little swallow, fly on . . .”

Vasiliev had known this song since nursery and always cried like he had as child when he heard it. He looked at Koshmin. The latter did not take his eyes off him and registered every movement—there was no hope of tricking him and maybe just sneakily throwing some money or a packet of sausage out of the window; and there’s the bars . . .
“So tell me,” said Vasiliev, hating himself for his nervous, ingratiating
tone, “explain to me what would the harm be if right now we gave her a bit
of bread or three rubles?”

“Who do you mean?” Koshmin asked harshly.

“You know, that little girl.”

“A girl?” Koshmin asked me again.

What’s he gone deaf or something, Vasiliev thought. Maybe he’s totally
mad, bloody psycho, they’ve given me a freak, and now because of him I
can’t give a kid some food.

“Can you not see her or what?!?”

“I can see her,” Koshmin replied slowly. “Sit quietly, if not, I won’t be
responsible.”

Meanwhile another old woman had come up to the window, she was
small, hunched over, specky, with the face of a provincial schoolteacher. In
her trembling, gnarled paw she held out little knitted slippers right up to
Vasiliev’s face, the sort that are still called booties, his own booties were still
kept at home, his late granny had crocheted them for him. If it wasn’t for
grandad’s pension and living in Moscow, his late granny could have been
standing just like that in her old age.

“Get your slippers,” the old lady implored us. “Quality slippers, pure
wool. Please. For your little one or someone . . . Get your slippers . . .”

So here they are, the sirens of Mozharovo. These are the people we can’t
go out and see. We’ve fenced ourselves off from our own people with steel
bars, and we sit here scoffing Strasbourg pâté. Vasiliev stood up, but Koshmin
somehow jabbed a steely finger into his abdomen in such a way that the jour-
nalist bent over and collapsed right there onto the bench.

“I warned you,” Koshmin said with disgusting pleasure.

“You warned me,” Vasiliev croaked through gritted teeth. “Bastards the
lot of you, shameless bastards. What have you done . . .”

“Us?” asked Koshmin. “We haven’t done anything. We should be asking
you, what you have done.”

All this time the parade of unfortunates continued outside the window:
an elderly, dangerously overweight man with a kind, confused face was lean-
ing right on the bars.

“Gentleman,” he babbled, his voice breaking, “gentleman, for the love
of God . . . I’m not a local, I’m not like them. You have to understand, I’m
here by accident. I’m here by accident, it wasn’t my idea. Three months
now I haven’t been able to get out, gentlemen, I’m begging you. Open up
just for a second, we won’t let anyone in. Gentlemen. You can’t just leave me here . . . You have to understand . . . I’m a man of culture, I’m like you. It’s unbearable . . .

“I understand completely,” he started again. “I have every sympathy with you. But I’m begging you, begging you . . . I’ll swear on whatever you want . . . Look!” He had a sudden flash of inspiration and pulled a battered piece of paper from the pocket of his crumpled gray raincoat. “It’s all here! A business trip, gentlemen, a business trip . . . I’m begging you . . . I’m begging you . . .”

At that moment he looked to his left, and his face was a picture of horror. Some terrifying figure in a diving suit moved inexorably closer, yanked his clutching fingers from the bars on the carriage, and dragged him away behind him—either some local monster or the forces of law and order.

“Aaaaa!” the elderly man shrieked with a piercing cry, all the time still looking back in the hope that some help would come from the carriage. “Save me! No!”

“Who’s that?” Vasiliev said with just his lips.

“Who is who?”

“That guy . . . in the diving suit . . .”

“What suit?”

“You know, the one who took that guy away . . .”

“The police, probably,” Koshmin shrugged. “As for the diving suit, it’s ordinary protection. You don’t go wandering round here without protection.”

The station was starting to fill up with people. Only five minutes had passed, but the poor and the crippled were trudging, crawling and dragging themselves along the length of the platform—they were the typical old folk, women and children you’d see in some Soviet war film, who have come to see off the soldiers with no hope of expecting them back. The soldiers leave, the Germans come, no one saves them. In every look you could read the uneasy, restrained helplessness of an invalid living under sufferance in someone else’s house, afraid of being a burden. The sort of people who are scared to bother other people with any request, because in return they might lose the last things they have. You could read on all their faces a long-established meek humility, all their eyes shone with a shy plea for a mercy which no one really believed in. Vasiliev was surprised most of all by one girl, just a little girl of fifteen: she went up closer to the carriage than the others, leaning on two crudely made crutches. She didn’t ask for anything, but just looked up with such pain
that Vasilev recoiled from the window—it was like her gaze had punched him in the face.

“What am I to do, ah?” she whined, but her tone was not quizzical but commanding, and heartrending, as if after those words Vasilev should jump up and dash out on to the platform to save the whole benighted crowd.

“Lord, what am I to do? Surely you can’t just do nothing, surely this can’t be it! There must be some mercy somewhere! What have we done to everyone! You can’t treat real living people like this…”

This Vasilev could not withstand. After all, he’d done his time in the forces, plus he went climbing, so he managed to flatten Koshmin with his trademark sharp left hook, and then ran off into corridor; but there was another conductor guarding him there, too. The conductor turned out to be very professional—in Russian Railways, and in MinAg too, they earned their Strasbourg pâté. Vasilev couldn’t move his right hand for two days afterwards.

“No exit,” the conductor said in a whisper, grabbing him by the arm and shoving him back into his compartment. “No exit. It’s like on a submarine. You should know. You know what happens on a submarine? It was strange to hear this reassuring whisper from someone who had just put Vasilev in an armlock with the professionalism of a genuine special forces agent. “On a submarine, when there’s an accident, they batten down all the sections. Just imagine, people in the next section are banging on the bulkhead, your crewmates, your comrades. And you can’t let them in, because that’s regulations. In the naval regulations it says that you can’t open the bulkheads during an accident. There are people dying in there, but you can’t let them in. It’s like that here, except here they’re not your comrades.”

“Bastards!” Vasilev started shouting, made crazy by impotent hatred. “Bastards the lot of you! Who’s not your comrade?! Are old men and sick kids not your comrades?! What have you done to the country with this sodding ‘stability’ of yours, what have you gone and done, so that you’re afraid to go out among your own people. These are your people, your people, that you’re hiding from behind these bars! You won’t spare them a bit of bread?! You won’t spare one measly ruble?! I hate you, I hate you, you scum!”

“Shout away, shout away,” said the conductor, neither threatening nor approving. “It’ll make you feel better. What’s he so stressed about?” he turned to Koshmin.

“Journalist,” smirked Koshmin.

“Ah . . . Well, he might as well take a look, it’ll help. There haven’t been any journalists here in Mozharovo for a long time . . .”
“What’re they doing messing about with the carriage still?” Koshmin asked the conductor disapprovingly. They chatted informally, like colleagues. “They should’ve decoupled it ages ago and we’d have been on our way . . .” “They can’t do it quickly,” said the conductor. “They’ve got to faff around for at least twenty minutes.” “They got weak,” Koshmin smirked again.

At that moment the train shuddered and started moving. A few little girls in faded rags set off running after the carriage—though they didn’t so much run as crawl, staggering about and immediately running out of breath; Vasiliev looked away. “Look, sorry, journalist,” said the conductor, taking a breath. “You’ll be grateful.” “Mmhhm,” said Vasiliev, rubbing his shoulder. “I’ll be grateful for everything you’ve done, all my life. Say thank you that it wasn’t to the death, that it wasn’t my eye, wasn’t my mouth . . . Thanks, I’ll never forget it. There’s this story—you won’t have read it, but I’ll tell you it in my own words, for our general edification . . . It’s called ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.’ The author’s name won’t mean anything to you anyway, so we’ll skip it. Basically, there is this prosperous city called Omelas. And everyone there is happy. And it’s wall-to-wall bliss and public festivities . . .” “And in a miserable cellar behind a door that’s always locked,” Koshmin interrupted coolly, “there sits a simpleminded little boy, hungry and covered in filth. He keeps murmuring: let me go, let me go. And if they let him go, the whole city of Omelas and all its prosperity will go to hell. Right? And the kid doesn’t even know the situation he’s in, and what’s more he’s retarded. He’s a spaz, you might say. Is it worth a single tear from a child and so on. We’ve read it. Ursula Le Guin. Our department is pretty well-read.” “What department?” asked Vasiliev dumbfounded. “MinAg,” said Koshmin and winked to the conductor. He replied joyfully with a toothy grin. “But if you’ve read all that . . .” Vasiliev began, his voice disconsolate. “Listen here, journalist.” Koshmin leant toward him across the table. “Have you got a thought or two in that head or has your brain gone to mush completely already? Could you hear them alright?” “Who’s them?” “Their voices, I don’t know who you could hear. You hear them alright?” “Well,” Vasiliev nodded, unsure what the aid administrator was getting at.
“And that glass is thick. That glass is very thick, journalist. But you could hear them as if they were standing right next to you, no? And you saw exactly the things that would have the most effect on you, right? Something from your childhood, I bet.”

“What about you?” murmured the shocked Vasiliev. “What did you see?”

“You don’t need to know what I saw!” Koshmin barked. “There’s all sorts I could have seen! Everyone sees something different here, that’s one of their powers! It’s always interesting to hear afterwards, it’s just most times there’s no one to tell. Here all you have to do is open the window a tiny crack into the carriage and all sorts . . .”

“Alright then,” Vasiliev said wearily. He understood everything. Save your windups for someone else. Your department, MinAg, Mind Gone, whatever you call it. You’re good at screwing with people’s brains, that much I know. And you’ve read some science fiction, I see. But there are no idiots that believe you guys, okay? No one watches your TV any more, all that stuff about spies in schools and wreckers in the mines. And as for the ghosts of Mozharovo which only I can see—just give it a rest, alright? Leave it out! I’m not going to write anything anyway, and if I did write it you wouldn’t let it through.”

“What a clown, eh?” The conductor smirked, but immediately grabbed his radio. “This is carriage eight!”

His face went gray and his body limp and he sat down heavily on the bench.

“They opened up in twelve,” he said to Koshmin, barely audibly.

“The correspondents?” asked Koshmin, jumping to his feet.

“The TV crew. Cretins.”

“What—all of them? The lot?”

“What do you reckon? Isn’t it always all of them?”

“What an idiot!” Koshmin whispered fiercely. “I could see in her face that she was an idiot. You should never take ones like her.”

“Okay, speaking ill of the dead and all that,” the conductor said reproachfully.

Vasiliev didn’t yet realize that the dead woman they were talking about was the cute one from Vesti. Everything came to him as if through cotton wool.

“This is no place for women,” Koshmin kept repeating. “I won’t take another one in my life. What they’ll do with the chief conductor back in Moscow, I shudder to think . . .”
“OK, let’s go,” said the conductor. “Got to register it, tidy up . . .”

They left the compartment, Vasiliev followed them.

“Sit down!” Koshmin turned round.

“Ah, it’s okay, he might as well take a look. Maybe he’ll understand then,”

the conductor took Vasiliev’s side.

“On you go then,” the monitor shrugged.

They went through the passenger car of the frightened Meyerson.

“Sorry, a little incident,” Koshmin said in passing in flawless English. Meyerson mumbled something about specified conditions of personal safety. The five carriages which they had to make their way through to get to carriage twelve seemed to Vasiliev to be an endlessly long express train. In passing he would look out of the windows, beyond which the same gray villages still stretched on; the lilac cloud, which had not yet burst, was still hung above them.

There were already three other conductors outside carriage twelve. They made way for Koshmin. Vasiliev looked into the corridor. Half of the windows had been smashed out, the doors to the compartments broken off, the walls crumpled, as if some relentless, terribly strong giant had been scampering around, getting its fill. The roof of the carriage bent slightly up, as if it had been inflated from the inside. The surviving panes of glass were covered in blood, scraps of clothing were scattered all over the corridor, and you could see a gnawed shinbone in the nearest compartment. There was a strange smell in the carriage, tinged with the disgusting smell of blood—putrid, ancient, like the smell in an empty hut where the greasy rages have long since been rotting and the mice are running the show.

“Three minutes,” said one of the conductors. “Just three minutes.”

“How did they . . . get her to open up?” said the second one, who was a bit younger.

“Now you’ll never know,” the first shrugged. “She’s not going to tell you.”

“Go back to your compartment,” Koshmin turned to Vasiliev. “Go and have a smoke, you’re white as a sheet. It’s nothing, all we’ve got to do is get through Kroshino, and then everything’ll be alrightio.”
SERGEI SHARGUNOV (born 1980) is a reporter and columnist for many of Russia’s most important newspapers. He is a committed social and political activist and an acclaimed writer. Shargunov had shown his literary merit with the short story *The Punished Babe*, which won the Debut Prize for young writers and was published in Italian by Minimum Fax in 2005. He is also a winner of the Eureka Prize and the Moscow State Prize.
“Could it be that I’m out of steam already, hmm?” I pondered, casually and bitterly. “So now I’m going to leave it to fate: am I to fall in a machine gun’s line of fire, past the wall of the Caucasus . . .” That was the spring I surrendered my life to powers unseen.

I knew this fellow Alikhan. Born in Vedeno, lived in Moscow. Alikhan didn’t drink and he didn’t smoke, he smelled of the odor of fresh she-wolf’s milk, acrid and faintly sweet. I’ve never sniffed a wolf, but that’s how it always seemed to me: Alikhan smelled like a wolf-cub only just weaned from its mother.

I rang him and inquired about Chechnya. He said his uncle lived in Grozny. “Your real uncle?”

“Nah, but he’s still my uncle . . . a distant uncle . . . He’ll put you up, if I ask him to.”

So off I flew into the unknown.

The plane landed at noon in a damp field. A mountain loomed, great black birds circled. Alikhan’s “distant uncle,” Umar, turned out to be about sixty-five. He met me in Magas, the Ingush airport, and we drove past the pyramids of poplars, past the checkpoint, past soldiers wandering about the shoulder of the road looking for mines, into Chechnya. You got the impression that Umar had made up his mind, the instant he met me, to impress upon me that he was an educated man.

“You’re a journalist? I’m practically one, too. I’m a teacher, I teach Russian language and literature.” A guttural voice, a long and narrow face, a gray bristle of mustache. “Taught all my life. Now it’s . . . let’s just say I have some time off.”

We sat down in a dining room on the second story of a brick building. The building had been destroyed at some point, Umar was in the process of
rebuilding it. The second floor was habitable. The first was still under construction—bare walls, boards, crumbled concrete on the ground.

“You’ll see what our Chechnya’s like,” said a woman named Zainap, who looked like a black hen, without leaving the stove. She was about ten years younger than her husband. “Take a walk around, breath in the . . .”

“Chechya isn’t right,” Umar interrupted her. “I don’t like the word. Chechnya’s the wrong word. It doesn’t sound grand. Chechnya my ashnya! And ‘ch’ isn’t a nice sound. How many good words do you know that begin with ‘ch’?”

I pondered it.

“Chernobyl,” offered Zainap.

“You’ve made my point perfectly!”

Zainap’s spatula gave a loud clang as she flipped the pancake in the hissing pan.

“Charnelhouse,” said Umar, turning the words over thoughtfully, “Chikatilo.”

I laughed: “Champion, charm, cherries!”

“Chancrous cherries.” Umar chewed with his lips, his eyes shone with adolescent competitiveness: “Childishness, cheating.”

“Churlish,” I agreed. “But what name do you prefer?”

He became serious.

“Ichkeria,” he said, mildly. “But better still—Nokhch, the Children of Noah. Then the English butted in. Chechens and Englishmen come from the same stock, didn’t you know?”

Zainap gasped deeply, perhaps at my unenlightened condition, and offered, “Walk around Grozny, Serezha, if you want to.”

I nodded.

“I’ll drop you off in the center of town,” said Umar, “walk about, wander as much as you like, you can find your way back by yourself, then we’ll eat, yes?”

“You’re not a Chechen,” said Zainap, and peered at me intently, scanning my features for something specific. “Don’t be scared. Who’d touch you?”

Leaving fate to take its course, I nodded again.

Umar and I walked out of the yard, climbed into his gray Lada, and he took me into the city. And dropped me off.

“Here,” he said, handing me a scrap of paper, “Tell them this address and they’ll drive you back. Fifty rubles, don’t pay more.”

I was standing by myself in the middle of Grozny. With a sense of abandonment and a calm that I couldn’t quite explain. A camera hung around my neck, over my solar plexus.

It was the weekend, a Saturday. I walked down the main street, moving with
the flow of the noisy crowd, emerging occasionally into shoals of less thickly populated space. I began snapping pictures. The crowd bore me along, people turning to look at me, feeling me out, weighing me. The city floated by in all its magnificent disarray. The newly patched-up facades of the multistory buildings, a sparkling fountain, freshly laid sidewalks, pine trees, the colossal concrete skeleton of a future mosque. And all around: multistory buildings destroyed by bombs, weeds, gates with white letters on rust reading "Beware, minefield!", a windowless and maimed government building on which a few glass letters from the past remained perched here and there, you could guess out the slogan: "Art Belongs to the People!", but all that remained of the first word, Iskusstvo, was Isus, Jesus, as if a postmodernist had selectively knocked out the unnecessary letters. I looked around and took frame after frame: ecstatic banners covered holes in the walls. “You’ve been President, Ramzan Kadyrov, for only a year—the city has risen from the ashes, the people cheer!” or “The smiles of children are our Hero’s reward.” And black and white notices on the poles: “Missing Person . . .”

People were smiling. That seemed strange. I thought they would stick me with a knife or shoot me. But everyone I met happily posed for the camera, passersby came up to ask “Where are you from?” and hearing that I was from Moscow were possessed by a still greater curiosity. The women hawking in the marketplace, the scruffy young guys, a legless invalid pushing himself about in a cart, women wearing scarves on their heads and with coquettish ribbons in their hair, and, of course, the dirty little boys—tens, hundreds of faces turned toward you, and in each a willingness to become a new shot. As if we had agreed upon it in advance. Even the group of bearded men in black. They stopped, raising their rifles skywards. They revealed such a variety of teeth—gold crowns, strong canines, rotted remnants.

“You’re wearing black?” I asked.

“Black is what Kadyrov’s personal guard wears,” said the fattest of them with the brightest black beard, in a dramatic voice.

Then I went into a café, sat in an empty niche in the wall at a rough wooden table, drew the dingy light-blue curtain, and drank a large piala of Kalmyk tea with milk and salt. Then I walked about some more.

“Maybe we could go somewhere?” I asked a girl who had posed for me ecstatically and even, it seemed, with desire.

She scowled with regret.

“I can’t.”

I shot at her repeatedly with my camera.

Then I had to go to the bathroom. I entered the first building I saw, walked
down the corridor, from up ahead came the sound of heavy, clapping hands and cries of passion. It was a boxing ring divided into segments. Dozens of young guys in boxing gloves, naked from the waist up, were fighting each other. They sweated and panted, I took aim and started shooting. Some looked over, baring their teeth to smile energetically, and went on fighting. One boxer leapt to the ropes, bent over the flash, and threw his rubber fist up in the air. I walked on through the building, and again I found myself outside.

“Where can I find a bathroom?”

“Right over there, on Three Idiots Square.”

“Three Idiots?”

“There’s a monument there. An old Soviet one. Three soldiers. Are you going to take my picture? Take my picture, then I’ll tell you more.” And he continued through the flashes: “Three people were shot on that square. After the first war, under Aslan. Three thieves. Shaitans. They led them out and shot them. And the whole city watched.” The camera dangled against my chest again.

“There’s the bathroom. There’s a shed to the right of the monument. See it? With bottles all around it.”

“What’s with the bottles?”

“What do you mean, what’s with them? We’re Muslims. You use paper, we use water. Where are you from?”

“Moscow.”

“My son’s there. And your people killed my other one. They kidnapped him and tortured him and never gave us his body. Take one last picture!”

He grinned broadly into the flash: a strong face, a piercing gaze, a white beard, a papakha on his head like a mountain of buckwheat porridge.

At twilight I flagged down a car going my way and, as Umar predicted, for only a fifty a guy in a sweatsuit drove me to the edge of town—to the brick house. There, I sat far into the night, dining with Umar and Zainap. Meat, pancakes, cognac.

My host pointed to shelves with rows of faded book covers. “My books! Esenin, Lermontov, Kuprin. My son used to read them. They killed my son. When the first war began, we fled to Ingushetia, our children were still in school—a son and a daughter, Adym and Ama. We lived in a train car, froze, starved. A bomb struck our house. We came back. Started rebuilding again. And then the second Chechen war came. In February of 2000, they broke into our house in masks, with rifles. The seized Adym. I shout: ‘And who are you?’ I got the butt of a gun—one blow, another—I fall, and they beat me, break my nose, my ribs. They shove my wife into a corner. My son they took
away. He was a regular kid, he liked to read books. What kind of a fighter was he? They put him in a pit, near where the Khankala aviation base is. One guy survived and told us. He says: we sat for days in the pit without food, without water, we only heard this roaring—the airplanes taking off.”

“I pray for just one thing,” said Zainap with a sigh, “that they didn’t torture him. That they just killed him and that was it.”

“Oh, they tortured them all!” her husband said, cutting her off. “What do you think they did?”

I said nothing.

Finally I hazarded, cautiously: “And your daughter?”

“Ama’s a policeman,” said Umar.

“She’s our tragedy, that girl,” said the woman.

“Stop it,” said Umar, waving his hand dismissively.

“What’s the point of hiding it? It was a bad marriage. She had a child and her husband abandoned them. It’s a disgrace to our family! He’s a bastard. His family says: ‘Your girl is to blame for it all!’ They don’t even want to see the child. She was always such a good little girl. A good housekeeper, and a pretty figure, thick hair, eyes like stars. She lives in Argun with the child. My sister, an old lady, comes over during the day, my little Ama is down at the police station. It’s a boy. Little Zelimkhan. Such a bright little boy, so happy. He doesn’t know his own misery yet. What it’s like—to live in Chechnya and your own father doesn’t accept you!”

“A wonderful, wonderful little boy,” said Umar in an affectionate voice, brightening.

“Now,” began Zainap, who then went out and quickly returned with a yellowed school notebook. “Read this! They’re poems Ama wrote, she was still only a schoolgirl. She was thirteen. ‘To My Brother.’ Read it! You’ll have a chance to meet her.”

“Will you read it out loud?” Umar asked strictly.

I took the notebook and read aloud: Who’s to blame that you are vanished, brother mine?

Your tracks were stolen by those filthy swine,
And now—to where have you been taken?
I cry, why must we be so forsaken?!
Why were our homes invaded by the war
Why has the winter taken you afar?
Russia, we will pay you back
And turn you into smoke most black!

* * *
“Turn you,” I asked, “turn Russia?”

“She was little. She doesn’t think like that any more,” said Zainap.

“She was bitter,” Umar said. “So many were killed. They came and killed them. And what for?”

“Listen,” I said, “but what about the war? Pardon me, but when they were killing everybody who wasn’t a Chechen and throwing them . . .”

“That was the bandits,” Zainap answered. “They stopped me on the street, too, and robbed me. It was that kind of time—lots of crime.”

“They robbed you. But they’d have killed a Russian woman, right?” I asked.

Umar tossed down a shot.

“You Russians were the masters down here,” he said, wiping his mouth and mustache with a sweep of his arm. “I was a teacher in a village. The principal was Zinyakova, a Russian. She made my life hell, she found fault with everything. Remember everything we went through?” he said, turning to his wife.

“I remember, I remember! We wrote letters to the Party. Nothing was done about it. Russians were the bosses everywhere.”

“And then what happened to her?” I asked.

“In Grozny, Russians lived in the center of town,” he continued, as if he didn’t hear me. “In the best buildings, in the big buildings. When Russia started the war, your people were the first to perish. Bombs were falling, Chechens were fleeing the city, going to their relatives, but the Russians just stayed in the city, in the center. You Russians pounded your own people . . .”

“What’s the point of talking? They’re not going to hear us,” Zainap said, getting up. “Is it time for bed already?”

We rose, too.

I turned out the lights in my little room and went to bed. “You’re in Chechnya, you’re in Chechnya!” The phrase pulsated in my mind, making it difficult to sleep.

The door creaked. I sat up in bed. The light went on. Umar was staggering about. In his hand was a gun.

“You aren’t asleep?”

The pistol was aimed at my face.

“No,” I said, squinting.

“Don’t be afraid. It’s my daughter’s gun. She’s a policeman. I’ll introduce you! Okay, go to sleep, go to sleep . . .”

“Here’s the deal,” he told me at breakfast, “I’m giving you to this guy for a day. Our family is getting together today and they’ll pack the whole house. You’ll
go to him for a day, spend the night there, and come back. He’s called Alkhaz. He’s a cop, but he’s okay.”

We got into the car. In the city center, Umar introduced me to Alkhaz and drove away.

Alkhaz wore a police uniform, he reminded you of a monkey, wiry, with arched eyebrows, merry wrinkles on his face. He introduced me to his cop friend, Lecha—big and fat, with flared nostrils and lips.

“My neighbor, we work together.”

We drove around the city in a grimy Zhiguli. Lecha in the back with his rifle. Alkhaz’s “Kalash” on my lap.

Alkhaz hit the brakes, lowered the window, and shouted at a woman on the street, “Hey, you, hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

She started back, surprised. He began to rail at her in Chechen. The woman, incoherent and hysterical, tried to answer him.

He flung a final word at her, apparently an insult, gave a creaky laugh, wagged his finger at her, and we drove on.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Didn’t you see? She got herself up like a tart. Girls like that should be shot! If a report comes in that there’s a woman who isn’t behaving the way she should, we go right out to pay a visit.”

“And?”

“We explain how she ought to conduct herself.”

Then I went with them to a police station riddled with bullet holes that recalled a military compound. I leafed through a thick notebook with the latest criminal matters—full of reports of missing relatives.

Then we drove to the stadium. It was a special day: Terek was playing Moscow Army.

“I wonder how our fans will act,” I said, thoughtfully.

“They’ll be quiet,” said the fat cop. “They came down by bus. Yesterday, in Ingushetia, all the windows were broken.”

We reached the stadium an hour before the game. People were already gathering, in groups. It seemed as if the entire male population of the city was rushing in. Men, youths, and little boys were running to the stadium from every direction. In groups. Laughing. They surged through the frame with the metal detectors. But each of them was subjected to a lengthy inspection. Everywhere were the black uniforms and the clatter of rifle bolts of Kadyrov’s guard. At last, amid the gleaming of police lights, Ramzan’s motorcade drove up. This was the stadium where his father was blown up.
The stadium (it held ten thousand) was packed. We sat beneath the central grandstand. Above us, in a brown leather jacket, loomed Ramzan, he kept putting his head in his hands. Nearby, in a dark blue suit, stood Delimkhanov with his hardened smile, shifting from foot to foot, back and forth.

The crowd reacted to every play as if it were a matter of Chechen honor. They leapt from their seats and cried out.

“OO-ooooooo,” howled an old man, using his cupped hands as a horn.

Terek was speeding toward the other end of the field. Goal! The stadium lurched as if there had been an explosion. Ramzan jumped about, waving his arms. The world sank in what seemed the wailing of newborns.

“The troops are moving out!” someone cried. “Allah Akbar!” thundered the reply.

One to nothing. The stands with the Moscow Army fans were quiet and unmoving. More mannequins than fans. The Chechens poured out of the stadium. They flowed onwards with a skip in their step, sang, embraced one another, and clapped their hands, their faces beaming with a sort of physiological pleasure, as if each of them had given birth to the ball.

A little boy, howling with abandon, took a running leap onto my back, and—what can you do?—I ran half the length of the street with him. Swiftly keeping pace were the two laughing cops, Alkhaz and Lecha.

Then we rode out to Bamut to see a place once teeming with life.

The village, at one time encircled and wiped from the face of the earth, was green with the wild, untamed grasses of early spring. The grass swayed amidst stone ruins. Opposite them a vast cemetery unfolded. Little metal flags instead of gravestones. Numerous nameless graves with little metal flags. How martyrs are buried.

We drove on and, near Gudermes, reached open fields. They were always open fields and there were no traces of settlement here. Off to one side I came upon a small gray stone on which darkened letters stood out, the names of Russian soldiers who fell here. In wintertime, in the second Chechen war. In the snow on the plains. “Eternal Glory,” it read. The sun shone, the odor of damp earth, a warm and gracious breeze wafted by, and the letters of the half-effaced names shone darkly. “Nikolaenko,” “Morozov,” “Ermakov”—I made out three of the names and committed them to memory.

The cops and I drank together that evening at their building in Grozny. They had apartments on the same landing of a five-story building, scorched and disfigured after being struck by several shells. They had no heat. Instead, Alkhaz had mounted a curious glass device on the stove, inside it glowed a blue flame. This
construction warmed the apartment a bit. Alkhaz also had a country house where his wife and three children lived. He told me how, in Grozny, the men in masks had came and took away his brother, they never heard from him again. It was clear that this was a typical story here. Lecha lived with his wife and three children in this damaged building.

“When the first war began, we all fought,” Alkhaz said, already tipsy. “The tanks moved through the streets and we would blow them up. Who fights a war like that? Tanks in these narrow streets. We would tell each other by walkie-talkie: hold on, my brother, don’t blow that tank up—that one’s mine! We hunted them, in short.”

“We were being hunted,” I said, gloomily.
“What do you mean, ‘you’?”
“Russians, that’s what I mean.”
“It wasn’t Russians only,” said Lecha, shifting the topic. “There were Chuvash. Ossetian interior ministry troops came to the village. They tortured and killed my uncle.”
“Your uncle?”
“A distant uncle.”

As we drank vodka in the kitchen, around the hulking Lecha fussed his little son, a redheaded two-year-old. He grabbed a spoon from the table and started whooping, on the verge of laughter.

“Put it back now,” the fat man said, quietly.
The child looked up, met his father’s gaze and, apprehensive, complied.
I turned the camera on them and triggered the flash.

“Come see what you look like!”
“Come have some vodka,” interrupted Lecha.
The boy came and his father gathered him in with his huge arm, pressed his downy head against his broad knee, and went poking the wetted cigarette filter into his little mouth.
The boy grimaced, made a weepy noise, and started turning his head from side to side.

“What are you doing?!” I asked.
Lecha turned his gaze upon me with derision.
“Let the kid get used to it.”
“Right you are, he’s got to be a man!” agreed Alkhaz, brightly.

Early the next morning, he drove me to the brick cottage and returned me to Umar.
The family had already departed, but their daughter Ama remained, along with Zainap. The girl had a day off.

Ama turned out to be swarthy, with long hair, a pouting mouth, sharply curved hips, and a large bosom.

The way she looked at me was so bashful and coy that I suspected they might be preparing her to marry me.

“Ama here suggests going to the mountains,” said Zainap, apologetically.

“The mountains!” I exclaimed, with new enthusiasm. “I need to see every part of the place.”

“They have this sorcerer there,” Umar said, in an ironic tone. “I’m an old-fashioned type. Wouldn’t give a plug nickel for all that devilry! And the ignorance they’re foisting upon us, it’s an outrage. You talk to her!” He pointed with his chin at his daughter. “She doesn’t remember her books. She’s forgotten the literature, she doesn’t know about science. She believes in all sorts of nonsense.”

“He’s not a sorcerer, he’s a healer,” replied Ama, happily. “Papa, you need to go to him.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I’m off…”

“He laid hands on me and it was like he turned my insides around. He knew exactly what hurt. He even told me where I have a birthmark on my back. He’s a seer, he knows the future.”

Zainap sighed hopefully.

“Oh, no, I’m not going with you,” said Umar. “It’s the very southern end. There’s nothing there but ‘green spots’ everywhere, where they hide out, those . . . partisans. Who knows what could happen? Don’t you go there anymore either, daughter. You’re a police officer, after all. Sergei’ll get taken. Who’s going to pay for your return, Sergei?” he asked; he wasn’t laughing, he was worried. “But maybe they’ll just off you on the spot.”

In half an hour, however, we were already riding in the taxi—Ama, her mother and I.

We had to cross all of Chechnya to the mountain settlement of Makhkety.

At lunchtime we found ourselves on a choppy mountain road overhung by a thick pine forest. Our ears were popping, there was no one on the road, the forest was green, impenetrable and endless. At a turn in the road we veered up onto a pebble-covered track and drove into the village. The car stopped and the taxi driver stayed to wait for us. Single file, we hugged the edge of a puddle-ridden, impassable and roadless space to reach the house—large, bright, made of wood boards. Around it, chickens scurried about and there was a crowd of women, portly and on the older side, with withered, sagging faces.
“Please let us through,” Zainap appealed to them. “We have a guest from Moscow.”

The women made no protest and moved aside, somehow dispassionately.

But in the house we had to wait because the healer was with somebody. We sat on the veranda, and I remember a boy of about five who was there. A black cat was sitting on the table and he was stabbing at it with a wooden dagger.

“Stop that,” I said.

He went on stabbing at the cat, keeping his deep, black eyes fixed upon me. I picked up my camera. A flash. The boy began poking the cat more actively, the cat gave a meow and jumped off and under the table. The boy took a green apple from the table, sank his teeth into it and went about like that—the apple clenched in his teeth, the wooden dagger in his hand. His eyes glittered. I took shot after shot.

“My little Ama has the same kind of good-looking son,” said Zainap. “A shame he has no daddy . . .”

Ama blushed.

Shouts issued from the yard: “Gooooal!”

I went to the window.

Women wandered by the doorsteps and, a little farther off, little kids were chasing a ball around. I went back to photographing. They were shouting fervently:

“Terek wins the championship!”

“Take it!!!”

“Pass!”

“Lousy shot!”

Interestingly, they were yelling in Russian—here, in the far reaches of the Vedensky district in the southwest of Chechnya, the country’s most indomitable region, Basaev’s homeland. Soccer. Ah, yes. Chechnya beat Moscow Army yesterday. Chechnya or Nokhch. The children of Noah.

“This land is peopled entirely with children,” I thought. “How expressive the children are! Children are the main thing here.”

There were a lot of them, an incredible number. I remembered the crowds in Grozny. The adolescents there shot glances of crazy intensity. A woman was walking with her baby, which bore its attentive, sparkling gaze aloft, as if afraid of spilling it. In the cloudy eyes of the old men adolescent passion sparkles like specked sunlight, then the eyes are once again extinguished, becoming tranquil, like those of very small children.

“How is my little Vanya back in Moscow?” I thought, and my heart ached.
The healer had finished, a sniffling woman in black flashed by, snapped up the bright-eyed boy who, by this point, was sucking at the apple core.

Zainap, Ana and I entered the dark and warm room.

The healer was relatively young. A large, broad-shouldered man. His face bearing gray-black stubble.

“You’re from where?” His gaze was unpretentious—benign, but commanding.

“From Moscow, a writer, famous,” blurted out Zainap.

“A pleasure. I’m Mohammed. A former commando. Forty-eight years old.” He spoke in short, choppy phrases. Not sharply, however, but in a softened tone, growing quieter toward the end. “I’ve always lived here. Never been to Moscow. I’m a peaceful person. My wife was killed in the bombing, left me a son. That’s when the visions started. At night I see what’s going to happen tomorrow, in a month, in a year. I began healing people. You’re fond of children, for instance, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” It was so unexpected that I reached for my camera, but I didn’t quite dare to take a picture.

“You have a son, am I right?”

“Yes, I have a son.”

“And you’ll have another, and a daughter. I have a son, too. One night the soldiers came. ‘You’re feeding the partisans. Come with us, we’re going to shoot you.’ I tell them: ‘I feed everyone. Whoever knocks and asks for food, I give it to whoever asks.’ They led me outside. My son woke up, he’s twelve. Runs up and clings to me. They shove him aside, lead me farther on, hit me with the rifle butt, again chasing my son away. There was a truck there. ‘Get in.’ I get in the cab. My son comes after me. Suddenly one soldier starts shooting. At the rocks at my son’s feet. The boy darted back, the pebbles whizzing about, slashing his legs. They held me for two days, beat me. Then they let me go. I come home, everything’s quiet. My son is lying there, in a state of shock. His face is buried in the pillow. ‘Malik!’ I call him. He wakes up. ‘Daddy? You’re alive?’ He’s hugging and hugging me . . . He’s grown up now, time flies. Gone to Piatigorsk, he’s at the medical academy.”

Mohammed got up, mumbled a prayer mentioning Allah, went behind Zainap’s back, told her to close her eyes, and began waving his great arms about, without touching her.

“Can I photograph you?”

“Yes, but be careful,” he chuckled, and then, in a hail of flashes, pronounced, “Your liver isn’t good. Spleen. Congestion. Stones. Right?”
“Right,” the woman said, with difficulty.

“You’ll live. What else? You don’t sleep well nights. You’re pensive. Extremely unhappy. You’re depressed. Don’t worry like that. The one you’re weeping for is in paradise.”

The woman’s shoulders started shaking, tears rolled from under her lowered eyelids, she hid her face in her hand.

“All right, that’s enough, that’s all. Now you.”

Zainap and I changed places. The stool she sat on was hot. I closed my eyes submissively and heard a compassionate voice.

“You got in a lot of fights as a kid. You fell down. But didn’t break anything. You liked sports as a kid. Gave it up long ago. Build your muscles. Don’t be a milksop. You’ll catch cold. You have to keep your neck warm. True?”

“Yes.”

“Not long ago something bad happened to you. But you’ll get through it. You’ve coped already. You shouldn’t talk so much. Don’t yell. Yelling doesn’t prove anything. You have a weak throat. You’re what—a writer? So, write!”

I heard him laugh, opened my eyes, Ama was laughing, in a shy staccato, and Zainap laughed, too, her face still wet, and I started laughing, an open and simple laugh, like a child.

We parted, laughing. Laughing, he refused the money I offered. Laughing, he shouted, “Next! The doctor’s ready!”

Laughing, we went single file along the edge of the rough, pitted path, climbed up onto the pebbles—the same ones the soldier shot at, it occurred to me, sending them flying about, slicing at a twelve-year-old boy’s legs.

The taxi was waiting for us. We drove off.

“Oooh, oy-oy,” Zainap gave a muted wail.

Ama was petrified with fear.

A red model 9 was speeding after us, honking and flashing its headlights. The headlights were faintly silly in the bright sunlit day.

We pulled onto the shoulder. Silence.

Unexpectedly even for myself, I climbed out of the car.

A man with a rifle got out of the model 9, in camouflage, a knife in his belt. His beard was red, his pate bald, with a steely squint.

“Where are you from?”

“From Moscow,” I said, almost inaudibly, and for some reason took a look around.

Around me were mountains, green with trees.
“How’s Moscow? Still standing?”
“Still standing.”
He scratched his nose with the index finger of his left hand (his right was on the trigger of the rifle).
“I was in Moscow, in ’90, I was just a kid. What do you do?”
“I’m a writer.”
“You write poems, writer? Know Timur Mutsuraev?”
“Yes, I’ve heard of him. A Chechen singer.”
“What’s your favorite song of his?”
I could tell by his intonation that the red-bearded man was a fan of Timur’s and memory instantly and graciously provided the somewhat too-obvious lines: “The Afghan doesn’t joke no more, the Jaguar’s gone into the night, Aslan has left us, with a smile, lit with an eternal light . . .”
Red-beard grinned merrily. Then he was on his guard again. “And what were you doing here in our parts?”
“I visited the healer.”
“The sorcerer. He’s a sinful man. Are you going to write about him?”
“Yes.”
“Why would you want to do that? Give me that,” he said, tugging at the camera. “Don’t take pictures here.”
“I’m a writer. And I take pictures,” I stubbornly insisted.
“Well take them, then. Take them off your neck! Come on . . .”
I hastily pulled the strap over my head and he held the camera on his right palm, weighing it. He hung the rifle over his shoulder. Then flipped open the cover with his fingernail and deftly extracted the flash card.
“Here.” He handed me the empty camera. “We aren’t thieves.” And repeated adamantly, “Just you can’t photograph anything here. Okay, go on.”
I got into the taxi. “He’s letting us go,” I said, and the driver tore off. Zainap was repeating something under her breath in Chechen. Ama had frozen up and stayed like that the whole way. The fear made her even more attractive.
“As for me, I’m not afraid of anything,” said the driver when we had already reached Grozny. “Allah will call when he is ready . . .”
The taxi driver was an unassuming type in dark, soiled clothes.
“What did you think of the healer? Like him?” asked Umar over supper. “It’s all superstition, I tell you. Although I did see a mermaid when I was a kid. On the outskirts of the village in Kazakhstan. I’m galloping along on my horse and a naked woman, long hair, gray, is sitting on a pole and laughing at me. I was so scared I fell off the horse.”
Umar launched into his reminiscences. Mystical happenings from his childhood were interwoven with awful tales from the war, as in little boys' stories.

"My father explained my fears to me," Umar said to me. 'It's your manly nature stirring,' he said. You know what you can't be afraid of if you don't want to be a coward?"

"War?" suggested Ama, and Zainap gave a sigh from the stove where she was frying fish this time.

"Get off," Umar waved her away without malice. "You can't be afraid of living. In those years, we lived expecting death to come at any moment. We got used to it."

"I'm upset that I lost my pictures," I said.

"Be happy they didn't take you," Umar replied.

"Exactly," sighed Ama. She had been drinking and was flushed and, pretty with the kerchief on her head, began to look a bit like a matryoshka doll.

At sunset, I helped Umar.

Standing on the iron staircase, I passed him glass for the windows, cold and slippery. Reflected in them were the setting sun and the flame of the gas lamp that burned close by. We were slightly tipsy, but neither of us wanted to admit it. A pane slipped out of its owner's hands and shot past me, shattering on the concrete floor below.

"That'll be good luck," said Umar, uttering the required phrase.

Ama came out of the house and began sweeping up. She didn't ask who had done it. She didn't ask anything at all.

As she swept, she looked up for a few moments.

"What a pity she and I will never be husband and wife," I thought, seeing how pretty she was.

"And we'll never even kiss," I added silently.
Dmitry Danilov (born 1969, Moscow) is a celebrated writer, journalist and author of numerous publications in literary magazines and online communities. His most recent novel, *Horizontal Positions*, was published to great critical acclaim and was nominated for the National Bestseller Prize, shortlisted for the 2011 Nose Award and was in the final shortlist for the 2011 Big Book Prize. His works have been translated into English, Dutch, and Italian.
You’ve got your passport.
    Yes.
    And your discharge.
    Yes, yes.
    And your certificate.
    Of course.
    The simultaneous appearance in the entry hall of a more elderly person and a younger person.
    The unbearable yellow morning winter light of the lamp on the ceiling.
    Dirty light-blue wallpaper.
    A bag (the string kind Russians used to call an avoska) set by the more elderly person by the wall. The bag’s loss of form and firmness, the bag’s sliding down the wall, the rolling out of the bag of a formless object, carelessly wrapped, God knows in what. The restoration by the more elderly person of the bag’s form and firmness, the cramming back into the bag of the carelessly packed formless object.
    The shifting from one foot to the other of the younger person. The bloating of the face, the general fuzzy, unfocused appearance of the younger person.
    What, let’s go already.
    Sure.
    The simultaneous attempts to put on shoes and coats in the narrow entry hall, the sluggish pushing, the attempts to tie shoelaces, to shrug arms into sleeves. The old woolen winter coat of some indeterminate dark color with
innumerable hairs and pieces of lint and fuzz stuck to it. The greasy jacket of an indeterminate dark color with feathers working their way to the surface here and there. They call jackets like this “parkas,” probably; they’re filled with down or some such. The sullen hat with ear flaps, saturated with heavy years and thoughts. The woolen cap, black, so impossible to tell how dirty it is, but still visibly dirty, yes, very dirty.

The avoska in hand, the bag on shoulder.
You’ve got everything.
Yes.
Let’s go then.

The sleepiness, the dryness of mouth, the trembling of hands while working the keys.

It is not a fact that this is father and son, not a fact at all. And they don’t look like grandfather and grandson. Even less like brother and brother. The exact degree of their relatedness is hard to establish.

The cold, the blackness, the blueness, the snow, the streetlights. Perovo.

These buildings were built in the sixties for the workers at the Hammer and Sickle factory. It was an easy commute, take the 24 tram to Third Vladimirsky Street, then turn left and go down the Enthusiasts Road to the factory. And back: down the Enthusiasts Road, take a right on Vladimirsky, and keep going till you get to the buildings that were built in the sixties specially for the workers at the Hammer and Sickle factory.

Workers at the Hammer and Sickle factory live here to this day, but nowadays they mostly ride the metro, from the Perovo station to the Ilich Square station, and then back.

Many of the workers at the Hammer and Sickle factory became alcoholics and died of alcoholism or other circumstances. Others did not become alcoholics and did not die. Still others died, but did not become alcoholics. And there are those who became alcoholics but have not yet died. They still live in these buildings that were built in the sixties for the workers at the Hammer and Sickle factory, those who drank heavily, those who died, and those who kept on living.

It may be that they are uncle and nephew. It may also be that they are not.

The clackety-clack of the 24 tram, turning off Third Vladimirsky onto Green Prospect.

It is not entirely clear why the prospect was called Green. Most likely the
creators of the prospect thought that it might someday become a boulevard, lush with plantings. And that the residents of the buildings built in the sixties for the workers at the Hammer and Sickle factory would walk down it of an evening or on weekends through green trees and bushes, and would fall in love with this place, and it would become, as the travel guides might put it, a garden spot, a favorite of the local residents. But somehow nothing ever came of this idea. There are trees, yes, but not the kind that create an atmosphere, nothing like what you’d expect on a street called Green Prospect. They’re weak, puny, embittered, these trees and bushes, and as a result the prospect is more gray than green, but you can’t call it Gray, it would be impossible even to imagine the maps or the street signs on the buildings saying Gray Prospect—but, on the other hand, whyever not, if there’s a Red Square, a Green Prospect, and a Lilac Boulevard, there should also be a Black Street, a Brown Boulevard, or a Gray Prospect, but for some reason it isn’t done to name streets and prospects like that.

But maybe they should have.

The progress down Green Prospect to the Perovo metro station through the crystal-clear cold air and the snow and the light of the orange streetlamps. The not entirely successful attempts not to fall while navigating down the iced-over steps.

How far to ride. On the metro with a transfer, then a long way on the commuter train.

Damn.

The unsuccessful attempt to squeeze into the train car and find a seat. The thickness of the passenger mass, the howl and thunder of the train. The rising nausea, the steadfast hopeless stoicism.

The crowd on the escalator up to the Marxistsky metro station, the crowd on the escalator down to the Tagansky-Radial.

The younger made exactly this trip yesterday, in the throngs, feeling nauseous. Only going in the other direction and with other purposes, or actually with no particular purpose at all.

The more elderly person didn’t make this trip but sat in the kitchen staring fixedly out the window at the Perovo trees, buildings, and darkening sky.

The travel along the purple line, Begovaya-Polezhaevskaya-October Field. After October Field the thinning of the crowds.

The route could have been different, first to Tretyakovskaya, transfer to the orange line, then to the Riga station, there board a practically empty commuter train. That way would have been far better, less on the metro,
more on the commuter train, better to travel on the commuter train than on
the metro, but for some reason everyone does it this way, or almost everyone,
travel to a distant station that is linked to a railway platform, to Tushinskaya
or Vyzhno or the Warsaw station, strange, somehow.

The Tushinskaya metro station, the Tushino railway station. The dark-
ness, the dawn, the wind, the steel and the asphalt of the Tushino station.

On one of the tracks stands a freight train with fourteen cars.

The commuter trains from Volokolamsk, New Jerusalem, Dedovsk,
Nakhabino, bringing to the Tushino station a huge collection of passengers.

Practically empty commuter trains to Nakhabino, Dedovsk, New
Jerusalem, Volokolamsk.

The commuter train to Shakhovskaya, practically empty.
Step free of the closing doors, next stop, Pavshino.
The train will pass the platform at the Trikotazhnaya station without stop-
ping. Please be attentive.

Be attentive. Be attentive. Be attentive.
The need to sleep, but no desire to sleep. On the metro the desire to
sleep was strong, now no longer.

Sitting facing each other, riding.

The more elderly person hardly ever wants to sleep, he usually stares
fixedly at something, not out the window and not at the younger person sit-
ting across from him, just somewhere off to one side, his gaze rounds up the
dge of the seat, the window frame, a piece of the train car's wall, his pe-
ipheral vision picks up, outside the window, the lightening of the sky and
fleeting glimpses of things rushing by.

Conversation between them does nevertheless take place, consisting of
seventy percent vocalizations, sighs, and silence. A careful analysis of their
remarks might suggest that the more elderly person lodges more claims and
complaints against the younger person, and that the younger person rejects
these claims and complaints and lodges his own claims and complaints
against the more elderly person, basically the same ones, but the more eld-
erly person emits emotionally tinged grunts like "eh" or "ah" and waves his
hand, and the younger person stretches and yawns, and the more elderly
person looks away again, over at the window frame and the wall, and the
younger person does fall asleep after all, though at first he didn't want to
sleep, and he dreams that he is riding the commuter train from Tushino to
Shakhovskaya, and that sitting across from him and looking somewhere away
is the more elderly person.
The reaching into the bag for the thermos, the screwing off of its cap, which simultaneously fulfills the function of a cup, the movements methodical, measured, precise, what’s the hurry, the pulling out of the cork, the pouring into the cap/cup of the liquid contained in the thermos, to all appearances hot or at least warm, the recorking of the thermos, the slow sipping of the hot liquid, which has the smell and aftertaste of plastic and cork, the drinking of the liquid, the screwing of the cap back onto the thermos, the stowing of the thermos back in the bag.

And again the glance somewhere away, to the place where the window frame is visible, the edge of the seat opposite, and a piece of the train car’s wall.

The dreaming that the commuter train drove, drove, and abruptly stopped.

The commuter train abruptly stopped. He awoke. The commuter train started moving again.

Obliquely across the aisle sits a young woman. People like the younger person are inclined to characterize young women like this with the word “attractive,” although, to be honest, it would be difficult to say anything good about the outward appearance of this young woman.

The stops less frequent, the travel between them longer. The names denser. Lesodolgorukovo. Dubosekovo.

The yawning, the vague expression, the inability to decide what to look at.

The immobility, the looking at the window frame and the piece of the wall.

To travel from Tushino to Shakhovskaya takes just under three hours, it’s a long way, a distant corner of Moscow Province. In Shakhovskaya it seems that Moscow is somewhere far away, thousands of kilometers from here, or as if it didn’t even exist at all, the only reminders of the city green Moscow commuter trains and license plates from the Moscow suburbs.

At the far end of the train car sits a stooped person who from a distance seems old, but may in fact not be old, may be middle-aged, in his prime, as they say, mature, so to speak, a husband, or possibly a young person with his whole life in front of him, a hundred roads open before him, living an interesting and affluent life, or uninteresting and unaffluent, quiet, monotonous and wretched, things go differently for different people, don’t they, so why can’t a young man at a certain point in his biography be sitting stooped and even bent over in a cold light-filled empty commuter train, thundering into Shakhovskaya station?
At Volokolamsk the young woman and the stooped person got off the train, the stooped person walked past their window and turned out to be a woman of middle years, quite elegant, and in the younger person’s head there flitted the single abrupt word “attractive.”

The opening of the thermos. Drink. No. Go ahead, drink, it’s hot. No, don’t want to. As you wish. The sipping of the dark hot liquid, smelling of cork and plastic.

The platform of the 133 Kilometer station. The closing of the thermos, the stuffing of the thermos in the avoska. The platform of the 149 Kilometer station.

Shakhovskaya station.

The avoska in hand, the bag on his shoulder. The dreaminess, the yawn, the light return intoxication into the frosty fresh air. The stoic not-quite-there silence, the squeezing in hand of the avoska handles.

In the square in front of the station two gigantic K-701 tractors are plowing snow. They are called Kirovets tractors. These tractors are made in St. Petersburg in the Kirovsky factory. This is why they are called Kirovets tractors.

The tractors with their own enormous size completely dominate the surrounding landscape, houses, little trees, sheds. They look taller than any object, any building in this area. Although of course this is not true, nothing more than an optical illusion.

Nothing need to be bought? No, later. Maybe. Shall we go in? I tell you we don’t need to, we have everything. We’ll go in later.

The square, the marketplace, the road, the road between houses, the courtyard, the five-story building, the entrance, the stairs to the fifth floor, the door, the apartment.

The smell of long hard monotonous agonizing lonely life. The shortness of breath and the absence of that shortness. The sorrowful sobbing furniture. The tea kettle on the stove. The refrigerator, sign of humility and submission.

The simultaneous shedding of coats and boots in the crowded corridor, the attempt to hang the coat and jacket on the hanger, the falling of the jacket off the hanger, the renewed attempt to hang the jacket on the hanger.

The avoska, set by the wall, loses form and firmness, slides down the wall. Out of the avoska rolls a formless, carelessly wrapped, shapeless object. The more elderly person takes the object, carries it into the kitchen, and lays it on the table.

If these people had belonged to another social class, if they had had
another level of education, different conceptions of the good and the
required, the younger person would have begun bustling about brightly,
would have said something along the lines of I’ll put the tea on, you rest,
don’t worry, I’ll do everything, and the more elderly person would have
stretched out on the sofa, thrown his hands behind his head, sighed heavily
and said something on the order of man I’m tired or man what an exhausting
trip or man that wore me out, but in this case everything went differently.
The younger person stretched out on the sofa, turned away, and instantly fell
asleep, and the more elderly person filled the tea kettle with water, lit the gas
range, put the kettle on the fire and sat in a chair by the window.

The younger person sleeps, the tea kettle gradually heats up, and the
more elderly person sits in the kitchen, staring fixedly out the window at the
trees, the houses, and the still light sky.
VLADIMIR MAKANIN (born 1937, Omsk) is an acknowledged master of contemporary Russian prose, whose psychological realism and acute analysis of the role of the individual in society has been recognized by numerous prestigious awards, such as the Russian Booker, the Pushkin Prize and the State Prize of the Russian Federation. His 2008 novel *Asan*, a virtuosic stream-of-consciousness take on the war in Chechnya, was awarded the Big Book Prize. His works feature as part of the Russian school curriculum and have been translated into several European languages.
When a young woman doesn’t show up until the very end, somehow there’s no room for her, no need—and so, all the more naturally she appears at the beginning, immediately, here and now. She was a St. Petersburg taxi driver, definitely young, friendly, energetic, but fated to work on that very night. (In general, female taxi drivers are spared from nights. Shifts are rotated.) And her very first passenger sent her straying down unlit and half-lit streets. He was alone, somber, and without a suitcase or any other kind of bag. But it went alright. She let the sulker out and drifted down the deserted streets on the outskirts of St. Petersburg.

Noticing a streetlamp and some well-placed fir trees bravely standing over the road, she slowed down. It was right by the sidewalk, and there was no one in sight. Turning the car off and not forgetting to take the keys (watch out!) the young woman hopped out of her car toward the trees.

The street slept. Just one window was lit in the building across the street. An old man was glued to the glass, intently staring off at nothing. He hadn’t been fully asleep when he was woken up. He’d been jerked from that sweet, elderly dream state, when you’re half-asleep and you start to believe that, at any moment, your strength will return to you. How he waited for it! These last rays of will are nocturnal, inarticulate, and they slip away; they’re yours and not yours. You can’t tell whether you’re dreaming them. Whether they’re a momentary illusion, teasing you.

It was a late night telephone call that woke him up. Of course, he shouldn’t have answered the phone so late at night, but he jerked out of bed, hurried his hand toward the receiver, and listened (for the hundred and first time) to a rude voice calmly say, “Oh . . . It’s you . . . your time is soon,” laugh and hang up.
The old man lingered for some time, holding the phone, listening to the insolent dial tone that spilled from it before putting it back in its charger base. That’s what they called it now: “putting it in its base.” In his day, they’d used the unpleasant verb “to hang up.”

He could go back to bed and perhaps fall into a vivid dream state. Laying down on his right side, he could perhaps find something funny about his soft bed and himself: an old man, putting his phone in its base after a conversation.

But before he did this, taking advantage of his brief nighttime clarity, he went up to the window. The time of the moon! He turned his gaze to the darkened, empty street. He saw a taxi. Suddenly, the car stopped and a female driver stepped out and hid in the trio of firs. She took care of her needs there. The old man didn’t see her and didn’t guess at what she was doing. He only saw her happy face as she reappeared alongside her car and, raising her eyes, assessed her surroundings. She looked at the building across the street and, naturally, at the window—and at him.

Her gaze lasted a second or two, but the old man was already cheered. She waved at him as if to say, “So there are two of us wide awake, you and I, in this slumbering St. Petersburg night.” Perhaps, her wave was also to apologize for the trees and her need—it happens, what can you do? The palm of her hand lit up in the light of the moon, or the street lamp. Petersburg had already started freezing over, though it was autumn. Light was strictly conserved, as was heat, but that single street lamp was always on near the building where the old man lived.

The taxi drove off, but the old man stayed by his window, heartened by the least bit of human contact. He spent day and night locked in his room. He was under house arrest. The old man, you see, was a former president.

He was not alarmed when something warm pressed at the back of his leg a minute later. He knew that it was the eager face of his companion looking for affection—the sturdy head of his dog. His dog and no one else. Remaining by the window, the old man tousled his dog’s ears, to which the dog tersely and joyously replied, “Ouuu-ouuu.”

The room’s echo returned the dog’s “ouuu.” As though some other dog was answering from afar, thought the old man, an echo from across the sea. From very far away.

Downstairs, at the lobby entrance to this building, there was a table, chair, a telephone, and the strong male musk of security guards. The
night guard was on watch—if anything happened, he’d whistle. Next to him was the door (wide open, naturally) to the lounge where three or four strong and, naturally, armed, young men snored. The ex-president was in no way dangerous from a security standpoint. Even if he were at liberty, there was nowhere for him to go. He was no longer mobile enough to flee.

Essentially, the only person guarding him was that night guard. He was also a geezer, and lonely. He suffered from insomnia, and had asked for the night post in order to give the young men a chance to sleep.

There was a song from his faraway youth, a song of his grandfather’s generation, where voices cried out to the heavens: “Let the soldiers sleep . . .”

And they slept. The security guard’s mind wandered, considering this and that, not at all concerned with the ex-president—why should he be watching an old man? At the same time, his nightly show of empathy couldn’t be generalized. It was like this in every country! The global pursuit of influential old men (the basis and engine for modern public life) made sense to the guard. That’s what the powerful deserved. Everyone gets theirs! Another’s misfortune isn’t always a source of pleasure, but with these powerful men, it isn’t for nothing that their downfall warms our humble hearts. It’s entirely because of who they are. We’re no ex-presidents, we’re just old men. They don’t write about us in the papers. And we’re delighted in our insignificance. (The only thing pursuing us is our old people smells. And the smirks, perhaps, of our smart-aleck grandchildren, who think that we already reek of death . . . )

The old man he was keeping guard over got what he deserved. After all, wasn’t he human just like everybody else? Didn’t he commit his share of little sins on his way to the top?

With this last thought, full of severe justice though not self-reflective (yet), the guard fell into a weak and steady state of nocturnal nirvana. Not sleep, but peace.

The peace of mind of the guard, like the peace of mind of many security guards, rested on two facts: first of all, when he worked he got bread and heat—heat at home. Another was the sedative he took every day. Every evening he’d drink (slowly) from the television . . . This had to do with the world. Even after the One-Day mass hysteria, we Russians had something left. There were a few SS-series missiles left behind, just in case.

The modernized ballistic SS-21, commonly referred to as the SS-series,
had a calming effect on just about everyone. It was well-known. As soon as it was launched at some hypothetical aggressor, the missile, playfully even, divided into ten parts. And it packed a ballistic surprise: along with the “hot ten,” it also shot out exactly forty lightweight dummy missiles. They called them dummies. But it was because of these dummies, indistinguishable from self-guided missiles when in flight, that the number of missiles released grew to 50: 40 + 10.

We’ve always feared death from above: first it was thunder and lighting, then the wrath of God, and now, on top of that, missiles! Since the time when we were cavemen, everywhere we went, we’ve planted our little lightning rods. Prayer is a charming shield, one of the strongest we’ve got, but it’s not by prayer alone that we live these days. This is why (not only because of the SS-series, though it seems to have started with it) there is a universal and universally acknowledged project: to suspend a thousand satellites over the Earth that will track and monitor any missiles splitting through the air. It is an international project, for the peace of mind of many nations. Isn’t that the most important thing? Isn’t it the perfect lightning rod for our overgrown cave? Isn’t it the

*fulfillment of all of our dreams?* . . .

to quote a famous poet from the newspapers back then. And the cave passage ended with the feeling of being a part of the world, or rather, a participant in world events—this captured the hearts of all of the war-wearyed public, without exception.

Only the first hundred satellites took any time to launch. The second and third hundred followed soon after . . . then the dynamic fifth, the seventh—it all made quite an impression! (A spectacle even. All of us have good imaginations.) It looked like some grand New Year’s display when, branch by branch, they weigh the tree with golden orbs of light. They scattered them around the corners of the room—and onto the very ceiling!—even (the mischief!) strewing them on the houseplants. The last little lights are hung up here and there, anywhere they fit, then with one fell swoop all of them are illuminated at the same time—what a show! The laser light display of the satellites, hundreds upon hundreds, lit up (what a show!) in order to monitor the launching of our or somebody else’s—anybody’s—self-guided missiles. The elderly security guards of the world can sleep on the job in peace. As they should. And let them! . . . What else do old men have (when they’ve
worked their whole lives) other than night shifts, illnesses, and nagging thoughts about national security?

The final, tenth hundred satellites were being sent into space, Russia seemed stable and comfortably Europeanized, when suddenly the conflict erupted. Religious conflicts, said the papers, never end, because their sparks are fanned by the little winds of history. There’s always a small heap of embers, smoldering.

In Russia’s patchwork tapestry, it could be Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens . . . It was merely by chance that it was the Tatars . . . that government clerks, tending to minor but necessary affairs, happened to hit a nerve, spot-on (the newspapers were straightforward with “insulted”), offending Tatars’ religious beliefs—theirs and not anyone else’s. But that’s what happened. The wheels of history, in such cases, slightly adjust themselves. The first robins were the youth in Tatarstan. Kazan students donned green Islamic armbands and started organizing meetings here and there, sitting on streetcar and trolley tracks, and then, without any warning, one day—in the middle of the day, no less—they blocked the Kazan-Moscow train line. They called the students the “Green Robins.”

University administrators did not deal with the situation in the best way they could, summoning and giving free reign to the police. When the infidels get aggressive, the true believers, praise Allah, get militant. This was confirmed the next day by the thousands in the streets and by the fury of the fire that night, raging in the oldest, most holy mosque in the city. Most likely, the fire was started unintentionally, but History likes chance best of all. Unfortunately and irrevocably, it happened that the Russian President was right then at an international summit. His council of deputies, directing operations from Moscow and clearly at a loss, deployed armed forces to Kazan. In crawled the tanks, and things began to look very familiar. Then the familiar became the course of things: shots fired at rooftops, into open windows. Shooting in the streets . . . The students set tanks on fire and immolated themselves. Photographs and footage of the violence appeared in newspapers and on TV around the world. The world wobbled . . . and started shaking . . .

It was the 21st century, but like the previous century, people seemed to lack the necessary experience to know better. We knew how it shouldn’t be . . . The West, by decree of the UN, demanded that Russia withdraw its tanks from Kazan. They would be replaced by international peacekeeping forces, guaranteed to maintain neutrality in the long-term
national and religious conflicts. The Hague got involved in a familiar way. Even more familiar was Russia’s response, advising the world to keep out of its internal affairs. The wheels were in motion (they only needed the slightest push!). Good will and the constancy (or inconstancy) of good will are, unfortunately, independent faculties.

The West vacillated—should they or should they not penalize Russia for its actions, forcing them to comply with the UN’s resolution—a decision made by the world community, after all! The West could, say, launch just one missile attack—strategically and only destroying the economy, sparing civilians. As it was written afterwards in The Guardian, the experience of Russia and the West collided. Russia had Chechnya (which was analogous to Tatarstan) while the West had the wonderful (and similarly victorious) experience in the Balkans. The West knew what was what. It was time to strike at the economy of the offending country and bleed it dry. They would shut off the gas and oil pipelines, shutting down factories, bridges, power stations, mines, and so on. It was time for punishment without declaration of war. The country would survive—opposition forces would come into power.

This was an especially potent plan of attack, since Russia’s energy resources were extended over great areas and too closely resembled airy summer spiderwebs. In the folk tradition, spiderwebs in summer portend fair weather. After the first, precise blows to gas and oil supply lines, Russia (plunged into primeval winter) will be destroyed in terms of energy and forced onto its knees. No man or nation can say “no” for long once it is on its knees.

The “thousand satellites” system was by this time fully functional.

Certainly, the possibility of a counterattack by the diabolical SS-21s was analyzed and planned for. The antiballistic missiles lay in wait. Statistically, in the best-case scenario, Russia would only launch one and a half indestructible missiles. However, missiles tend not to fly in halves (so one).

One missile will be launched—the rest would be intercepted and countered. The concussion of the explosion at the moment of interception would be powerful enough to knock that one main missile off its course. Dummy missile! It’d wobble helplessly in the air. A joke! It is unlikely that its free-flight trajectory would land it in Europe or Asia; most likely it would end up safely in the boundless waters of the Pacific Ocean. And incidentally, it could even drop smack down on its own territory, in the dark taiga of Siberia. What could be better? What more could you want?
The most grievous errors are always the simplest and the most human.

Who would have thought that Russian colonels (in their national laziness) could not be bothered to gather up “used” missiles from the fields and forests after each SS-21 trial? It boggles the mind! These large metal missile shells, crumpled and contorted, could not be reused. (These monsters were now only good for the scrap heap.) At some point, army officials (without the knowledge of the Ministry) cut the number of dummies launched by a factor of three. Naturally, after conducting trials, they would correct their laziness (their “human error”) arithmetically—all the totals were simply multiplied by three.

Intelligence regularly reported that the Russians were multiplying their number by a fixed factor of three, but in the West, this was interpreted as the Russians exaggerating their success. It was thought that they just wanted to appear stronger and more threatening than they really were. Which can be expected from any individual or nation preparing to receive the first blow.

As it turned out, NATO and Russia struck at the same time, the launches separated by mere seconds. The war came and went. Le Monde reported that the interval between the missile launches was so small that, had the course of events been any different, it would have been impossible to determine who had struck first.

The journalist allowed himself a popular comparison: the missile face-off (before the attack) reminded him of two aggressive cats on a rooftop striking the “devil’s pose”—arching their backs. A cat sets its fur bristling in order to look bigger, and more muscular. So, you know, that when you looked at him, you got scared.

The missiles prepared for launch, continued the journalist, collided in the atmosphere like frightening bristled fur. However, for the people (whose roof is the sky), the factor of three that seemed mythical proved to be all too real.

It wasn’t one and a half missiles that were launched (which would have meant one missile, since missiles don’t fly in halves) but four and a half (which meant three).

And with that, the missile attack reached its conclusion. The day of war ended, by evening the war was considered one day long. What enormous, “expanded” Russia, with its long, long winter looked like without power is hard to imagine. What happened, perhaps, was not catastrophic, but it wasn’t life, either. Russia was cut off “from oil, gas, and coal—back to logs”; from the third millennium back to the first.
And, amazingly, there were still missiles left over.

The West did not want to keep fighting, either. The French left NATO, kicking and screaming. They couldn’t forgive their leader. Europe could not stop blaming the Americans, even though America was hit the hardest.

One of the Russian missiles that was not countered, as it had been supposed, ended up sinking in the Pacific Ocean. It splashed somewhere into the calmness of the waves.

The second one’s crooked trajectory landed it in Europe, in neutral Switzerland, though luckily it only destroyed a small patch of happy trees somewhere in the Alps. Superpowerful, it killed only a bit less than one thousand locals and, on top of that, about a thousand pretty skiers on vacation.

Only the third missile (the last of the “lucky” ones) reached America, destroying almost half the city of Chicago in one fell swoop. Chicago. A population of two million. The missile, as though in a daze, reached the very coast of America before splitting off into its component parts and shed them, blasting, where it could—mostly into the sea. But one of these self-guided little pieces made a sudden detour toward Chicago.

This third missile, unlike the others, was called “crazy,” even though, by missile logic, the crazy one was the one that merely caused a slight disturbance in the Pacific.

That was the damage. (According to France-Presse.) Plus, of course, gas- and oil-deprived, freezing Russia.

Horrified by the Chicago disaster, Americans blamed their president. They impeached him—honest taxpayers of all ages repeated the same thing to every newspaper and camera: “How could he? How could he?”

Very quickly, he was run out of government. Now he was an ex-president.

On top of that, they rushed him to court. Across the country, petition after petition gathered signatures: to court with him! To court! A war that lasted one day couldn’t change people in their essence. Rather, as those mean-spirited philosophers maintain, the most important crowbar in the democratic process has always been the citizens’ proclivity toward indicting eloquent old men at the end of their careers.

Say what you will, this is the only manifestation of Judicium Dei on Earth—and its only equal.

They prosecuted Pinochet, they prosecuted Honecker, they got Kim Yes Yes and Kim No No, little old man after little old man—sent to the
corner, one and all! Without an ounce of sentimentality (instead, the cold of self-righteous discipline), the TV screen broadcast their sad, pathetic faces to the whole world. All of it was done for our sake. Publicizing the defeat (Look at him! Just look!) of yet another little old man—is this not our humble civil triumph? And isn’t this, seriously, our daily (or nightly) spiritual food? And why not the answer to our prayers? Our brief, frightened prayers about the future (our own future)—our prayers in front of the blue candles of our televisions. We’re only human, and our TVs are our humble churches. We stand on our knees in front of the television and we pray.

They even took former chancellor Kohl to court! The number one German, the fatty, the one with the great big jowls! They didn’t end up convicting him, but they beat him up rather good, anyway. Perhaps, they were in a bit of a hurry. They rushed it with him just a little bit—then they let him off. The most important part of an indictment (this must be kept in mind) is to wait for the helplessness of old age. Why tear at the healthy? Who needs their big fat rosy cheeks? Instead, we must await feebleness, flabbiness—show us the impotence—and (the minute a man is pitiful) off to court with him! The moment of truth is the moment of impotence. Otherwise, the truth of truths isn’t just. (And, we must admit, it isn’t very fun.)

It’s important to get to the bottom of things. After all, it’s specifically this man’s sickly gaze that we need to see. We need his spittle out of the corner of his mouth . . . his lawyers . . . his relatives. Hobos with placards—all of this is part of the process, it hypnotizes us, already gaping in front of the screen—it’s a ritual. They’re carting him, who was once so powerful (in front of screaming crowds), around in a wheelchair! At least once, on a weekend (toward the evening) we need this—to sigh and turn our spirits to this, to have a look . . .

In Warsaw, a local crazy ran around town with a new monologue. (He found out that they were taking Jaruzelski to court.) “Panie! It’s a trick! We keep on prosecuting the false ones! Take a close look at them, panie—you’ll see right away! Mock-up men—imaginary dictators! Neither one way or another—we’d loved the real ones . . .”

Of course, certain wiseacres believe that prosecuting old men at the end of their careers is only the petty revenge of a crowd that, unfortunately, has few joys in life. These very wiseacres (unwittingly, or even wittingly) defend the despicable little old men. They would never acknowledge the grandiosity, the sheer beauty of the process. They’re only good for wanting Kantian
ethics, duty and the stars. And where can you find Kantian ethics? Up your ass, is where. There’s no such thing.

We’ve learned to approach justice from another angle—the earthly one. We know everything we need to know. It (the truth) is very simple. No matter who our leader is, he’s a bastard. And he’ll finally get what he deserves.

People freezing here and there (in Russia) also separated their leader from his presidency. It was time to call him to account. Yet Russia, in the One-Day War, by a mere second, ended up on the defending side. So the simplest thing to do was to continue pursuing the actions against former President R (Russia’s “R” was the easiest thing to call him), in order to make him answer for the tanks and blood spilled in Kazan. There was nowhere to hide.

Former President A (the American), aging, was left completely alone, except for his dog.

His wife died, his children had long since moved to opposite ends of the country. It couldn’t be helped that the children became estranged: who’d like it if, day after day, their father was savaged in the papers. Not to mention the damned TV, where, in anticipation of the trial, everyday there were new lies—and malicious ones at that!

President A’s dog, on the other hand, did not read the papers nor sniff at the blue essence of the television. The dog was named Ivan. This was the custom—to name large and powerful dogs popular foreign names, preferably from enemy states. It was believed that Ivan was the most popular Russian name.

Former President A (the American) would hardly touch his breakfast. The same went for the papers: glancing over the fresh headlines, it wouldn’t have even occurred to him to read further. However, he would gladly get down on the floor and wrestle his formidable dog and scratch it behind its ears. Rolling around on the thick carpet, the aging ex-president would speak with easy bitterness to his dog, “Just the two of us, Ivan. You and I, and nobody else.”

But a little happiness crept into his voice. The dog had become a dear, familiar creature. It understood everything.

Other than the long (and probably happy) games with the dog, former President A spent his days occupied with unpleasant affairs: he had to concern himself with his future. How little he wanted to do this! (He didn’t even want a future—the hell with it!)

His people would come, leftovers from his former team, the whole old
royal guard. Over coffee, ice cream, and a little whiskey, they had a long
and downright difficult talk about how to stall the court proceedings. They
couldn’t get around them, of course, just like they couldn’t get around
democracy itself. But maybe they could stall things . . . Make the process
drag on interminably (maybe even torturously so, but nevertheless). This was
the order of the day—it seemed to all of them that this was the most impor-
tant thing they could do, their only chance.

Even a small, professional team is a busy organ—it requires regular
financial upkeep. The money that former President A had saved over the
course of his life was going into these trusted hands, into their pockets, and
being dispersed into the “pits” these hands were digging in the path of the
Court.

The last of his savings was something like ice cream, melting in his
mouth. The money was like coffee at the bottom of the cup. Finishing up
their discussion (and the coffee, the ice cream, the whiskey) the trusted peo-
ple would leave him by noon.

There was a computer screen at the ex-president’s headboard with a
graph of his life and a graph of his money. Both graphs reflected prognoses.
Both lines were falling downwards with each passing second, as though rac-
ing against one another. The same kind of calculating device (so that it
wouldn’t get lost) could also be found on his desk. And another one was
lying around on the carpet by his dog.

“What do you expect? Once the money’s gone, the trial will start. But
will it happen in my seventieth—or my seventy-fifth—year?” the former
president asked his dog, lying back down on the carpet and picking gray
strands of fur off his great body as though it were a giant daisy.

Ivan only turned his nose toward the window (in the direction of the
unconquerable calculating machine).

By this time, on the other side of the world, former President R (the
Russian) was also elderly and completely alone. For health reasons, his wife
lived in Crimea, where the air itself was full of iodine vapors, and (more im-
portantly), it wasn’t as freezing. His two adult sons had moved away, picking
a small town somewhere in the Urals to raise their families and live the kinds
of lives that least reminded them of who their father was. Sometimes the
sons would meet on a Saturday or Sunday, get drunk and loudly (but not too
loudly) complain of the ingratitude of their fellow countrymen:

“They (the people) have forgotten everything good our father did for
them.”
“They (the people) remember every bouquet that they themselves ever brought him.”

But what is the point of breaking sons’ hearts and lamenting the whims of the people when, century after century, they (the people) do not think on their situation without taking causality into account. They (the people), in their simplicity, lay the blame for all of Russia’s present troubles on the shoulders of the ex-president—namely the destroyed electric lines and the oil and gas pipelines.

The Hague—they couldn’t give a damn about it! They (the people, the countrymen) were soothed and comforted, even a bit diverted, by the fact that the Hague tribunal was looming over their ex-president, as though it were a phantom, albeit an increasingly real one. More and more insistently, it was putting him at fault for sending tanks into Kazan ages ago. The grandeur of the self-propagating procedure! A decade and a half had passed, two Russian Presidents had come and gone, but still, The Hague, year after year, continued to accumulate more and more evidence supporting that old crime. The proceedings turned abruptly serious. Finally (by regular mail) a subpoena came summoning President R for questioning.

Russia had been vaguely waiting for something and hadn’t yet given up its ex-president into the hands of The Hague, though he had long been under house arrest and could not leave the St. Petersburg city limits. They were waiting for the diligent Hague to gather all of the facts. But even more so (and everyone knew this) they were waiting for the ex-president to become senile.

Ex-president R was not a man of great means—his savings were melting away like ice cream, inching down like whiskey in a glass. However, he too had a team of sorts. A few devotees considered him a Great Man who had tried to restore Greatness to Russia. These passionate supporters were few in number and, of course, poor. But friends are friends, and these could spend hours on the phone with the ex-president, say, after breakfast, boosting his spirits.

And the ex-president had breakfast completely alone, not counting his dog Jack. By Russian custom, dogs have popular American or German names. Whether the name is American or German depends on the winds of history.

Breakfast was brought directly to the ex-president’s table, since he
was not allowed to leave the house to go to the grocery store or the deli. He drank tea with milk, ate two light rolls, cheese, and salami. As a former athlete, the ex-president limited the amount of meat he ate in the morning. He would eat the roll and the cheese while feeding the salami to Jack.

Like many aging men, he did not stand on ceremony when talking to his dog: “Is it fun, Jack, to win the battle against cholesterol?”

Jack didn’t answer, but leapt to catch a slice of meat in his mouth.

“Even idleness doesn’t depress me anymore, Jack!”

There was no treat for him and so the dog, with his mouth free, could hold up his part of the conversation. He joyously replied, “Ouu-ouu!”

The ex-president reached out and scratched Jack behind the ear.

While ex-president R was awaiting the Hague tribunal, ex-President A (the American) was waiting for the verdict of the American Supreme Court. Both Presidents fiercely resisted. Neither considered themselves guilty. And both, from newspapers and television, learned various details about each other’s lives.

Their being old men inspired a special kind of curiosity in them: which one of them would get trapped first? There was no getting around the fact that their names were inextricably linked in History, with its One-Day War—the blame was theirs to share—but each one of them had their own dues to pay: so which one of them was more guilty? Of course, this was an empty question, and put rather sportingly—neither one really had any hope of absolving themselves of any responsibility. On both sides of the Atlantic, a grand process had set slow-moving and angry packs after them—but who would be caught in the chase tomorrow? Who, with fur flying, would be caught by his weak aging calf?

If the Russian ex-president were to fall first, would the American be able to feel somewhat justified? (Of course not, unfortunately. A brief illusion). It’d be the same thing vice versa . . . However, no one wanted to be put on trial first. Thus, the ex-presidents were again competing, albeit indirectly. Both considered this fact with a smile. Both understood very well what nonsense these thoughts were—how little it all meant! But human lives (especially the lives of elderly humans) consist of insignificant things.

Both waited . . . Each one of them suddenly remembered their health. It was essential to stay in good shape for as long as possible.

The Hague tribunal finally got the evidence it had long sought—that
during the unrest in Kazan, the president had called Moscow three times from the summit he had been attending. Some special services operations were found (paid for) that could accurately confirm (though not in writing) the contents of those phone conversations—the date, the time, even the very minute they happened! The Russian president spoke—but what could he have spoken of in those days if not Kazan? What else could he offer his powerful support staff but the advice to send tanks in reaction to the unsatisfactory outcome of the talks?

Like clockwork, the leading newspapers of the world again lit up (in red) with images of Kazan—with the orange sunflowers of tanks burning in the streets, and with the red buds of self-immolating students.

Blow for blow, ex-President R (or rather his team photographer) answered the challenge with haste. The photographs they had to offer perhaps were not as flashy, but they too meant war.

The ex-president’s devotees, the same three or four of them, saw to it that the ex-president got a second, simple, one-bedroom apartment in the same Petersburg building. (They weren’t able to get one at the same entrance as the guards, but they got one nearby.) Not of significant means, they’d all pitched in the money to rent the apartment for the ex-president so that he could practice his former favorite sport—martial arts. In that small apartment, they set up a very small gym with tatami mats. Once a week, on Tuesdays, he would train. His faithful followers were trying to raise his spirits, reminding him of his former days. One of the devoted agreed to be the “dummy,” a weak sparring partner, whom the ex-president would throw over his hip onto the mat. The ex-president had once been capable of executing this move with some skill (everyone knew this), but now his loyal friend had to more or less throw himself onto the mat headfirst of his own volition. The faithful man risked his neck every Tuesday.

After the training session, the ex-president would be so weak that he had to be taken back to his room in a wheelchair. The exit with the wheelchair was executed with the utmost precaution, lest it be observed by the greedy eyes of the press. The ex-president was wheeled out in the thick of dusk. Rolling him from building to building, his helpers would dress, or rather bundle, the ex-president in a gray, nondescript cloak with a large hood that hung over his face.

The newspapers were chomping at the bit to get a picture of him looking weak, but still alive—millions of people had to see for themselves how much
better were their lives (their millions of lives) than the life of one who had been above them.

He's being rolled to court in a wheelchair! This has and always will inspire great satisfaction in TV viewers. It's best if he also has a tick of some sort—all the better if his glass eye is shaking from terror. Not bad at all! And there's the strand of saliva dripping right on the blanket the security guards have swaddled him in (out of pity) . . . and from the blanket, the silvery thread reaches right to the floor.

However, the faithfully devoted, the three or four of them, disseminated photos in which the aging ex-president, in a fighting pose, threw a well-built opponent down onto a mat. It was impressive. The man, with a glassy look in his eyes, was flying somewhere far into the corner. The newspapers printed the pictures, but not eagerly. The readers were only irritated by such photos—life is short, how long can a person read the newspaper and watch justice be postponed again and again!

The Hague, after a few of these pictures were published, slowed down their procedural rush. The judges shrugged. Of course, the Russian Ex wouldn't be going anywhere. Time and Democracy stop for no one. However, one still had to wait until the president stopped throwing his sparring partners into corners. What a sight it was! The caption under one of the winning pictures of the Russian ex-president, slamming his dummy onto the mat with the greatest of ease, read simply: “Who's next?”

In the prolonged biological one-on-one with Time (and the implicit one-on-one with the Russian ex-president), the American Ex was also strategically placing photographs in newspapers, and, more effectively, on TV. His Texan friends (also only a handful, the last ones left) made it seem that the ex-president, donning a cowboy hat, was barreling down the dustiest local road on horseback. This happened a half-mile from any curious onlookers. He himself couldn't sit in the saddle anymore. A dependable corset-harness was constructed for him out of parachute wire—it went from the saddle right up to the armpit of the rider on his left side—the rider, presumably, was filmed and photographed from the right.

The ex-president galloped for nearly ten minutes, during two of which he looked passable. After his ride, however, he shut down. The only reason he didn't actually collapse was that he was strapped in so tightly. He was carefully removed from the horse and carried to the car. All day at home, they carefully blew dust off of him. He was completely
out of it for a day and a half, not recognizing his friends, sitting in his chair with his mouth agape.

However, the two minutes of his brave ride lit up television screens worldwide.

It was enough to stall the court proceedings—it even put a halt to tallying the votes from Chicago, Illinois. The ex-president’s lawyer, in a public statement (immediately following the release of the footage of the ex-president on the horse), was able to use the fact that the votes “for” and “against” were not tallied by hand. The lawyer insisted on a recount. It would be more fair, more humane. After all, we were talking about one of ours, a man who gallantly sat astride a horse, nonchalantly holding the reigns with one hand . . .

But in some states they were fairly burning with a desire to put him behind bars.

The lawyer was planning to contest the hand recount as well, declaring the challenge to one staffer after another. He would (in a retreat this time!) invoke the propensity for human error. He would emphasize the biases held by various re-counters. Untrustworthy government employees—they’re a dime a dozen! Their mother or father (or fiancée) had been killed by the “crazy” missile. How could this person be expected to correctly place the tallies “for” and “against”? By this time, the war was being called the “one-day misunderstanding,” “an unfortunate accident,” “a historical comma,” and so on. The moral of the story being that it needed to be forgotten as quickly as possible. People from Chicago and the surrounding states were still escaping to the East and West—as far as possible from the strontium and enriched uranium fallout.

The world expressed its sympathy. Unscathed Europeans, Swedes, Germans, Spaniards all called Americans to their safe shores. Even the freezing Russians invited them with open arms. The utter cold (even the Siberian cold) was preferable to acute leukemia. Those who, for one reason or another, could not house Americans, expressed their sympathy in kind words. Letters upon letters were sent so that the victims wouldn’t lose their fighting spirit. The largest number of letters came from Hiroshima.

The ex-president was the recipient of a very different variety of letters, ranging from condolences to insults, from every corner of the States. All Americans were familiar with this address, “To the Texan who couldn’t multiply by three.” Even schoolchildren knew of his ridiculous error.
He had no place contending with Russians if he couldn’t even do basic arithmetic.

In Europe and in the far reaches of Africa, when children learned how to multiply by two, they would already start giggling in anticipation of the threes, knowing their teachers would soon take the opportunity to back up their lessons with an example from recent history.

He, the man who hung the sky with strategic missiles, was being called an opportunist! He, who had laid awake night after night in those terrifying times, was being accused of being carefree—and guilty of the death of hundreds of thousands . . . Or, they were incapable of seeing that his decision and his will was indeed their own decision and their (and no one else’s) will. They (the people, his countrymen) did not want to think for a minute that turning their thoughts in this direction would be seeing the truth. All they wanted to do was see him in court. Without hesitation, posthaste, they wanted to see him as a salivating old man. They were already intoxicated by the pursuit—out of the gates, no holds barred. Life in prison would not be enough. Some thought he would get 21 years, one source calculated a total of 322 . The people relished these figures, but they were too small . . . Far too small.

Sometimes, he would get phone calls (in the middle of the night), and people would outright scream at him about his approaching trial, “It’s coming soon!”

Sometimes, it would be as though they were asking for information. “Hey, buddy. I was wondering, where’s half of Chicago?”

Obviously, they were referring to the half of the population of the city that had died in the One-Day War. The victims had died instantaneously, within two or three seconds of impact.

The question “Where are they?” was purely rhetorical. Some religious members of the population persisted in posing the question in the sense that the massive destruction of Chicago had given the Lord a job that was both unfathomable (to us) and urgent. He was responsible for each individual soul! Some were intended for heaven, others for hell . . . We would be perfectly capable of taking apart the concrete ruins, clearing the brick and the rubble, but could He, sorting through such a great mass of the fallen, separate the millions of sinners from the righteous?

Since the time (recently) when philosophers, and with them other wise men, realized that Time was a man-made construct, created for its convenience (so that comparisons could be drawn), since that time, Time had
become simply time. Tick-tock, tick-tock. For this reason, any troubling idea could now be replaced by a set of rules and regulations—fine-tuned and infallible Procedure. Why should humanity wait for the hand of Time to judge? It wasn’t enough—let time do its job—just time, just a day, a month or so, even a year or five. Tick-tock. We’ll get what’s coming to us.

So, in sadness, thought the old security guard—the same one sitting in the entrance of the St. Petersburg building where the ex-president was under house arrest. The former Petersburg engineer (though that was so very long ago) and current security guard yawned at his nighttime post; he was bored, but at least he was warm! Exhausting his own insomnia, out of sheer idleness, the old man contemplated Time . . . and the fate of the former president . . . and how sorely old men were defeated (finally, his thought turned on something important!).

Why, he wondered in the still of the night, does this chase reek of spiritual carrion? Indeed, indeed, a good and naïve question (while in Russia whole blocks are freezing to death!). Right now is the perfect time for this question . . . at this very moment. That untalented, self-aggrandizing, jeering, heartless horde—what are they so happy about? And why do I, an old man, who has no love for them, take them seriously? Why do I, so full of trust, run ahead with them into our common future?

He spit off into the corner of the room. Old men are grumpy and rarely happy with the present.

“Who’s next?” The question underneath the picture in the newspapers appeared forebodingly poisonous.

Newspapers flocked out from St. Petersburg, again full of pictures of the Russian ex-president. This time, he was not in karate uniform towering over tatami mats. His torso was no longer belted by that familiar black belt. And he wasn’t throwing anybody over his hip. This time, the Russian former President was in a wheelchair, out of it, with his characteristically glazed-over eyes and a half-open mouth. One of his devotees was pushing his wheelchair forward with difficulty, hurrying to disappear into the courtyard of the building complex.

One of the faithful had not been careful enough. It was a Tuesday, and they were taking the ex-president (and ex-fighter) home from his practice room. One of them let the hood fall, revealing the old man as he really was. It’s possible that the hood was simply pulled off by the wind. But it is also possible that somebody who was aware of what was going on had been bribed and “accidentally” pulled the hood off the ex-president’s face. Someone had
been bought off. A photographer couldn’t have landed in the bushes outside of the building of his own accord. And two more near the building gates, with flashes. Somebody’s extra cash had done its job. (As they had also done in the American case. As soon as an old man is betrayed, someone nearby is in the money. As reliable as snow in winter.)

The photograph of the weak old Russian man was greeted with sighs of relief and even cheers of long-awaited victory. People in cafés jumped out of their seats and waved bundles of newspapers over their heads: Finally! He didn’t get away! See what he really is! His time has come! The Hague immediately set a court date. The Russian government, as is their wont, was still dissatisfied. They remained reluctant to give up their wilted ex-president just like that. But there was already talk of Russian officials making some secret deal with one of the Baltic states. They (NATO members despite it all) were prepared to kidnap the ex-president and put his extradition on their own cool consciences. From Petersburg to Tallinn? It was just a stone’s throw away. And from Tallinn to The Hague, on a good private jet—he wouldn’t even have time to finish his coffee!

All of the calculators—on the desk, the rug, and the one by his bed—were telling the American ex-president that his hard-earned money, set aside for his battle against Time (with the approaching Court), had been spent. It would no longer be difficult for someone to pay one of his entourage more than he could pay them. Someone’s loyalty was bought. At first, all bribery suspicions fell on Gary, an old boozer (one of his oldest friends). Gary, embarrassed, shot himself. The man who had really betrayed the ex-president to the photojournalists ran off to another state without looking back (and from there, he wrote his memoirs justifying his actions).

But there was no fixing things. That black Tuesday (the very same day that the Russian ex-president was hit), the American ex-president fell off a horse. The feeble cowboy couldn’t even stay in the saddle for a minute. And right then and there, hiding in the bushes, some rake of a photographer snapped the picture.

The pitiful, lost face of the fallen American greatly resembled that of his Russian colleague. This coincidental day (a Black Tuesday for both), the journalists also began to call The One-Day War—one which both old men had suddenly lost.

American newspapers, more than others, disseminated images of the lifeless expression on his face. The old man, with a confused look and an open mouth. Steps away from the grazing little horse, he was slobbering like
an infant and being lifted up, carried, pushed away in a wheelchair (resembling the Russian one), so he could get home and to bed.

Now even the formerly neutral states were voting to take him to court as soon as possible. The Head of the Supreme Court set the long-awaited date.

The night passed like any other, the night when the American ex-president put the phone back in its base and decided not to be upset by the rude voice—he even tried to smile. And why not? The moon was high! He went up to his window (just like his transatlantic counterpart) and looked out at the still nocturnal landscape. This was not one of the worst minutes in his life. It was a good minute! It’s not very often that the heavens allow old men moments of such clarity, and a modicum of strength. When it does happen, it is at night.

On the street—on the opposite side of the road—he saw a cheap car stop and a girl hop out of it. This was maybe fifty feet away from him, maybe more, but his sharp though elderly eyes saw it all very clearly. Looking around and deciding that the coast was clear, the girl ran behind some bushes on the side of the road and disappeared from view. She was probably relieving herself. It happens!

Happy, she returns to the car and (raising her eyes) notices the yellow glow coming from a window in the building across the street, framing a man’s silhouette. It’s night. The street is asleep. Just in case, the girl gives him a friendly wave. The palm of her hand lights up with her motion—hurray! Hurray!

The ex-president sees (in the silvery moonlight) that she is young. He sees that she is well-built, with a good figure. Through the veils of old age, he remembers something, and whispers to himself, “If only I could screw her right now.”

He feels no desire to get closer to her. His psychoanalyst once taught him to do this—as soon as he sees a young woman, he has to say how he wants her—as though he was letting himself lick the very desire! That’s how a man can stay young. This gives him the strength to fight for his life. Though it didn’t end up helping the psychoanalyst. He was dead. But maybe that was because he was unlucky, thought the ex-president. Or maybe he didn’t see pretty young women often enough.

The old man returned the young woman’s friendly gesture. Her car set off into the night, and a moment later it disappeared. She was gone. There was nobody else left. She was gone . . . but at least the dog was still there. The
ex-president felt how behind him, pressing to his shaking leg, the dog was begg

ing for attention.

Without turning away from the window, the old man reached behind with his left hand and petted the dog’s head.

“Ouuuu—ouuuu,” the dog answered, swooning from affection.

The room’s echo quivered. And, as though from the other side of the world, the other end of night, the cheerful whine of another dog replied, “Ouuuuu—ouuuu!”
Yury Polyakov (born 1954, Moscow) is a prolific writer, poet and playwright, whose works form part of Russian school and university curriculums. His philosophical and straightforward insights, originality, topicality and self-deprecating humor have made his novels, such as Hundred Days to Release and The Incident on a Regional Scale, prizewinning international bestsellers, which have seen a record number of reprints and have been translated into many languages. Several of his novels have been adapted for the big screen.
All right, listen up! Perestroika kicked off in '86, I returned to favor and made it to the West—to England—for the first time. We flew out to the Heather Ale International Festival of Young Cinema. Needless to say, we knocked back some duty-free whisky on the plane, and got into our usual cinema chat: Tarkovsky, Lelouch, Spielberg, Fellini, Kurosawa . . . There was this nice young bloke amongst us, a grad from the cinematography Institute. He was the latest entry in a family line of film critics: way back when, reviewing Battleship Potemkin on the pages of Pravda, his grandpa had called for Eisenstein to be sent off to Solovki. All flight long the youngster listened to our debate in silent reverence, afraid to open his mouth, like some mortal serving ambrosia at a feast of quarreling gods.

But then we landed at Heathrow, which was like our Sheremetyevo times four. No sooner did we set foot on this green and pleasant land than we metamorphosed from voluble heaven-dwellers into tongue-tied numpties (“khello-khow-do-yoo-do?”). Only one of us, the quick-thinking, glib-talking composer Khabidullin, who’d written the score to The Young Engels, somehow managed to communicate—by means of Beatles lyrics. Our taciturn film critic, on the other hand, came into his own and began jabbering merrily away in fluent English. Unlike us, who fought our way up into the high echelons of art from amongst the popular throng, he’d gone to a specialized school and, what’s more, studied with a native Brit who’d worked as a liaison to Kim Philby and, after the great spy’s exposure, was smuggled into the USSR in a sack of diplomatic mail.

Incidentally, here’s something I noticed a long time ago: the simpler your way of thinking is, the poorer your Russian, the easier you’ll find it to pick up
other languages. And polyglots’re just plain gloopy! Unsurprising, that: no room for thinking when your head’s teeming with so many foreign words.

Of course, just like everybody else, I wanted to choose freedom. Stay for good. But when I went off to ask for political asylum, the composer Khabidullin overtook me. He was in such a hurry, there was such suicidal determination in his face, that I slackened my pace in spite of myself. What, I thought, is freedom? Essentially, in the words of Saint-John Perse, it is nothing more than a tolerable degree of coercion. Was I going to forsake my native land, my faithful wife, my darling women and, finally, that vitalizing Russian bedlam whose juices nourished my art—was I really going to forsake all that just to swap one degree of coercion for another, more sophisticated one? Was I really going to stay here and settle amongst these strange Brits, who lived in bondage to the banks and spoke as if their lower jaws were numb? And the women! They all looked like plain-clothes cops! No! Not in a million years!

By the way, if you think Khabidullin’s now writing scores to Hollywood movies and having his symphonies performed at the Albert Hall, you’ve got another think coming. He can be found tinkling the ivories at the Borscht ’n’ Tears restaurant three nights out of seven, playing his medley of Soviet hits—and he’s happy if some tourist chucks a quid into his cap. Sometimes they invite him onto the BBC so he can share the story of how the KGB brutally forced him to write the music for The Young Engels, and Khabidullin, in an effort to extend his leave to remain, lies about government toughs and their threats to deport him to Kolyma. In point of fact no one forced him to do it, quite the opposite: to secure the coveted commission from Mosfilm, he cheated heinously on his boyfriend by becoming the lover of the vice-president of Goskino, a vile, boy-hungry old man! And you call that freedom?

Anyway, I never did ask for asylum. But during this trip I realized that the important thing was to learn English. When—to my wife’s joy and much to the surprise of my friends—I returned to the Motherland, I did some asking around and found myself a teacher. A thirty-five-year-old graduate of the Romance-Germanic Faculty of Moscow State University, she lived on Sivtsev Vrazhek Lane in an upmarket (as they say now) brick house served by a concierge, which in those times was no less exotic than a security guard dressed in an iron cuirass and armed with a halberd would be today. She was,

---

1 Mosfilm: the largest film studio in Russia. Goskino: The USSR State Committee for Cinematography. —Translator’s note.
incidentally, granddaughter to a People’s Commissar in Stalin’s cabinet. Her name was—well, let’s just call her Kira Karlovna.

She was slight, slender, bespectacled—and so spiritual that, looking at her, you’d be forgiven for thinking that people reproduce by pollination with library dust. When I was around her I had no desire for anything but “education, education, education.” She was knowledgeable, well-read, no fool but not too clever either. But then, as Saint-John Perse rightly remarked, “The brain embraces intelligence no oftener than embraces contain love!” Hers was that grimly upright kind of intelligence you often get in children who’ve followed in their parents’ professional footsteps. For not only will sympathetic intelligence and talent never be sexually transmitted to your wife, which is obvious—alas, they often fail to be passed on to your children. Talent is the mischievous, accidental gift of the cosmos, and the descendants of Stalin Prize laureates shall be the ruin of Russian culture.

But back to Kira Karlovna. Our lessons were ticking along nicely. Sometimes, truth to tell, her gaze did linger on me, leaving me to think she was interested in me as more than just a student with an uncanny knack for pronunciation. Once, when we were doing “In the Restaurant,” I suggested we kick the topic around in the House of Cinema, a setting as consistent as possible with our theme. So we went. Had a few drinks. Chatted, needless to say, about life. As it turned out, she’d been married for several years, but then her husband left for the mountains, never to return. Out of tact, I didn’t try and find out whether he never returned at all or never returned to her. On the way back, as I was walking her home, she shot me this glance, tender and expectant, every now and again. And in the lift I thought, Kira wants you to kiss her.

No dice, missy, I thought. Pity sex isn’t my style!

In the hall she slipped awkwardly on the parquet floor and, regaining her balance, flung herself on my neck.

Ain’t going to happen, I decided. How would I recite irregular verbs to her afterwards?

But, having resolved to leave, I suddenly read such despair, such universal sorrow, such cosmic loneliness in the eyes of this poor wretch. You know, if they ever managed to harness the power of female loneliness and convert it into electrical energy, we’d get by just fine without any nuclear power stations! So I thought, what the hell, and kissed her on the lips, trying to make it seem all friendly and jokey just in case. What I got in return was, as that Khlebnikov of yours might say, a veritable “kisstorm.” There was post-
coital awkwardness later, of course. You know, when a man and a woman try with all their might not to look each other in the eyes after doing it, knowing that the fun part’s over and the relationship part is yet to come. Next lesson I was feeling horribly ill at ease, and I kept getting the perfect mixed up with the pluperfect. But when Kira dropped a pencil, accidentally on purpose, and bent right over to fetch it, I suddenly noticed she wasn’t wearing any knickers. No knickers at all! It was fatal for me, this endearing forgetfulness of hers. From then on our lessons were divided into two unequal segments, tuitional and coitional. She turned out, by the way, to be a halfway decent methodologist, and later on my bedroom English would help me out no end in my escapades with foreign women. And beneath that bookworm exterior, I have to tell you, lurked a hot-blooded, insatiable, creative female creature. Loath, it seemed, to believe her luck would hold out, Kira was stocking up on fleshly delights, as a desert-dweller would on water.

Observing from aside, as it were, the happy juddering of our bodies, I often reflected on the fact that not even the most solid titanium construction could ever withstand the host of violent tremors you generate over the course of your sexual career! But for all her dedication to the cause, Kira’s passion was a tad naive, even simpleminded—and this lent a particular charm to our encounters. Later I discovered in her nightstand an American seduction manual entitled *How to Find Your Man, Conquer Him and Grapple Him to You With Hooks of Steel.* This little book had it all: the tender, expectant glance, the kiss in the lift, the slippery floor and, naturally, the dropped-pencil-sans-knickers. I’d stumbled on a well-read knickerless enchantress!

But that was just the beginning! Kira, by the look of things, had decided to marry me, and she began acting in total accordance with the manual’s recommendations. Not only did she refer to me as the best man in the world and a film-director extraordinaire, she also set about inching her way into my creative concerns, begging me for errands to run, typing up screenplay proposals and taking them round to studios. And all of a sudden I started thinking, well, actually, why not? What exactly have I got to lose?

My wife Larisa Efimovna and I got together in what was a difficult time for me. She was, of course, a kind, caring, homey woman, but no more than that. Spying me in the doorway, she’d immediately entrust me with Hoover, dustbin or even my rucksack, for filling with potatoes at the market. No, she didn’t shun my creative pursuits, but she treated them with the sort of condescension men get from their folks when they go ice-fishing, or take camping trips accompanied by their guitars, or, in a word, when they do anything
that seriously cuts them off from their families. What’s more, she was mighty fond of money. Not that she was miserly or avaricious—she just had some innate reverence for those omnipotent scraps of paper. Whenever I managed to earn a little extra cash (by lecturing, for instance), she’d receive the plunder with a peculiar, mysterious gesture, sorting the notes by degree of wear and tear. And if she came upon a new razor-edged amethyst twenty-fiver, or a green fifty, Larisa Efimovna would long admire it before putting it aside, and she’d release it into the household economy with a sad farewell sigh. But in those days large notes were a rare sight in our family, and my wife contrived to reproach me for our meagerness of means even while groaning with conjugal pleasure. Alas, as Saint-John Perse said, “We fall in love with the best woman in the world, and always break it off with the worst. And, funnily enough, the woman is one and the same in both cases!”

Of course, Larisa Efimovna soon twigged that something was amiss. But, marrying an out-of-favor film director, she made preemptive peace with my penchant for women, indispensable to a creative personality for the illusion of inner freedom. Having decided that this was just another of my little dalliances, Larisa Efimovna initially adopted the wait-and-see attitude that had kept our marriage afloat for many years on end. But this little dalliance was dragging on and on. Additionally, every wise woman can forgive her husband a lukewarm, or even indifferent, glance in his eyes, but a glance hinting at comparative womanology shall never be forgiven. That the danger stemmed from the English teacher wasn’t hard to guess: a man who’s just returned from his lover always exudes the good-naturedness of a gorged predator. Taking our son with her, Larisa Efimovna went back to her historical homeland—the stanitsa of Staromyshastovskaya in the Krasnodar region—to ask her mother for advice.

My experienced mother-in-law Vasilina Tarasovna, who had domesticated two husbands and one partner into their graves, explained to her daughter that she had two options. First, get her own hands on someone decent and not give her husband the time of day—the old man’ll shag his fill and come crawling back to eat humble pie. Second, arm herself with something heavy out of the kitchen drawer, go round to the offender’s and introduce her to the foundations of marital law. Option number one was pleasanter, number two more fool-proof.

Philistinism? Depends how you look at it . . . In times gone by cardsharps

---

2 A Cossack village or administrative district.—Translator’s note.
would be beaten with candlesticks—and that, strange though it may seem, fitted perfectly well into noble etiquette. But back to our muttons. While my wife was away I became even more resolved to change my domestic destiny. I spent my nights at Kira’s, of course, and was presented with a working model of our future life together. This included morning coffee in bed, touching attention to my health, tactful involvement in my creative undertakings, nightly music-making, and, naturally, tenderly inventive sex before bed. Oh, how she played Chopin’s nocturnes on the family Steinway! What’s more, Kira insisted, delicately yet firmly, that in all likelihood Larisa Efimovna wouldn’t be able to share dignifiedly in the worldwide cinematographic triumph I’d soon be enjoying. No, no, she was a good woman, with a vocational education under her belt, but, alas, that wasn’t enough to stand on an equal footing with a priest of the goddess Cinemope.

I have to admit that, listening to Kira, I was hard-pressed to imagine myself in a tux on that famous Cannes staircase. But when I tried to visualize Larisa Efimovna walking beside me, decked out in some Versace frock to boot, my imagination simply gave out. Kira, though, clearly saw herself in that role. Afraid on a genetic level, like all descendants of Stalin’s confederates, she was cagey, dodged direct questions, and only once, after several glasses of wine and some tempestuous loving, did she insinuate to me that her family roots on her Commissar grandfather’s side went back almost into the Rurikid3 haze of history. This was a surprise: the Generalissimo, I thought, kept close tabs on the worker-peasant origins of his confederates. She smiled slyly in reply, laid her head on my chest and whispered that Soso himself was the illegitimate son of the explorer Przhevalsky, who’d wandered into Gori and had his shoes mended by the cobbler Dzhugashvili—but this, mind, was a terrible secret.

Anyway, things were heading toward divorce. There was just one thorny, horny little problem: every night Kira would exploit my male resources with ever greater voracity. Far from subsiding, as usually happens with familiar lovers, her female exactingness grew more threateningly pronounced. In light of all the other plusses, I would quite possibly have overlooked this nuisance: after all, the poor woman had been knocking about at a loose end ever since her husband failed to return from the mountains. “At some point,” I consoled myself, “she will get tired of this,” preparing for a change of marital destiny.

3 The ruling dynasty of Kievan Rus’.—Translator’s note.
But then something terrible happened. Larisa Efimovna, needless to say, didn’t pick up any lover. After all, she was a one-man woman, and not some frivolous dame. And we shouldn’t regard the notion of “easy virtue” as applying only to nightly pavement patrols and a readiness to jump into the first car that stops by. No: a woman of easy virtue can be pure, stringent, hard to seduce, even faithful in marriage, but her devotion is not the metastasis of love, a heart irrevocably smitten. No, it is . . . It is, if you like, merely an appendage, a supplement, sometimes much desired, to her own life. And a lost appendage can be compensated for. That’s all there is to it.

Anyway, here’s how it went. One Saturday Larisa Efimovna was making borscht. And suddenly (she swears), she heard a voice proclaim loudly and clearly, in the soft tones characteristic of the Russian South, “Lara, you need to put an end to this right now! Get up and go!”

Leaving the pot of borscht on a tiny flame, my wife armed herself with an umbrella of Soviet manufacture, heavy as a club, and went off to bring some pain. I’d given her Kira’s number myself—back when I’d not yet imagined I’d be learning English by the Bedside Method. And getting an address from a phone number’s a piece of cake. Thus began a fatal series of coincidences. “If the devil is in the details,” Saint-John Perse teaches us, “God must be in the coincidences!” First of all, there was no lesson planned for that day. But, driving past Kira’s, I slowed down a tad. Moscow was ridiculously hot that summer, you just wanted to drink—and eat, too. And I decided, completely spontaneously, to pop round for an hour or so: by that time our relationship had reached the point where doing this was simple as not even a phone call required. She opened the door and beamed with unexpected joy. She did, however, have another visitor . . . No, not a man! A student, some school leaver with the face of an inquisitive imbecile. She turned him out immediately, and, interpreting in her own way my intention to take a shower after the heat of the street, changed into a see-through kimono—a gift to her grandmother, I think, from the wife of the Japanese ambassador. Stalin, by the way, had Granny jailed for her irregular friendships with ambassadors. Just imagine: Grandad’s running heavy industry while Granny’s sitting in Svirlag. Tough times! Tough, but fair: don’t you go accepting gifts from ambassadors. And so, post ablution, togged out in her never-returned-from-the-mountains husband’s terry bathrobe, I was munching heartily away, while she was bustling around me and, in keeping with the recommendations of the seduction manual, constantly dropping something, bending over for it, and opening the kimono, draped over her naked body.
And then—you’re not going to believe this—then, out of nothing, practically out of thin air, Larisa Efimovna materialized in the kitchen doorway like an angel of vengeance, the umbrella her flaming sword. The shock made Kira scream and drop a Kuznetsov plate, smashing it. As for me, I was quite simply petrified. “Learning English, are we!” shrieked my incensed wife—and brought the entire weight of Soviet light industry crashing down upon my head. Jolted out of my mystical stupor, shielding myself with a velvet cushion her Commissar grandfather had brought back from Venice, I made an orderly retreat to the bathroom, conceding my dressing gown on the way. Locking the door behind me, I got my breath back and regrouped.

Later it turned out that the concierge, who admitted guests into the building only with the residents’ permission, had left her post for literally a moment to gawp at a motorcyclist who’d crashed into a kvass barrel. As a result, Larisa Efimovna was able to stroll unimpeded into a tightly secured building. But that’s not all. Kira and her neighbors, all well-to-do folk, had, for security’s sake, partitioned off their apartments with a common iron entryway that was always kept locked. Just at that moment, though, a girl from next door happened to be taking the dog out for a walk.

“Who are you here to see?” she queried warily of the unfamiliar woman with the umbrella.

“Just Kirochka! We’re good friends,” cooed the crafty Kuban Cossack, readying herself for a ferocious incursion.

But that’s still not all. My teacher was a cautious, even fearful lady who only lost her head in bed. I’d always hear a multitude of locks clicking behind me on my way out: her Commissar grandfather, who spent his entire life walking around in one patched-up service jacket, left her enough antiques to fill a sizable museum. Sometimes I think it wasn’t only short-supply goods that were doled out every holiday to those old Bolsheviks by the distributor on Maroseika Street, but art objects confiscated from the vile bourgeois and the enemies of the people. At any rate, I saw three Fabergé eggs, a Kuznetsov dinner service and two Levitans at Kira’s with my own eyes! But that day the impossible happened: the imbecilic school leaver failed to shut the door after him, and Kira, anticipating an unscheduled bout of happiness, forgot to check the locks. Tell me now, is it really possible to have so many sudden coincidences in a single day? No! God is in the coincidences!

---

4 Distributors were limited-access shops, open only to particular groups of (elite) consumers.—Translator’s note.
5 Levitan, Isaac Ilyich (1860-1900): landscape painter.—Translator’s note.
I sat awhile in the bathroom, washed my wounds, collected myself and
demanded that my suit be handed to me through the door. This demand was
satisfied. I dressed, brushed my hair and listened. All quiet. Which meant
that Larisa, bearing in mind Kira’s robust education and fragile frame, must
have opted not to hit her. That was one small mercy at least! I spent another
few minutes in front of the mirror, choosing the right face to emerge with.
Not an easy ask, since I had to appear before my wife, who’d caught me red-
headed with my lover, and before my lover, caught red-handed by my wife.
The main difficulty was that I needed to put on a dolefully remorseful expres-
sion for the benefit of the missus, and a completely different, philosophically
inspiriting one for the sake of the mistress. You just try and combine the two!
Eventually I somehow twisted the old mug into a mien at once philosophical,
remorseful and inspiriting—and came out to join my ladies.

The rivals were sat opposite one another in the kitchen, smoking silently.
Both had their eyes glued on the accumulation of fag ends in the ashtray, as
if striving to glean from them the answers to life’s most crucial questions.

“But you’ve given up!” I reproached my wife lightly.

By way of response she glared at me like I was some black mold suddenly
endowed with human speech.

“Perhaps we could have a drink?” I suggested delicately, aware that some
alcohol would do everyone good after a mad bout of stress.

“I don’t have anything . . .” murmured closefisted Kira, doleful gaze ever
on the ashtray.

“But what about the—you remember . . . Your grandfather’s bottle?” I
asked, referring to the Malaga she kept in perpetual storage in the fridge.

This wine had been presented to her Commissar grandfather by some
EPRON heroes half a century ago. While demining the Sevastopol road-
stead after the war, they stumbled on the wreck of an English frigate which
got down during the Crimean campaign, and brought to the surface several
bottles overgrown with long, green, slimy seaweed. As historians would have
it, this wine was sent from London to Lord Raglan, commander of the British
forces, by his wife, the Duke of Wellington’s niece. Before his death, Kira’s
grandfather instructed her to open the bottle and drink the Malaga on the
most important day of her life.

“All right then, take it.” She nodded with difficulty, evidently having de-
cided that this day had come.

---

6 EPRON: the USSR’s special-purpose underwater salvage and rescue service; ex-
isted from 1923 to 1941. —Translator’s note.
While I was fumbling around with the cork and the sealing-wax, made rock-hard by time, my ladies smoked in silence, inhaling deeply. Occasionally they looked up from the ashtray and scrutinized one another, weighing up the respective danger each posed. Finally, I poured out the syrupy, almost black Malaga into Bohemian glasses embellished with royal monograms. The wine turned out to be thick, fragrant and very strong.

“Right, and now what?” inquired Larisa Efimovna severely, downing the glass in one gulp, as per Cossack custom.

“Let Dima decide,” Kira proposed softly, glancing at me with suggestive tenderness.

“Dima?!” my wife bellowed. “Don’t go calling him Dima just yet!”

In reply, Kira smiled thinly, thereby expressing her sincere sympathy in regard to the uncalled-for humiliations I was forced to endure in this unequal and aimless marriage. The night before Kira revealed to me that on her grandfather’s side she really was almost a Rurikid, whereas her grandmother’s family line reached practically all the way back to David the Psalmist, which was why she had distant relatives in America, who, believe it or not, happened to be shareholders in Warner Brothers. In a word, I needn’t worry myself about the international recognition of my future films.

I looked at Larisa Efimovna, mentally saying my good-byes, and felt so sorry for the poor thing I could’ve cried. You know, when you’ve spent a long time living with a woman, even her flaws gradually become virtues. I remembered how I waited for her in her office lobby with a bunch of yellow roses, how we kissed at the massage parlor, how she used her quarterly bonus to buy me an export-quality Poljot watch, and how, literally two days later, I used it to settle up at the House of Cinema restaurant. She spent the whole night crying over this injustice, then got her revenge in the morning by slashing up my favorite tie with Van Gogh’s sunflowers on it—the very pink of the high fashion of the time.

All of a sudden, Larisa Efimovna wearily proclaimed, “Here’s how it is, Dmitri Antonovich. I’ve got borscht on the simmer back home. Either you leave with me now, or you stay here and learn English. For good. Though, of course, Kira Ivanovna might have other life plans.”

“Absolutely not!” Kira returned, with undisguised triumph. “I’ll take in Dmitry Antonovich!”

Then something hit me—harder than any umbrella could’ve. Take me in? What did that mean? What was I, exactly—a paralyzed relative, a piece of slow-moving cargo? My film *Two in the Reed Beds* was condemned by
well-nigh the Politburo! You could call me a subverter of principles, the terror of Stagnation cinema, the Soviet Fellini — and she was going to “take me in”? Don’t make me laugh! And here’s the strange thing: Kira the highbrow, the descendant of two great families, who’d received an excellent domestic upbringing, graduated from Moscow State University, studied in Oxford . . . Kira the refined, who always spoke as if she were translating Victorian prose on the fly . . . Kira the cunning, who’d learnt by heart the worldwide best-seller How to Find Your Man, Conquer Him and Grapple Him to You With Hooks of Steel . . . And all she can come out with is the ridiculous, common, womanish “I’ll take him in”! What, have I been burned out of house and home?! Am I wheelchair-bound? No need to take me in! No need! Oh, but what a great giver of hospitium! That’s the kind of terrible destructive power an ill-placed word can have! Dynamite of destiny! TNT! One ludicrous phrase and KABOOM — your entire life goes veering off in another direction!

Finishing off the Malaga, I said, “Thank you kindly for having us, Kira Karlovna” — and got up.

“But what happened?” she asked, blanching.

“Everything’s just dandy!”

“But whyyy?”

“Learn some Russian!”

After that, we never saw each other again. I only heard that she took it really badly, fell ill, made the rounds of doctors and got married to a psychotherapist a year later. Some time afterwards her husband went off on a hunting trip with friends, never to return. Whether he never returned to her or never returned at all was unclear. No doubt there was a curse hanging over her family line. I don’t know who screwed up more — the Rurikids or the Davidoviches — but karmic retribution rained down incessantly upon the poor wretch, carrying off her men into unknown horrors. Yet Providence had loftier designs for your humble narrator — something else was expected of me. This bloke, someone up there had clearly decided, was capable of more than quietly living off Grandad’s antiques, giving succor to the bottomless pit of Kira’s femininity or failing to return from a fishing trip one day.

Anyway, Larisa Efimovna and I went home. The borscht, of course, had boiled away, but we mixed a little hot water into the dregs — it wasn’t inedible. My wife began to lay the table, and sent me to take the bin out. Incidentally, I never made any more films and, as soon as the merest whiff of capitalism hit the Soviet air, I went into the restaurant business.
ROMAN SENCHIN (born 1971, Kyzyl) is a novelist whose expressive narrative style has brought him critical acclaim as a leader of “New Realism.” Senchin’s books are strikingly visual portrayals of ordinary people and events, and frequently include a wealth of ethnographic details. His most famous novel *Eltyshevy*, which depicts life in a contemporary Russian village, was on the final shortlists of the Big Book Prize and the National Bestseller Award as well as the Russian Booker Prize of the Decade. His works have been translated into English, German and French.
The Sayan Mountains don’t possess the kind of grandiose heights that infect hikers with the itch to conquer; there are no five- or six-thousand meter mountains with insurmountable peaks or icy caps that never melt. The Sayans may yield to Tibet, the Caucasus, and the Pamirs in terms of significance, but the Sayans are still a huge country of mountains, stretching from Krasnoyarsk on the north to the expansive Mongolian steppes on the south. To the west, the Sayans border the equally mountainous Altay and they approach Lake Baikal on the East. Of course the Sayans aren’t all mountain: there are generous life-giving basins, rocky deserts, and dunes that almost resemble the Karakum Desert. There are also healing mud lakes and taiga wilds that human machinery has never touched.

Hundreds of rivers, brooks, and rivulets cut—sometimes hurriedly, sometimes sluggishly, sometimes furiously—through thick layers of rock, clay, sand, and black earth that seems almost edible and soaked with its own fat, waters that twist and loop to find their master, the Yenisei River. The many waters resemble thin roots that don’t look like much on their own, but they feed a powerful stalk that stretches from the very center of Asia to the Arctic Ocean.

There were never serious plans to build a railroad through the Sayans, though it wasn’t as if the need hadn’t arisen: the Republic of Tuva in the Sayans was, after all, rich with asbestos, coal, timber, and lamb. And a new road would obviously have been a shorter route to (now formerly) fraternal Mongolia than through Ulan-Ude. But there would have been too many mountain passes to conquer, too many tunnels to dig, too many bridges to
construct. Even building an auto road—the Usinsk highway is famous here—
took several decades. That project was periodically abandoned then resumed;
it wasn’t brought to fruition until after Tuva joined the USSR in forty-four,
at the end of the war. Trucks crawled along the highway in caravans in those
days, taking nearly a week to drive the five hundred kilometers or so from
Abakan to Kyzyl.

It’s no exaggeration to say that Sergei Alexandrovich Deev’s entire life had
been tied to that road from early childhood on. His father, Alexander, was one
of the first to haul cargo on the Usinsk highway in a ZIS, a reliable and powerful
truck in its time. He lived in both Abakan and Kyzyl, staying in dormitories,
ilittle hotels, or more often, his truck cab.

One Saturday evening after a delivery run he met a girl at the Abakan city
park, danced with her until the dance floor closed, and then saw her home. He
must have spoken eloquently and at length because when Alexander Deev, also
known as “Sanya,” came back after his next run, he saw that a girl was standing
at the truck depot gates waiting for him. He guessed immediately that she was
waiting for him, and he wasn’t mistaken. The girl announced, trying to sound
businesslike, that she had two tickets for a touring circus. The girlfriend she’d
wanted to take couldn’t go. Sanya washed up in five minutes, gathered a small
loan from each of the guys, and borrowed a jacket and tie from the head of the
convoy. After the circus, he brought the girl to the only restaurant in the city.
They submitted their marriage application two weeks later.

Their Sergei was born in October of forty-eight. A daughter followed. [I
took out the second son because he doesn’t seem to exist later on and there’s no
mention of a death.]

Seryozha hadn’t even turned five when his father began taking him in the
truck. His mother, as she told things herself later, worried and grumbled at her
husband but she didn’t protest too much: she knew from the start that her eldest
son’s life would be just like his father’s.

And so Sergei rode in the passenger seat until he was eighteen, then he
took his driver’s test and struggled for about a year with a half-broken-down
“Gazik” Jeep belonging to the public works department, hauling saplings along
green streets, dry branches to the dump, and other trash, too. But it was three
years in the army’s automobile troops that made Sergei into an ace of a driver,
so he was able to get into a nice new MAZ truck after his army service without
any red tape. By that time his father had developed an ulcer and high blood
pressure, and was bored with his mechanic job at his long-time depot. He was only a little over fifty.

Sergei took his father with him whenever he could. They sat side by side but now the son turned the wheel and the father just moved his fingers instinctively, pressing with his feet on the empty, pedal-less bottom of the cab and looking intently ahead, out of habit. Sometimes Sergei entrusted the wheel to him, and his father ceremoniously changed seats and cautiously drove the MAZ at low speed, carefully avoiding every pothole, every bump in the asphalt, as if he’d only recently learned how to drive.

As trucks became more powerful and comfortable, the roads changed, too. Whole mountains were cut off, gorges were filled in, and reinforced concrete snow sheds were built in avalanche areas. Many words meaningful to older drivers became obsolete: “long uphill,” “chains,” “sinkhole,” and “switchback.” None of the road was left unpaved because there were no more steep climbs or drops on the highway where a truck could slide on black ice, as if the asphalt were glass.

The Usink highway’s driving time gradually decreased, too: a run that took almost a week in the post-war years took less than twenty-four hours in the nineties. These days, now that the once-difficult, dangerous pass ironically nicknamed “Happy Pass” can be circumvented, truckers can drive from Kyzyl to Abakan in one bright summer day, though foreign cars and new Zhigulis can tear through those four hundred kilometers in five or six hours.

But with all the innovations, the highway lost its beauty and tiny villages disappeared from appendix-like pieces of road that became superfluous. Respect for the road was lost, along with its charm. And Sergei’s father, who was now already truly ill and getting on in years, didn’t voice a desire to ride with his son in a KamAZ truck that could squeeze out ninety kilometers an hour for most of the route. He sat at home, remembered the highway, and grumbled with a shaking voice, “We went in caravans in my day, it took us three days to equip ourselves and get ready. We all spent the night together, started a campfire, and talked like real people but now... He flies through and doesn’t remember anything, doesn’t feel what he flew through.”

And Sergei, who had already been called Sergei Alexandrovich for a long time and become a respected person at the depot—he was one of the senior long-haulers who’d wheeled through Mongolian territory and northern China, and covered all eastern Siberia—smiled at his father’s words, taking them as typical complaints from an old man. But childhood memories and impressions
extinguished his smile: sleeping in the familiar cramped cab of the ZIS, the taste of superstrong tea brewed on a campfire, his own rough hands helping his father put chains on the tires so the truck could get out of heavy snow. He remembered the drivers’ legends, scary and told with plausibility, about the river Olenya that fell in love with the driver Kolka and beckoned, beckoned him and, in the end, took him along with his truck. And about the old believer Makary’s cast iron pot, filled with gold coins from the tsar’s times, buried somewhere on the banks of Lake Oyskoe.

Sergei Alexandrovich remembered the joy of returning home, the gait of world-wise drivers who were like local Siberian long-voyage sailors, and their unrestrained, long-awaited revelry in restaurants. He remembered their girlfriends from Siberian teashops, monuments to comrades in remote passes made from a chipped steering wheel on a fir stake and wilted stalks of blackened Asian globe-flowers. But now… you pull on a track suit, put flipflops on your feet, shove a couple sandwiches and some kefir into a bag, jump into the spacious cab of a KamAZ, and, if you need, listen to music on a tape player. It’s easy, yes, but for some reason there’s no joy from the easiness. Or is he, Sergei—Sergei Alexandrovich—also nearing old age and an old man’s grumbling?

His father died that spring. His mother, who was three years younger, had died earlier, in ninety-seven. And Sergei Aleksandrovich Deev himself hit fifty-three: he was married and had two children, a son and daughter, and three grandchildren. After his father’s death, Sergei’s son moved into the two-room apartment that had been willed to him and his family. His daughter, her husband, and their Pavlik lived together with Sergei and his wife. Of course it was now unfeasible to get a separate apartment, and there wasn’t nearly enough money to buy one. His daughter’s family had been renting a one-roomer for about a year, paying almost half their salaries. They were worn out when they returned to Sergei Aleksandrovich and his wife.

To be honest, though, his life wasn’t holding together very well lately. The depot was staying afloat after the storminess of perestroika and transitions but the number of trucks had been cut by more than half, and the old ZILs, MAZs, and KamAZes were used as spare parts for newer vehicles: it cost too much to order parts from the factory. And there was less cargo, generally from businessmen who hired trucks to bring canned goods, sugar, frozen sides of meat, and other things to Kyzyl, then haul out lamb, Siberian cedar, and leather. But businessmen are businessmen because they count their money ever so meticulously, meaning the drivers didn’t make much on those runs.
At one point, Deev had a serious intention of switching to a passenger transportation company but he turned out to be a little old for it, and the hiring committee didn’t seem impressed with his rickety health. Or maybe everything was fine with his health and it was just a place where you needed an in or some money, where there was no reason to take someone from outside, even if he was an experienced driver.

Generally, though, things were okay at work. Sergei Aleksandrovich had a reliable KamAZ made in nineteen-ninety, the last time the depot brought in a batch—ten trucks—directly from the factory. After that, the depot itself bought one or two at a time, as needed. Deev was first in line for runs, and a run was money. He and his wife had been together for twenty-seven years. They’d helped their son and daughter, who now had their own children and work, but now, as a couple in old age, Deev and his wife had lost an important husband-wife bond.

During conversations Deev often noticed (he was surprised to notice it initially, but later he took it for granted) that they spoke completely different languages, neither understanding nor trying to understand each other. This annoyed both of them, and the result was an escalation to shouting. At those moments, it was unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable, that they’d lived together for so long, shared so many joys and ordeals, despairing, separating for several days, raised their son and daughter together, bathed them in a little tub when they were tiny, sat at night by the bedside if one was sick, gone for walks on the weekends in the park, and had fun celebrating holidays together. Now every encounter with his wife portended a long, unnecessary, and painful conversation in different languages. It promised incomprehensible claims, offenses, reproaches, and more and more new arguments. And tears.

Sergei Alexandrovich knew it was inevitable that women had a difficult time at around fifty, when they could no longer conceive children, and that affected the psyche. But he also noticed changes in himself: bouts of annoyance and a feeling akin to paranoia, and an incomprehensible and sharp feeling of offense that almost drew tears. Lately he’d started to sock away part of his salary, hiding it behind the paneling in the cab of his KamAZ or somewhere in the apartment. No matter how much he earned, now it was never enough for his wife, and it seemed to him that she spent money on the wrong things, squandering. Coming home, Deev felt an annoyance that grew and strengthened with every step, and sometimes he himself initiated an argument, as if trying to forestall his wife.

She had worked for a long time, at least twenty years, as an accountant in a train car factory, but the year before last she’d suddenly gotten work as an
administrator at a market. She explained that the salary was higher (which would be important for her pension), and, yes, there was a certain palm greasing on the side, too. Deev had always experienced hostility, even disdain, toward the market and sellers, so it stood to reason that his wife’s new workplace and her new market vocabulary and habits added irritation.

Despite living in the same apartment, they tried not to have much contact with their daughter and son-in-law. They rarely even ate dinner together. That’s not to say they didn’t get along but it’s natural: why get in the way of each other when they had their own, separate families? And beyond the usual things, there weren’t any common interests. They ran off to work in the morning, brought three-year-old Pavlik to daycare, came home from work in the evening, ate something in the kitchen, and sat in their own rooms, watching television.

No, it wasn’t much fun, and Sergei Alexandrovich understood that life wasn’t moving ahead so grandly. He just didn’t know how to change or liven things up, and couldn’t figure out a way to find a solution. Sometimes when they argued he would suddenly look with sober eyes at his wife’s angry but still-familiar face. Though older, her face was still beautiful to him. Inside, something pushed, pressed, and cried out, “Hug her, calm her, say something nice, and everything will be okay.” But a new wave of irritation and resentment would wash away that inner voice. An especially biting little word from his wife made him drunk with rage, and he would yell, his heavy hand, covered with grayish hair, shaking, and his eyes bugged. And at night, lying alone on a narrow couch, mentally repeating the specifics of the argument, the regular and blindly malicious phrases they’d thrown at each other, he understood that their family life was broken and wouldn’t return, and he had to decide what to do.

He made a decision at the beginning of that summer, not long after his father’s funeral. He began preparing, quietly, thoroughly, and with calm resolution.

Of course it wasn’t his last run. There would probably still be dozens and dozens of them. But the question was always there: Did he want to get behind the wheel tomorrow? Could he? Everything was more difficult, less for his body (though it was older and more worn) than for what was inside his skull. Maybe this goal would help, give him strength to go out again and fight the melancholy by looking at a ribbon of road that was familiar and dear, yet strange and alien.

Every time, every run on the Usinsk highway, he brought something with him that he’d need for building or setting up a house. Maybe a mattress and a blanket in thick plastic bags, maybe nails of various sizes and a tool, maybe
grains, macaroni, and canned goods. He also brought a chainsaw he’d recently bought with three thousand of his saved-up money.

There was a certain little village on the highway, Idzhim, a small village with about twenty log houses, no school, no truck stops. It almost even lacked electricity: they put on diesel in the evenings and were illuminated for two, three hours. The only things there were a little store, a mechanic’s shop, and a grader to scrape snow off the road. Apparently people from the taiga—or maybe old believers or hunters or just romantics—had settled around the shop in the forties and fifties to get away from civilization. Of course there was a physician’s assistant, as in any populated place, and it stands to reason that someone or other was in charge there.

Sergei Alexandrovich rarely shut off his engine in Idzhim, but he always felt sadness and the desire to stop, even twenty kilometers away, as he approached. But rationality talked him out of it, “Why? Press on further, to Turan, to Aradan, there’s a gas station and cafeteria, there’ll be someone to joke around with.” And he’d fly through in his MAZ or, later, his KamAZ, past tiny Idzhim, clinging to both sides of the highway and squeezed by the taiga.

Earlier, long ago, when he’d ridden as a passenger with his father, they’d turned off to visit an old man. Sergei Alexandrovich couldn’t remember his name, and it’s doubtful he ever knew it. His father and the old man would sit on a bench in the yard and smoke: a Belomor Canal cigarette for the driver, a pipe for the old man. They would be silent for a long time, then Deev would point at his son: “So, the thing is Seryozha is growing so…” The old man confirmed that fact with a slow, deep nod and answered, “And mine are stretching out, too.”

Boys who were about ten or twelve stood near the porch, expecting something. And that old man probably wasn’t even an old man then, but he’d seemed old to Sergei because of his thick, broad beard, unhurriedness, and the gradualness of his motions and conversation. Then a woman would come out and call them to eat. She was heavyset but not fat, fresh-looking, with smooth cheeks, and she also appeared elderly. There were two girls in the house who seemed to be around the same age as Sergei and their brothers. They helped their mother set the table. They usually ate typical boiled potatoes and some kind of tough meat that had an unpleasant aftertaste. By tradition, the elder Deev placed a paper bag with halva on the table, sometimes a “Golden Label” bar of chocolate.

During lunch Sergei looked out the corner of his eye at the kitchen and marveled at unusual things. Birch bark containers stood on the shelf instead of
metal canisters, the spoons were wooden, and the large bowls were deep and metallic. Items familiar from storybook pictures leaned against a huge stove with a shape that reminded him of a truck: there was a grabber made of horn and a wooden paddle with a long handle that looked like what Baba Yaga used to place Ivanushka in the oven to bake. They ate, silently, focused, heartily, and somehow friendlily, as if they had fulfilled an important, necessary deed. The lunch seemed tasty though Sergei didn’t like the meat.

One time he decided to play soccer with the boys. His father had just bought him a leather ball with a lacing, and Sergei dragged it everywhere, even on truck runs. But the boys couldn’t play soccer, and, no matter how much he explained the rules and stoked interest in the game, they looked at him as if he were a halfwit. Then they suggested their own game. One of the boys brought out a small ball-shaped sack, probably filled with BBs, and started kicking it, as his brother counted. He counted to fifty-eight before the ball fell into the grass. They gave it to Sergei. He got to three. The second brother kicked it about thirty times and reassured Sergei, “You’ll get the hang of it!” But Sergei didn’t like the game, and they ran to the river.

The river. In Idzhim you can hear it day and night whether you’re in the house or yard, or head for the taiga to cut mushrooms. It makes noise ceaselessly, never quieting for a second. At first it seems you could lose your mind from the thunderous sound and rumble: the sound bores through the ears, hammers the head, and fills every brain cell. It torments you but you get used to it. And then the river’s din becomes akin to the ticking of a clock or the sound of a tuned motor that doesn’t misfire.

The river gave its name to this whole road, this highway. Even the encyclopedias write it that way: the Usinsk Highway, after the river’s name, the Us River. The Us loops among the mountain ridges and jumps along the rocks in the narrow gorges. In the old days, the first settlers—Cossacks and old believers—traveled along the Us into the southern Tuvan steppes, later putting down a road along those paths.

They say twelve bridges were thrown across the Us in the beginning. Then seven remained. Sergei Alexandrovich caught only five. The bridges were high, of notched larch logs darkened to the blackness of coal. But they continued straightening the road, so only two bridges remained intact when Sergei got behind the wheel. Now people cross the Us in just one spot, on a concrete bridge that fears no flood waters. Yet another stretch of back road was eliminated, and two others had nobody to care for them. As it happened, Idzhim
was between them and already, yes, without a mechanic, without a store, and without inhabitants. That old man, the quiet friend of Sergei Alexandrovich’s father, disappeared long ago, went away somewhere with his family. Maybe he went even further into the wilderness or maybe he brought his children to civilization.

For a while, many drivers continued to drive that stretch of road the old way after it was cut off. They just couldn’t let go of fond memories and such a familiar place. Sergei Alexandrovich had sat quietly on this very log at the side of the road, enjoying the sitting as if he were no longer of this earth. And there, that honeysuckle bush over the river was once dark blue from berries: he’d gathered a pail of berries in a half hour, made his wife happy. But in the end, one of the bridges collapsed, and they’d rolled out new asphalt.

The population of Idzhim moved to the nearest village, Shivilig. Many people brought the shells of their log homes, bath houses, and sheds—the buildings in Idzhim were durable for whole centuries—and almost nothing remained of the village but some gate posts, stone foundations, and fence posts.

As it happened, that’s when, maybe a little late, maybe not, Idzhim began pulling at Deev. And this was serious, for real, not a joke. His hands asked to turn the wheel onto the old stretch of road where the village once stood. On one of his runs, Deev turned off and left his KamAZ by the shore, risking all. He crawled across the remains of the bridge and walked three kilometers along jagged asphalt reddened from detritus that had risen to the surface. He didn’t try to reason about why he strode along. Something just called him to Idzhim, demanding that he come. Maybe a little piece of his childhood or the wish to see the strong old man, confident of his strength and steady because of his confidence. And to see his house, his quiet, obedient and strong children, the whole harmonious family. No, they weren’t just harmonious, they were fused together, as one. Though in reality Sergei Alexandrovich saw only abandonment, no people, and things gone to seed, he somehow felt better.

Sergei Alexandrovich walked down to the Us along a path overgrown with fuzzy plantains thanks to the absence of human feet. He squatted and dragged deeply on his cigarette, listening to the din of the water crashing on the rocks, watching it run. That monotonous din and a lively, ever-present dazzle that resembled fish scales brought him a belief in something permanent, unchanging, and dependable. When the din suddenly changed for an instant—the water finally dislodged a rock, using its power to move the rock a centimeter lower in the flow—it seemed to Deev that a deadly silence had taken hold. The instantaneous silence frightened him and something flashed in his mind: everything
would end now and fall into a black hole. But the rock settled into a new place, immovable for another hundred years, and the monotonous din returned, together with Deev’s belief in the permanent and unchangeable. And Deev gratefully caressed the icy, hurrying water then stood and returned to the former village through the fuzzy plantains. For some reason he straightened a dangling support piece on a building before gathering his strength and reluctantly returning to his KamAZ, which he’d left three kilometers away.

It was probably everything together—and something else, too—that pushed Sergei Ivanovich toward the idea of settling in Idzhim. It wasn’t just the discord with his wife, the not-so-friendly relationships with his grown children, and definitely not tensions at work that Sergei Alexandrovich felt as he plunged each day into a changing, bleak, and unpleasant life. He himself understood that his idea was silly and unfeasible, a childish game of Robinson Crusoe. But it plagued him relentlessly, exasperating him and forcing him to buy canned goods, tools, and clothing, and to acquire experience in the art of laying bricks for a stove and trimming logs to build a house.

Now Deev went to Idzhim on every run. Once he stumbled on a cellar as he wandered the former village. He recognized the place: the store had stood here, and the cellar was in the yard. It had been dug into the depths of the earth on a slope, and the walls were covered with flagstone. Metal shelves, some small barrels, and water bottles remained. It was surprisingly dry in the cellar, and clumps of mold had only settled into the far left corner under the ceiling. Sturdy taiga grasses had overgrown the yard and only a small hill and the crevice around the door marked the cellar’s location within the grassy jungles. The door was in working condition and strong, and Sergei Alexandrovich hung a lock on it on his next trip, camouflaging the door with rotten boards and branches. Then he began hiding necessary things in the cellar: a mattress and blankets in thick plastic bags, nails of various sizes, provisions, and a carpenter’s instrument.

Deev prepared all summer, gathering supplies and trying to collect logs scattered around the village for a dugout house, to make it through his first winter. His runs interested him only because he could stop in Idzhim for a few hours and stock the cellar with new things. More than once when he argued with his wife—arguing mechanically, indifferently—he imagined that one day he just wouldn’t come home. His wife would wait and then run to the depot, where they’d tell her that he’s come back from his run, left the truck in its bay, and strode out as always, toward home. But no, not toward home. He would take the Abakan-Kyzyl night bus and get off at the turn toward the old part of
the Us highway, go to Idzhim, and begin living there. He’d be alone, just in the cellar at first, then he’d make a dugout house. The next summer he’d try to build a spacious, sturdy house. He would dig a kitchen garden and plant potatoes and other vegetables. At one time people lived just like this, without electricity, without money, without televisions, KamAZs, or cities. He’d learned from a hunter friend how to set snares for rabbits. That friend was now looking for a weapon to buy and had already sold Deev shot, powder, and two dozen cartridges and caps.

One of the Abakan newspapers would probably print a photograph of Sergei Alexandrovich on the last page, saying “left and didn’t return,” listing his features and providing a telephone number to call with information. His family would probably suffer and his wife would feel remorseful about their arguments. Deev imagined this with a strange and unpleasant interest and pleasure, trying to convince himself that that wasn’t why he wanted to run away and lose himself. No, he was simply tired and wanted another life. He was tired of people, of the apartment, truck, work, and everything that made up his work and time off, everything that made up his fifty-plus years. But he still didn’t know nature and the earth where man wasn’t master; he had never gathered mushrooms or hunted, and he didn’t even know how to tie a fishing line onto a hook properly. It was time to try.

And now it’s September, already September. Snow will fall in the Sayans any day. The needles on the pines and cedars are darkening, becoming almost dark blue. The edges of the larch have grayed, and the leaves of the bird cherries, birch, and aspen have opened in cheery crimson, yellow, and a dry, young gold. The air is fresh and there is less and less smell of grass, the cold is obviously coming. Blue-gray clumps of clouds roam the sky. Deev is making an Abakan-Kyzyl run, the usual, certainly not even close to being his last.

Yesterday he had indifferently noticed how they’d loaded the back of his KamAZ with some sort of boxes, and today he’d received his manifest, tossed out the usual greetings with the guys, had the traditional smoke with the mechanic, and then sat behind the wheel and turned the ignition key to the right.

Now he will turn from the smooth, tended asphalt onto a road that hasn’t been repaired for a long time, get to the destroyed bridge, and hoist a pack with the necessary goods for a solitary life in the taiga. How many more of these runs will there be? He should buy a gun soon. Then, probably then, he could make up his mind not to go back home.
ANNA STAROBINETS (born 1978, Moscow) is one of a handful of Russian authors who writes in the genre of “intellectual fantasy.” Her debut collection of mystical short stories *An Awkward Age*, which has been translated into English, has brought her fame as “the queen of Russian horror.” Her latest novel, *First Squad: The Truth*, is based on the Russo-Japanese feature-length animation of the same name. She also has a successful career in journalism working as a reviewer, reporter and cultural editor for leading Russian newspapers.
I walk down a narrow, smelly path between some sheds. The sheds are all green for some reason, only occasionally are there dark brown ones. I try not to catch their walls with my shoulder; they’re covered in yellowish slime and bird droppings, with chicken and pigeon feathers stuck on top of it. My shoes and trouser legs are covered right up to the knees in whitish mud. Out of inertia, I look where I’m going all the same. I try not to step in a puddle or a pile of dog’s stuff.

A small, spotted mongrel with a bloated belly and filthy eyes is lying across the path gnawing a chicken bone. I take a step forward. The mongrel shows its yellow teeth and growls quietly. I stop. Ahead there are only four sheds and then—the way out of the labyrinth. I raise a foot, the mongrel switches to yelping, and the black and white fur on its back stands on end. My shoe kicks it in the face. It jumps back a meter, but then runs up to me again and breaks into piercing, squeaky yapping. I kick it once more and press it to the ground with my foot, a rumbling comes from its belly and its face is right up against the chicken bone. I press harder. The dog falls silent. Something gives a crack, I don’t look to see what. I walk quickly to the end of the path and find myself in a children’s playground. I give my shoes a good wash in a puddle.

In the center of the yard is a sandpit in which there are two backward boys pottering about with buckets. Squat swings, a rotten wooden table. Children are clustered by the table, examining something closely with their mouths wide open. I go closer. I see her.

In the photograph in the newspaper she looked different—a bemused, dribbling doll with frightened eyes and an idiotic yellow bow on her head. In
the flesh she was nothing special: an unprepossessing five-year-old child, sniffing and breathing hard as she concentrated on something. I squeeze my way through between the children until I'm standing next to her. She stares at me silently in astonishment. She continues poking enthusiastically with a bit of green bottle glass at something lying on the table. To her right is a murky mayonnaise jar, and crawling around at the bottom of it are some earthworms, orange and black soldier beetles and a huge June bug.

She pulls a soldier out of the jar and puts it down on its back on the table. She has dirty, chubby hands with black streaks under the nails. Poking her tongue out with the effort, she cuts the insect in two down the stomach with the bit of glass. The children examine the two kicking halves with curiosity. She delves into the jar once more and pulls out an earthworm. Hanging from her finger, the worm wriggles convulsively for a certain time, then surrenders and goes compliantly limp. She picks up the bit of glass.

I pull a stern face and ask menacingly, “And what's going on here?!”

The children run off giggling. She turns to me sharply and drops the worm onto the ground. She looks. Dully, without any expression. Her gaze crawls absentmindedly over my clothing.

“What is it you’re doing?” I ask very quietly.

She lowers her head. Sniffs. The worm lies motionless on the ground in the same place that she dropped it.

“We were playing hospitals.” She gives the worm a little kick with the toe of her boot. “I’m the doctor.” The worm curls nervously into a spiral. “I’m doing an operation.”

I say to her, “Look what you’ve done. Killed a beetle. Its mummy will be very upset.”

I remove my dark glasses and look her in the eye. Sadly and a little reproachfully. Her face finally wrinkles up in crying. Tears drip onto the table. She screws up her eyes.

I say to her, “Do you know what you have to do now for its mummy to forgive you?”

“What?”

“You have to swallow the bit of glass.”

Rule number one. No foul play, no physical intervention. Only the natural order of things, corrected slightly by us. If you simply want to get rid of someone, find a hit man. Our work is different. We do accidents. We do coincidences.
We have everything. We have top-floor apartments with balconies in bad condition. Winning lottery tickets. Our own casinos. Our own schools. Our own shops. Our own aeroplanes. Our own hospitals. Actors who play the roles of lovers over any period of time, from a couple of hours to a couple of decades. Actresses who play devoted women. Actresses who play debauched women. Actresses who play actresses. More than five hundred kinds of fatal poison. Defective stepladders. Tens of thousands of morbid bacteria. And vaccines against the illnesses. We have one-eyed kittens. Pure-blooded Dobermans. Foodstuffs past their sell-by date. Condoms with holes in them. Faulty cars. Feature films whose existence is suspected by no one: for the time being neither the director nor the screenwriter is indicated in the credits, an entire film library, works of genius awaiting their “creators.” Gigantic stacks of books written by anonymous authors—one day they will become bestsellers. We have everything.

I came to the Agency through an advertisement: “Wanted: editors, sound men, screenwriters, assistant directors, actors.” The interview took place in an empty room. I was examined by a quiet, nasal voice which oozed from a speaker in the ceiling.


The examination lasted about five hours. I described in the greatest detail my childhood, my favorite guinea pig, the guinea pig’s fall from the sixth floor, my parents and my parents’ funerals, my adolescent spots, my adolescent nocturnal emissions. I listed the names of the glossy magazines that help me masturbate. That used to help. I looked patiently at idiotic pictures and told the Speaker what they reminded me of. I even thought up rhymes for various words that the Speaker dictated.

The result was that I was taken on to work for the Agency. Because I’m a nobody, I think. I have no friends or relatives. My appearance is un-prepossessing, unmemorable. Average height. Average weight. I can be
confused with anyone at all. It's impossible to remember me. If I rob somebody in broad daylight, the victim won't recognize me at a confrontation. I have no birthmarks, moles or scars. I have thin lips, an entirely unremarkable nose, dull hair, small, inexpressive eyes, a small, soft member. I'm impotent. I have no interests. I can invent endless miserable stories about orphaned children, parted lovers, amnesiac beauties and grasping, perfidious fiancés. I wear dark, plain clothing—usually gray or dark blue—and dark glasses. I lead a boring life. I'm exactly the man they need. The ideal Agent.

There are flowers growing there. They twist and stir in the wind. Revolting, fat, graveyard flowers almost the height of a man. They have powerful, glossy stems and garish yellow heads. And there are nettles as well, gigantic too, and ordinary grass, thick, crisp, moist. That's absorbed juices from under the ground.

There are very few people. The Writer, stooping, has frozen in a fixed pose, looking at the ground, not stirring. His wife cries all the time, but neatly, without hysterics. And there are several more women crying.

I stand at a certain distance from them, leaning against a tree. Quite close, but not so as to attract attention. I'm wearing a long, gray raincoat. It starts to rain, and I pull the hood over my head. I think, how amusing. I've already described all this a number of times before, when I was writing scripts. Be it in the first episode or the hundred and first, sooner or later in a serial there's a funeral. And in a funeral scene it has to be pouring with rain. And someone's solitary figure is standing a little way off. In a gray raincoat, behind some trees.

The rain gets heavier, and soon everyone starts to disperse with a little more bustle than there should be under the circumstances. One woman lingers by the grave: she has an umbrella.

I draw the hood down a bit tighter, in such a way that practically nothing can be seen of my face, only the tip of my nose and my glasses, and I head toward her. I didn't put on my usual dark glasses today, I chose different ones, with round, reflective lenses. I don't want her to remember me, but there's nothing to worry about, I can go up really close to her. She'll look, but will remember only herself, her reflection on my face.

She has a kind, round physiognomy with three trembling chins. Stupid blue eyes study themselves in my mirrors as I quietly ask her to give me the Writer's address. Who am I? Just a great admirer of his talent... Such a
tragedy... I have children too, it’s dreadful to imagine... No, I don’t mean to be a nuisance paying visits, I simply want to send a letter of condolence, that sometimes helps, you know. I’d restrict myself to a telephone call, but of course, they don’t have a phone.

She nods trustingly and dictates the address.

To begin with I very much enjoyed the work. I was actually called in to the Agency extremely rarely, once in three months, no more than that. I was presented with an apartment and I worked from home. Every morning in my post box I found a large stiff envelope with no inscription whatsoever and, inside it, the next script. Not once did I see the courier who—evidently in the middle of the night—brought the envelopes. Because there was rule number two. Under no circumstances and under no pretext should Agency staff know one another either to look at or by their voices. No meetings or corporate parties, each Agent works completely autonomously. We receive our tasks over the phone from the Coordinator—a nasal, electronic patter without life and without intonations.

Every morning I ate a couple of yogurts and a beaten raw egg, drank tea with milk in it, washed myself quickly with cold water and immediately set to work. I read carefully through the scripts and made pencil notes in the margins. After which I still had about an hour and a half to get on with things of my own before the Coordinator rang.

The Coordinator was unswervingly polite. (“Good day, how are you today? I’m glad everything’s all right with you—so now let’s get down to business. A Client will be coming to see you today at about five. Please discuss the details of the script with the Client—ensure that the script conforms to the Agency’s requirements. All the best, good luck in your work.”)

The Agency is a secret organization. It has branches in every country. Only the chosen few know of its existence.

Our clients can invent their own scripts, or they can use a ready-made story from a book or a film. The greatest popularity is enjoyed by Stephen King; several times I have had commissions for *The Shining*, *Misery*, *Dreamcatcher*. A sad young man brought a printout of a very short story by King—I don’t remember what it’s called now—about a finger that came to life and set itself up in a married couple’s bathroom. The young man wanted us to let two clockwork rubber fingers loose for an evening in the washbasin and toilet bowl in an apartment belonging to two nice, educated pensioners. He had
been saving the money for this commission for ten years. The educated pensioners were his parents.

A half-crazy old millionairess once came to commission an episode from *Pet Sematary* for the noisy family living next door to her. Screwing her eyes up dreamily, she said, “And so, you arrange an accident, their cat goes under a car and dies. They bury it, but a day later the dead cat comes back and frightens—”

“I’m sorry, that’s not possible,” I replied patiently.

“Not possible—but why?” the old woman asked in wonder for the umpteenth time.

“The dead cat can’t come back. But we can make an effigy of the cat. It’ll be an artificial, clockwork cat. Synthetic. Quite dead to look at. Or simply a live cat, made up to look like the dead one.”

“No, no, if the cat comes back alive the whole point is lost. And I want their cat to go under a car and die. Them to bury it, and then, a day later . . .”

Apart from that, clients simply adore *Titanic*. Rounding up everyone who’s antipathetic to you onto one gigantic vessel and sinking it triumphantly in one go is an option that is seductive, expensive and vulgar. The Agency accepted such a commission only once, in 1912, when somebody—I won’t name names—did actually come up with it all. Then the script was considered striking and challenging. But to repeat a trick over and over again is the lot of people who are utterly lacking in imagination. We propose to such clients that they make do with a plane crash. As a rule, they agree. And some are satisfied with just a train or coach crash.

Original scripts are, as a rule, worse than wretched. For example, billionaire daddies like to commission practically the whole of the lives ahead of them for their precious little ones. Born—educated—made a fortune—got married—died in their sleep. I myself come up with all kinds of details, and at least some sorts of twist in the plot for such bare outlines. It’s deadly dull. But what’s to be done? Every day, the richest people on the planet, and others who are simply very rich, bring their money here. Such huge sums of money that they suffice for the upkeep of our Agency. Such huge sums that we have everything.

The Writer walks to the railway station to buy tickets to go back. Naturally, they can’t stay here any longer. The little town is too small, and what happened is already common knowledge. What’s more, the provincial quiet is of no use now. The Writer isn’t likely to continue working on his new novel.
To return to their big, roaring, amicably indifferent city is the only thing they want right now.

He walks with his head drooping low. I follow him.

He is wearing a bright-red scarf, a foolish joyous blot on his black clothing. I've been watching him for more than a week now, but it's the first time I've seen this scarf. Perhaps he just picked it up somewhere by chance and attached it to himself without thinking. The Writer usually dresses tastefully. Or maybe he put it on deliberately, so that sympathetic looks would affix themselves to this loud piece of cloth and not to his face.

He buys the tickets. Trudges back slowly along the narrow, empty platform. I follow him. I feel sorry for him. He doesn't hear my footsteps behind his back, they are drowned by the noise of the approaching train.

Of course, I didn't mean to be content with the position of a simple script editor for the whole of my life. It's not that I'm a careerist, and unfulfilled ambitions have nothing to do with it. It's simply that I'm a creative individual. I always dreamed... yes, I always dreamt of testing myself in the Agency as a director.

One morning the Coordinator rang me, and after the customary little nasal recitative, he added one more phrase: “Please discuss the details of the script with the Client—ensure that the script conforms to the Agency's requirements—from today you are entitled to implement commissioned scripts independently.”

I was ill at ease. In expectation of the Coordinator's call, I had already been staring senselessly at the television for more than an hour. Only two channels were working for some reason, and by turns I had been shooting the TV's remote control at the participants in a talk show on one, and some suspicious-looking, smiley medical workers on the other. When I'm fretting, I always channel-hop. It calms me down.

“The door was open.”

Someone else was in the room. Someone was talking to me in a vile, hoarse voice. On the screen, a fat woman in a miniskirt was fidgeting in a huge leather armchair and getting ready to cry. I aimed the remote control at her, pressed the green button, and she dissolved with relief in a square of darkness. I continued to watch. The darkness was filled with my reflection—mine, and that of the person standing behind my back.

“Be so kind as to leave that channel on. My favorite talk show.”
I moved a finger and the woman was resurrected. The long-legged presenter was holding out a glass of water to her and gloating. The fat woman was wiping her tears with disposable paper handkerchiefs and mournfully shaking her head. I know for certain that the door could not have been open. I always close the door.

I looked round.

With this Client, everything was strange, very strange, right from the start. Firstly, I wasn’t brought a script that day. I waited in vain all morning. Secondly, I wasn’t warned about his coming. He came himself. And thirdly, he seems to have had a key to my home. How could he have got in otherwise? I always close the door.

Onto my desk he put a folder with the inscription “Script” and a big newspaper cutting—almost an entire page.

The article had a title that was very grand and senseless somehow. Was it “The New Voice of a Generation,” or “The Voice of a New Generation,” or “The Generation of a New Voice”? Something of the sort. Paraded directly beneath the headline was a gigantic photograph depicting a happy family: a husband, a wife, a little daughter. He looks into the camera over the top of his glasses—a little ironically, rather wearily, all in all, benignly. She smiles and looks at him with pride, the smile is at one and the same time silly and false. In one hand she holds a sheet of paper of some sort—an official document, seemingly—while the other arm is just lightly around the child.

The photograph was framed by a skimpy text, in which it was announced that the popular Writer, the winner of several prestigious literary prizes, was leaving the capital with his family for a small provincial town in order to devote himself entirely, far from the bustle of the capital, to writing his latest book.

There followed an interview with the Writer. He said that the idea for the new novel had been gestating for many years. That the most pressing problems of modern society would again be broached in the new novel. That the first reader of the new novel would, as always, be his wife. And that in the new apartment they had bought in the little provincial town there would be no telephone; they had no use for superfluous links with the outside world.

I was about to reach for the folder with the script, but he stopped me.

“Later. That’s later. The next time I come.”

He moved toward the door. The script and the newspaper cutting stayed lying on my desk.

Looking at his back, I asked, “When?” “Soon.” “All the same, I’d like to know a little more precisely.” I was intending to say this harshly, but it came
out more ingratiating. ‘After all, I do have to do a certain amount of planning . . . of my affairs.’

He said, “Don’t worry. You won’t have any other affairs in the near future. Apart from this one.”

This was my first serious commission, and I decided to prepare thoroughly. First of all, I set off for the bookshop.

The Writer’s books are on display on the central stand under the sign “Bestsellers.” Two novels (all he has written so far) are laid out in neat piles. Hands reach for them with pink nail varnish, with green nail varnish, without nail varnish, with bitten nails, with hairy fingers, with wedding rings. When the piles are getting very low, a sluggish salesgirl appears, dragging her long, bowed legs on huge heels, and brings some more. I reach a hand out too, pick up both novels and join the queue at the till. Standing in front of me is a girl with sparse yellow hair holding the same books in her hand as me. She examines the covers indifferently. One is bright green, with an indefinite, blurred profile. The other is a dirty red, and there are endless rows of cans and bottles of sauce on it. I almost hate the Writer already.

Next to the till stands a saucer of caramel sweets. The yellow-haired girl stuffs several into her mouth at once and chews them, making a crunching noise. She looks round at me and immediately turns away. It’s stuffy in the shop and there’s a horrible smell of glue. I already hate the Writer. I can’t bear caramel.

I read all evening and most of the night. They were quite short, those books, but they irritated me too much for me to deal with them quickly.

The first novel was called *Death at the Supermarket*. It told of a single, elderly woman who went to a supermarket to buy a dressing for some fish dish that she intended to cook for dinner. Naturally, however, she didn’t limit herself to buying just the dressing, since supermarkets are specially laid out in such a way that customers rake as much food as possible off the shelves, and there she is, wandering among the sausages, the cheeses, the sauces, the packs of broccoli and bottles of Coca-cola, and remembering her childhood, her youth, the whole of her life. Unhappy love affairs, abortions, parties. At the same time she is reading the inscriptions on labels. She walks around, remembering and reading, and she can’t stop, and gets lost in a labyrinth of food. Her head is spinning, and then she is already staggering and calling for help, but the clatter of trolleys drowns the weak voice of an old woman. And when a well-schooled shopping consultant finally approaches her to sing out
his standard “how can I help you,” she falls down and—see the name of the book—dies.

Appended to the novel was an ecstatic afterword. There it was explained that in his “bold and savage works” the Writer was battling with the cult of consumption.

It was unendurably dull.

The second book, about a manic serial killer, a member of the Greenpeace movement, which was destroying everyone who didn’t love nature enough, I didn’t even bother reading, I only looked through it. Nothing special either.

The Coordinator stopped ringing me. The Agency gave the Client a key to my apartment, and he would come when he considered it necessary. He would appear without warning, steal up ever so quietly and say, “Tell me about it. I want to have a report. I need all the details.”

And I would tell him, trying to stand with my back to him. Looking him in the face was impossible. But not looking was almost impossible too. It called, hypnotized, mocked you, that face did. It enticed, bewitched and sucked out your soul—and then rebuffed it. It was hideous. A parody of a clown.

One half of that face, the right, always remained motionless. But the other gave a weird half-grimace when he spoke, the mouth twisted to the left, the left eyebrow now rose in amazement, now knitted in malice, pulling up and down with it, as if on an invisible thread, a trembling, twitching cheek and a mockingly winking eye. But the most dreadful thing about that face was his other eye. The one on the dead half, with red, inflamed lid. It never blinked. And it was round. The perfectly round eye of a bird.

The Writer falls. Gazes around in surprise. In front of his eyes there are apple cores, empty plastic Coca-Cola bottles, seed husks, broken green glass, squashed beer cans caught under the sleepers. He looks up and says feebly: “Help!” but the roar of the train drowns his voice.

“No one will be surprised. No one will suspect anything,” says the script. “Writers, like all creative individuals, are psychologically unstable. And it’s common knowledge in the little town that he had a motive for suicide.”

I stand on the edge of the platform and look down. The blood-red scarf is indistinguishable now against the general background.

Then I go to the post office, buy a postcard of Father Christmas (I don’t
like it, and it’s not the season either, but the pictures on the others they are selling are even worse: a revolting tilting doll and gold roses). I check the script and, trying to copy the hand in which it’s written, I trace out carefully and neatly, “You see, I can after all.” It comes out looking similar.

I fill in the address that the woman with three chins gave me and send the postcard to the Writer’s wife. The Widow.

When the Client came the second time, he picked up the script from my desk, reached it out to me and said, “Read it out loud.” I read, and he moved his repulsive lips soundlessly and sometimes smiled. Twenty pages of typed text—he knew them off by heart. For the first time while working at the Agency, I began to feel afraid. So much hatred.

There—I’ve done almost everything the Client wanted. Almost. The last page of the script is lying in front of me.

Only the Widow remains. I ought to have done away with her today, but I couldn’t. I feel something’s not right. Basically, of course, it’s all the same to me, it’s none of my business, it’s simply my job, but . . . Something’s not right. I’d already arrived at her house with a huge bouquet of tulips (“Good day, flower delivery—a bouquet sent by admirers of your late husband—please accept my condolences.”). But she yelled so. Yelled so horribly. I left.

Yes, I know, I know. She’s not been in her right mind for a long time after what we’ve done to her. She opened the door to me and stood on the threshold almost naked, her dirty, matted hair covering her face, holding a large frozen fish in her hand and sucking its head, as though it were a lollipop. She stuck her lips into the icy open jaw, she licked the fish’s dead eyes. She looked at me for a long time, senselessly, dully. I reached the bouquet out to her and she took it with her free hand, examined it for a minute or so, then dropped it. And suddenly began yelling wildly, wailing. I expect lunatics often yell like that. But she . . . something in her yells put me on my guard.

And I left. Before doing away with her I have to clear something up. I’ve got a number of questions for the Client.

Why doesn’t the Coordinator ring me any more? Why did she yell like that? But the main thing is . . .

“Where does such hatred come from?” I surprised myself by daring to ask after all.

He’s silent.
I’m too fretful, so much so that my hands are shaking. And my whole face seems to be burning. I go to the bathroom to have a wash with cold water. He follows me in silence.

I have a wash, and I feel better. I dry my face with a towel and hear him locking the bathroom door from the inside. I start to feel scared. He’s standing right behind my back. He’s mad.

I raise my head. In the mirror above the washbasin is the reflection of his deformed face. I suddenly notice there are tears flowing down his cheek.

“Are you crying?” In reply he smiles, his left half smiles. He says, “Lagophthalmos.” “I don’t understand.” “Lagophthalmos. Hare eye. The circular muscles of the eyes are paralyzed, and so the lids don’t close, which leads to the breakdown of tear circulation.”

I ask, “Have you had it since you were a child?” He shakes his head. “A car crash—just over five years ago. Multiple fractures of the extremities, a fractured skull, damage to the facial nerve. Half of my face is paralyzed. I spent three months in intensive care. Then six months more in a surgical ward, and a couple of years in a psychiatric one. In a certain sense I began my second childhood. I’d forgotten how to chew—”

I have absolutely no desire to listen to him any more. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“—and now I can take only liquid nourishment. Every morning over a period of several years my doctor has rung me and, like a caring mother, has asked me how I feel and given me instructions for the whole day. And he would have continued ringing. I think he would have rung me all my life, if—”

“Stop it!”

“—if I hadn’t cut the telephone lead. I can’t appear in the street without dark glasses. I have fifteen scars on my face, and at times they’re terribly painful . . .”

I screw my eyes up. “. . . the only thing that helps is icy water.” Almost in a whisper I ask once more, “Where does such hatred come from?” In the mirror I see him smile with one side of his mouth. “Try and remember. It’s all very simple.” He looks at me with his round, dead eye. I look at myself with my round, dead eye.

“Where have you been?” I speak in a vile, high-pitched voice. Not my own at all, or perhaps I’ve only just noticed what my voice really sounds like. My T-shirt is disgustingly wet under the armpits, pungent black stains are spreading across the blue synthetic material. I smell bad. I’ve got a
stomachache. After my every phrase something gurgles inside me loudly and tragically.

She is silent. I pour myself another glass, knock it back in one, and follow it with another cigarette, making sure that the hand with the lighter doesn’t tremble too much. I feel sick. I take a deep breath of air and cough, squeakily and disgustingly somehow too. I take another breath and say, “Perhaps you’ll explain to me what’s going on?”

She studies an invisible object on the floor carefully. Then raises her eyes to look at me and there is nothing in them apart from sloth, apart from a brazen, unceremonious desire to sleep.

“In the morning, okay? We’ll talk in the morning.” She leaves the room.

“No, now!” I scream in her wake, but I don’t run after her, I restrain myself.

I hear the bathroom door closing and the hissing of the shower. I drink straight from the bottle. Then I say out loud, This won’t do, a sense of dignity, what about a sense of dignity. I pour myself a glass, and mutter something else under my breath like a madman, like an imbecile. Then I start crying.

She goes to bed.

My hysterics. My night. It doesn’t matter any more now, everything’s allowed now, I behave like a woman, ha-ha, I slam doors, I run around the apartment, I sob, I shake and writhe. I rehearse a speech. I make threats, I argue a case to the mirror. I drink. It runs out, and I emerge from the building into nauseatingly spinning space and buy more, and I drink.

I crawl in to her toward morning.

All those months when she was trying to leave early and come back late, and sometimes didn’t come back at all, or suddenly escaped at an ungodly hour under some utterly idiotic pretext (her parents have been struck down with back pains—what, both of them?—well yes, both of them, and their poodle needs to be taken for a walk urgently; her girlfriend’s love life has gone wrong and she has to go and console her at once), and stopped touching me, and almost stopped talking to me—all those months I couldn’t bring myself to ask her that question. I don’t want to ask it now either but I’m drunk, and the words tumble out of my mouth by themselves somehow, slowly, inexorably, in big, stinking lumps.

“Do you want me to leave?”

Her gaze roams around the room—scattered behind my back there are evidently dozens, hundreds of fascinating, invisible little things. Finally she notices me too. Is going to say something? I get scared, very scared.
“Yes.”

That's it. I feel as if someone's cold paw, having imperceptibly overcome the layers of skin, fat, and whatever else there is inside, has grabbed my stomach firmly and squeezed with all its might. And I've died.

For a time we talk, if it can be called that. From somewhere in the next world I ask all these questions—unnecessary, tedious and vulgar. I don't have to think about their formulation, I do everything on auto. I've made the useless heroes of my useless scripts say these words a million times. Do you have someone else? So it's all over between us? Who is he? She answers, clearly trying to look guilty, but she can't manage it. She's like a diligent schoolgirl reciting a poem she has learnt by heart, but without having gone into the meaning. False intonations. Emphasis in the wrong places. Yes, it's all over. Yes, there is someone else. He's a writer. She obediently makes her report to me, she tells me everything—more, even. He's so talented. He's so interesting to be with. He hasn't published a single book yet, but everything lies ahead, because he's so motivated. True, he's poor, and he doesn't even have an apartment, but that's not important . . .

So where are they going to live? What do you mean, “where?” Here, of course.

For her I'm already a ghost.

The final touch—and how did those damned scripts contrive to get out of their inoffensive parallel world and clamber into my loathsome reality?—she seems to be pregnant. By him, naturally. Maybe she's pregnant, but maybe she isn't, she's not yet completely certain. But she feels a bit sick in the mornings, and she wants to sleep all the time. Talking about this, she becomes noticeably more animated, she confides in me as in a girlfriend. For her I'm already a ghost.

I turn completely into one of my ridiculous characters. I shout that I'll kill him. And I'll kill her as well. And their disgusting offspring if it appears.

She is evidently following one of my scripts as well, and so guffaws in reply, loudly and unnaturally. And squeezes out through her laughter, “Y-you? Come on then, kill me . . . kill me . . . You can’t do anything to me . . . you can’t even . . .”

I convulsively rake some utterly unnecessary things together into a bag, slam the door and slip out into the street. I open the door of the car at the third attempt and sit down at the wheel. I'm drunk, but not so much so that I don't understand that I have nowhere at all to go. And that in a minute I'm going to smash myself to bits.
And while the car is slowly, cinematographically toppling over, wheels uppermost, and before my head bangs into the side window and hundreds of splinters of glass sink into my face, I have time to reflect upon a lot of things. And to understand why everything has turned out the way it has. Why she has treated me this way. Because I’m a nobody, I think. I have no friends or relatives. My appearance is unprepossessing, unmemorable. Average height. Average weight. I can be confused with anyone at all. It’s impossible to remember me. If I rob somebody in broad daylight, the victim won’t recognize me in a confrontation. I have no birthmarks, moles or scars. I have thin lips, an entirely unremarkable nose, dull hair, small, inexpressive eyes, a small, soft member. I’m impotent. I have no interests. I can invent endless miserable stories about orphaned children, parted lovers, amnesiac beauties and grasping, perfidious fiancés. I lead a boring life. I’m exactly the man . . .

. . . I’m exactly the man they need. The ideal Agent.
ALISA GANIEVA (born 1985, Dagestan) writes under the masculine pen name Gulla Khirachev. She is an outstanding literary critic, fiction writer and author of avant-garde children’s stories. In 2009 Ganieva won the Debut prize for her first work of fiction for adults, *Salam, Dalgat!*, an insightful and vivid depiction of contemporary Dagestan. In 2011 it was published in French in the collection of stories *Ecrire La Vie.*
The car cut out, stuck in the fog.

"This way, come on," voices said. The rustling of packages, the slamming of minivan doors. Someone was approaching, squishing through the mud.

"It’s damp here, put on your jacket," the women told Naida, wrapping their round heads in long, fringed scarves and clumsily climbing out with their plastic bags.

It smelled of earth, thyme, damp, and, in the distance, roast meat. Invisible voices and hands met in the fog.

"The cloud’s settled, it’ll clear up soon," someone’s raspy bass said.

After muffled greetings, after sighs and exchanged whispers, they began climbing up the rocky lane. They were led by Shapi, son of the deceased, Hasan. Behind him was Naida’s father and Shapi’s friends who had come—a Lak, a Tsuntin, and some Russian. Naida’s relatives followed behind, touching her with their hands.

Singing could be heard from far off, mixing with voices and the distant rush of the river. After passing through a barely visible inner courtyard, where Shapi and his friends melted away, Naida and her fellow travelers entered a room crammed with some women sitting on three-legged stools and pillows, some simply on rugs, reciting the zikr. The murmured condolences began, the embraces and sobs. Naida held her package of gift socks and towels out to the hostess, who pressed them to her chest. The new arrivals were immediately given white embroidered pillows, and they seated themselves at the threshold, hugging their knees and bowing their heads.
Bahu, wearing a brown velvet dress and seated in the middle, was slowly, effusively reciting the aiat that preceded the thousandfold sacred formula. Then she clicked her beads and began loudly, Lailaha ilalah, and the rest joined her in chorus. The figure of a curious little girl appeared and disappeared in the doorway. Then a metal tub rattled on the other side of the wall when it dropped and then, once again, all you could hear was the accelerating refrain, “There is no God but Allah.”

Flushed, Bahu rocked her head from side to side, stubbornly stressing the first la, as if straining to push a boulder off a cliff. One woman shouted loudly, eyes shut; another barely moved her lips, her hand opened flat toward her face as if she were about to wash it. Naida caught herself thinking that she was unconsciously bowing slightly at each repetition.

Once finished with the zikr, they set to their conversations. Bahu leaned back and relaxed.

“At the Belal’s bukhon1 Sanit fell down after the zikr,” a skinny blond woman wearing a dark blue skirt said. “She passed out directly after the shahada.”2

“Ba!” a young woman in a chiffon kerchief said in amazement.

They brought in a deep tub where large meat kurze, which looked like khinkal, were steaming.

“Khhasanil rokhhal’e shchevagi,”3 Bahu said in her bass, picking up a khink4 and sucking the broth from it.

“Amen, amen,” the others began, reaching for the food.

“How is your Amir, Bilma?” a stout woman said under her breath to the woman sitting next to her, who had come with Naida.

“Fine, pu-pu mashalla.”

“I heard he had problems,” the stout woman went on, looking uneasily into Bilma’s eyes.

“Who does?” the questions came.

“Bilma’s son.”

“Put that down, Ta bat. What do you care?” a young woman in a kerchief shooed her off.

“I’m just worried. Vah! When Hasan, munag’al churaiav,5 was still alive,

---

1 Funeral (Avar)
2 The ritual utterance: “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is His prophet” (Arabic)
3 May this reach Hasan’s spirit (Avar)
4 The traditional Avar dumpling (pl. khinkal).
5 May he rest in peace.
he even asked about Amir. They say Amir had dealings with Abus’s murdered son.”

“People have given him enough trouble over those bribes. I can’t understand why people won’t leave him alone,” Bilma blazed up. “He spoke to the man once and right away they started dragging him into everything.”

“Shchib kkarab?”6 the grannies worried, stretching their legs out in their dark baggy pants.

Someone translated.

“Abus’s wife says that Bilma’s son had nothing to do with it, too. She thinks they abducted him, planted the weapon on him, and then killed him,” Ta bat reported.

“Astaupirulla,”7 rang out on all sides.

“That may be true. How do we know?” Bilma interjected. “But actually, I don’t know, for me the main thing is for them to leave Amir alone. For now, pu-pu, mashalla, they are.”

Everyone started talking at the same time.

“What are they saying?” a Lak woman in the room asked Bilma.

“Get him married, they say…” Bilma smiled. “Marrying them off now, that’s harder to do these days.”

“Do you have a lot of boys like that?” Taibat asked the Lak woman.

“Wagonloads!” She clapped her hands. “Everyone knows them.”

“They know them here, too,” Taibat commented with satisfaction, raising her full arm with the dripping khink high. “In some villages they even have their own mosques.”

“Ullubiı, you saw, he built a mosque here!” Bahu informed them gladly, polishing off the contents of the tub. “They say he gave a million out of his own pocket!”

“I was at their new house in Makhachkala,” Taibat immediately caught fire. “Three stories, in short, and they themselves turned the attic into a mosque out of the goodness of their heart!”

New mourners came into the room, embracing the deceased’s daughters and nieces in turn.

“Vaia-ia-ia, we almost didn’t get here,” a white-faced woman wearing an ample dark dress with spangles sighed. “In Khadzhalmakh the traffic was stopped through the whole village, and then, when the asphalt ran out, the engine died. These cars of young men stopped right away and fixed it.”

---

6 What happened? (Avar)
7 Lord, forgive us (Arabic)
“The roads are good now, Manarsha. You don’t remember how they used to hammer rails into the cliffs, lay wooden boards on top, and that’s how we rode,” the hostess said, folding her flour-spotted hands on her belly.

“You couldn’t turn around!” Manarsha confirmed heatedly, addressing the Lak woman.

Then she made her way over to the grandmothers and they started talking in Avar about the clan, how hot it was in Makhachkala, how bad the mosquitoes were there, and how in his youth the deceased Hasan had danced as a masker on holidays and at weddings, jumping around in the mask of a rabbit-wolf or a goat, sprinkling oat flour, and pouring wine, and how the deceased Hapsat hadn’t wanted to marry him and had run away from the village three times and been caught on her way to the district center.

Naida went out into the next room, where they had spread oilcloths, which had been taken in out of the rain and on which split apricots were drying. On the floor, in deep bowls, Turkish sweets waited to be drenched in honey.

Further on, in the kitchen, it was noisy. They were grating, shredding, boiling, cleaning, rolling. There were lots of young women, both from the village and visiting city girls.

“Ah, Naida, how you’ve grown! Did you come with your papa? Is your mama better?” They buzzed around her. They pulled up a chair for her, a knife, and a bucket of potatoes.

After the greetings, their discussion of the recent flood resumed. The river had washed away the school’s foundation and nearly carried off the steel bridge.

“And then there’s Taıbat,” Naida’s neighbor whispered quietly into her ear. “She went to drag rocks from the river. She folded her skirt back to here”—her neighbor ran the edge of her palm a little above her knees—“put the rocks in here and carried them. What a disgrace it was, vaia-ia-ia!”

White-faced Manarsha entered the kitchen noisily, smiling broadly. Exchanging loud kisses with nearly everyone, she stopped next to a slender, narrow-shouldered young woman who was laying sliced circles of tomato on a platter.

“Does this girl have a wedding here in the fall?”

The girl grew flustered, looking around at her mother.

Her mother, who had a large mole on her rosy cheek, clapped her hands.

“All the halls are packed three months in advance, and we don’t know
what to do. She only wants the Marrakesh, and I tell her, why the Marrakesh? Let’s do it at the Evropa.”

“It’s not cool there, mama-a-a,” the young woman droned softly.

“Habib says the same thing, she says people will say we were being stingy.”

“Couldn’t you do it at the Eltav?” Manarsha asked, taking a tomato the girl had cut and directing it into her mouth.

“Her girlfriend had hers at the Eltav and she doesn’t want the same place.”

“You took the suitcase already, right?” the hostess asked, pouring cow colostrum into a dough envelope and pinching the ends.

“You have no idea!” Her mother gestured emphatically. “They’ve given so much of everything, she has enough for three years. A gold chain this thick, like peas! They gave her a fur coat, a phone, clothing…”

Manarsha sat down next to Naida’s neighbor and began whispering softly.

“Sure, Bilma came, but Taıbat says that her Amir wasn’t taken in for questioning for no good reason. Why didn’t he come here for the mavlid, she says? Because, she says, they don’t recognize the zikr. And I tell her, Bilma’s son is a good boy. We all know him. The fact that he had doings with Abus’s son doesn’t mean anything.”

“Don’t say anything, Manarsha,” her interlocutor whispered. “Everyone’s nerves are frazzled from them trying to wear the boy down. Do you know this? Do you know that? Where are these books from? Where are those books from? He’s only twenty. Why torment him? His brothers gave him a good beating. To make sure he doesn’t get mixed up with anyone else.”

“Bahu’s asking for tea!” someone shouted out.

A short, sturdy unmarried girl poured thick black tea into glasses and set them on a tray, scattering a handful of caramels around the edge.

“Chamastak, make Bahu’s tea stronger!” the hostess shouted to her.

An old woman appeared in the doorway, wrinkled and tanned, wearing a black chukhta, a sack dress, and baggy trousers. The women pointed out her newly arrived granddaughter to her. The granddaughter, bareheaded and a little bewildered, was sitting in a corner fingering the sequins on her black top and keeping half an eye on her nimble-fingered contemporaries.

“Vaı, diliaı, g’anie iache, èbel’ul,”8 the old woman said slowly, and coming closer she put her arms around her, embarrassing her and bombarding her with questions.

8 Come here, my darling, mama’s darling (Avar)
“Your grandmother is asking you about your studies, Bika,” they began interpreting for the girl.
“Doesn’t know our language,” someone’s voice said in justification.
“Mine don’t either. I speak to them in mine, and they speak Russian,” one of the women gathered said.
Right then Chamastak returned with one glass on the tray.
“Bahu needs it stronger.”
“Dil’a abchhi, I told you so.” The hostess frowned as she fished the boiled colostrum khinkal out of the boiling water with a skimmer.
“To be honest”—Manarsha addressed those around her in an indignant half-whisper—“Bahu acts like she’s the wife of the khan. She’s always chief at every mavlid, and she always recites for every zikr. She likes to lead the lilia and she eats for three! She nearly fell into this bowl of khinkal just now, I’m telling you!” The women laughed quietly.
“You really lay it on, Manarsha!”
“What, you mean it’s not the truth?” she objected, breaking out in a smile that covered her entire white face.
“Where’s Uruzma?” the hostess asked suddenly. The women started to fuss. The old woman began talking in Avar about how Uruzma had promised to come and sing the lilia today for sure. Someone suggested sending the girls after Uruzma, so they started for the door, whispering excitedly. They got Naida up and sent her off with the others.
“Only quickly!” someone shouted. “The zikr is about to begin again soon!”

2

The fog had nearly dispersed. The mountain peaks were not quite cleared yet; dark green spots peeked out of the white sky. The men who had come to offer their condolences were sitting in the yard on long wooden benches along the windows. “Let’s walk fast or people will look at us,” the girls said, turning to one another.
“Do you know me? My name is Elmira,” a swarthy girl said, giving Naida the once-over. “I saw you at Arsenchik’s wedding. You were wearing a red dress.”
“Probably.” Naida smiled.
When they walked through the gates, Elmira turned teasingly to the girl who’d been cutting the tomatoes. “Saida, your fiancé was sitting there.”
“Envious?” Saida smiled.
“Have you chosen your dress?” Bika asked her, tossing her long hair back.

“The dress is absolutely fabulous!” Saida got excited. “It’s a coffee color, and we got it for 150,000, with a Japanese train. Here, see, here’s the corset, and here, hand embroidery, pearls, and Swarovskis, what have you. When my girlfriend was getting married, she went to Moscow for a dress, but they didn’t have any as elegant as in our salons. She bought a crummy one, without a train. Her fiancé paid for it.”

“Yes, some fiancés even buy a car,” Bika said dreamily. “And do you know where to have your hair done?”

“At Karina’s, I think, with Zumrud.”

“Don’t do it with Zumrud.” Bika shook her head. “She does the exact same hairstyle for everyone and doesn’t look at your face. And you know what I advise you? Lip tattoos.”

“Oh no! It hurts, Bika!”

“They give you a shot and it doesn’t hurt, don’t believe it!” Bika began, but short Chamastak hissed, “Don’t shout, you’ve come for a bukhon! Where is your kerchief?” she said to Bika.

“But I’m not here for the mavlid, so I can go without a kerchief,” Bika grumbled.

“Do you hear what she’s saying?” Chamastak said in amazement, clapping her hands.

Naida interrupted her, “Who is this Uruzma?”

“Hasan’s first wife, mumag’al churaia’v. She only lived with him for a year, back before the war.”

“But why so little?”

“He didn’t like her. His parents made him marry her. He lived with her just a little and then sent her away.”

Naida was slipping on the stones, which were wet after the rain, and holding onto the walls, which had spirals and Arabic inscriptions cut into them here and there. In the old part of the village, all the houses merged into a single stone fortress with narrow lanes and arched passageways. Through the collapsed doorways of uninhabitable housing, one could see the long midline columns black with centuries of soot. Uruzma lived in one of the three-story towers with small, unglassed windows and a flat roof, which she had rolled with a concrete roller.

“This way,” Chamastak called out, and they walked up the steps to a dark, spacious room with large wooden chests in the corners. Under the ceiling
hung dried bundles of St. John’s wort, wormwood, and nettles, and on the walls, carved wooden boxes with kitchen utensils.

Uruzma wasn’t there.

“Maybe she went to the field?” Elmira sighed heavily.

“She couldn’t have gone today, today is the third day,” Chamastak responded.

They went out. Flat roofs, here and there collapsed, retreated down the slope. A little further down were new white buildings with gardens. Below, the noisy river, and opposite, surfacing out of the fog, the tall, forested mountain.

An old woman wearing a black chukhta was observing them from the next-door roof.

“G’urchhāmi!” Chamastak greeted her in Avar. The old woman responded eagerly and after inquiring in detail about all the girls, who they were and whose, and where they’d come from, told them that Uruzma had not been home since early morning.

The girls stood there, uncertain of what to do, and then headed back. Bika walked ahead resentfully, fingerling her sequins, when right in front of her, a donkey fell to the ground and started spinning on its back in the dust, bellowing. Bika shrieked.

“Ghabdal,” Chamastak exclaimed.

“What?” Bika asked, not understanding the oath, and still too frightened to retreat.

Elmira started laughing. “Let’s go look for Uruzma some more. Could she be at the cemetery?”

“She’s not supposed to be at the cemetery today,” Chamastak replied.

“She isn’t there.”

“So she must be in the field,” Elmira insisted stubbornly. “Look, there they go.”

And she pointed to the mountain.

Shielding her eyes with her hand, Naida saw two small, bent, female figures descending the mountain paths with huge stacks of hay on their backs.

“That’s Abasilia and Karimilia,” Chamastak said, squinting. “It’s not Uruzma.”

“Oh, let’s go back then,” Bika whined, shaking the dust the donkey had raised from her skirt.

“Yes,” Elmira agreed. “Only we should go by way of the store. What if she’s there?”

“Does she have children?” Naida asked suddenly.

9 The morning greeting (Avar)
10 Fool (Avar)
“No. No brothers or sisters either. Her father was killed when she was just born.”

“Who killed him?”

“His cousin. Uruzma’s father was a learned man. He knew the Quran. He even made himself a hole in the wall of his house and would poke his head out there and read the Quran like that, where the light was better. And he would plaster his ears with clay so noise wouldn’t distract him. But then, well, when his uncle died, they suggested he read the yā sin and other prayers at the grave. He was supposed to spend a few nights at the cemetery. His cousin knew the Quran a little, too, and he wanted to recite, too, but the alims wouldn’t let him because he was unclean. He was only fifteen—because of that. And, well, one time the two of them even fought on the grave. But then a voice came from the grave and stopped them. They truly envied Uruzma’s father because he was learned. These enemies started setting this fellow, his cousin, against the learned man. And the boy eventually killed him. He stuck a knife into him and ran all across the village to hide from his enemies.”

“And was he convicted?”

“Yes, he was, only Uruzma’s family wouldn’t take revenge. They had a masliat. He came back to the village three years later, put on a white sheet, and went to Uruzma’s mother and her brothers. He lay down on the ground, put the knife in her hands, and said, like, I’m your k’urban, kill me. But she forgave him.”

When the girls reached the little store, a dried-up, gold-toothed woman was standing with a flat bread wrapped around a piece of halvah—a gift for the mourners.

“Iakhara?” Chamastak said to her, and they stepped aside and began speaking in Avar.

“Vaı Alla-a-a, I’m so tired of being here,” Bika said, getting out her mobile and spinning it in her hands.

“Show us photos,” Saida ran up to her. “Aminka is such a beauty here! Oh mama!”

“Subkhan Allakh, beautiful, indeed,” Bika agreed.

“Wow! Is that Barishka, from the Teacher Training College?” Elmira asked, also looking at the stylish telephone’s little screen.

“Yes, we took the pics when frosting was fashionable.”

---

11 Reconciliation (Arabic)
12 Victim (Arabic)
13 Are you ready? (Avar greeting)
14 Allah is great (Arabic)
“You mean you see her?” Elmira protested, pulling back her swarthy hands. “Do you know they filmed her for the phone? I didn’t see the whole thing myself, but all the boys have the clip. Rusik even showed me the bit where she’s sitting naked in the park and hiding her face.”

“Shut up!” Bika was shocked. “Is that why she’s moving to Kiziliurt?”

“They won’t leave her be there, either.” Naida grinned.

Right then Chamastak walked up and looked at the gold-toothed woman walking away. “That’s our distant relative who married into the village up top. It’s hard there, she says. No water, no electricity. She has six children and another four died without doctors. She’s gone home. She’ll be walking until nightfall.”

“Why doesn’t someone give her a ride?” Bika asked.

“There’s no road there.” Chamastak brushed her aside and stepped into the store. Elmira followed.

After they went in, a silvery Lada Priora with tinted windows and a very low chassis turned the corner and stopped in front of the store. Two young men who Naida never got a good look at swiftly jumped out of the Lada. They grabbed a kicking Saida by the shoulders and dragged her toward the car. Bika started yelling and grabbed Saida by the arm. The girls ran out of the store, followed by the shopkeeper. The abductors pushed Bika away, shoved Saida into the car, and the next moment had turned the corner at the village club and were lost from view. It all happened so suddenly and fast that no one had a chance to do anything.

Bika, disheveled, jumped on Naida. “Why didn’t you help me?”

The shopkeeper shouted something in the direction of the store, where a little girl in old stockings poked her head out and rushed to Hasan’s house.

“Vababa!” Chamastak wailed, and she ran after her.

“Hurry up!” someone shouted. “The zikr is just about to begin again!”

The fog had nearly dispersed. The mountain peaks were not quite cleared yet; dark green spots peeked out of the white sky. The men who had come to offer their condolences were sitting in the yard on long wooden benches along the windows. The girls passed by, modestly lowering their eyes, and disappeared through the gates.

After the reciting of the dua and quiet conversation, they went out on the porch for dinner. They ate, mentally sending the food to the soul of the deceased.

“How was the drive here, Muhu?” Shapi asked the strong man with the gray head of hair poking out from under his cap.
“I stopped by at my grandfather’s grave in Gimry. He died in Gimry when he was making the hajj, and now there’s a ziaarat there.”

“What are people saying?”

“I went to the public square. People are very unhappy. . . . Uı ˘ı Under the CTO,15 they could run into anyone’s house, beat him up, and take what they wanted. They relieved themselves right under the imams’ portraits! Listen, they made a mockery of the entire jamaat! Total khapur-chapur!16 He slapped a fly in his lap. “They chopped down the apricot trees, they chopped down the pears! They even shot the goats. They wouldn’t let you out of your house, and one old man’s whole flock was lost, scattered in the mountains. They burned the forest! People say they barely put it out. They arrested the young men.”

“They didn’t arrest them for nothing,” said a puffy-cheeked man of about forty wearing a dark blue shirt too tight around the collar.

“Le, Alexei!” Muhu threw his hands up. “If a guest comes to your house, what, are you going to turn him out on the street? When an insurgent knocks at your house, you’re still going to give him nettle khinkal! Can you really be arrested for giving a bandit khinkal?”


“And I say it does!” Muhu objected heatedly. “You don’t know a thing about it. We know them by name, he says. If you know them by name, go to that address, catch him, and try him under the law. Why humiliate innocent people? Once a whole army came to a neighboring village. Helicopters, tanks, g’ara-g’uralı!17 They did a search but never found anything. They just confiscated a gas pistol from one fellow. The soldiers planted DVDs and cartridge cases on my friend’s son.”

“How do you know they were planted?” stout Habib asked mistrustfully.

“What do you mean how?” Muhu jumped up. “What does he need cartridge cases for? He’s a doctor! He sewed up one man’s head when he came to him from the forest. What, he’s supposed to drive away a wounded man? A doctor is supposed to heal!”

“Since the big war those Gimry men have been restless!” Habib exclaimed.

Shapi smiled wanly, listening to the Avar of a gaunt old man in a green

15 Counterterrorist operation
16 God knows what, nonsense
17 Pandemonium (Avar)
skull cup who was sitting on a cushion. “Gazalav says in Gimry people always lived poorly and fought the rich. He says in their valley they raised fruit, while we looked down on them from our mountains.”

“What fruit now?” Muhu gestured dismissively. “It was all flooded out by the power station, so the best orchards were flooded and it got colder. Now the persimmons don’t grow as well. What do you have growing in Tsunt?” he turned to a taciturn, broad-boned man who was staring at the floor.

He smiled. “Nothing. Plenty of alpine meadows and pastures, but things don’t grow well. In winter the roads are impassable, you can’t drive, and there’s no sewer system,” he mumbled under his breath with a strong accent. “People used to go to Georgia to the bazaar, but the borders are closed now, and half our relatives remained there and they won’t let us visit.”

“They resettled you on the plain, they even destroyed your houses so you wouldn’t return, and you went back to those cliffs anyway!” Habib exclaimed.

The Tsuntin scowled.

“You don’t know what that trip was like! My grandmother said they put the children on donkeys and walked to Chechnya through the snowy passes. They didn’t want to. They hid and at night returned to their destroyed village. Then they forced them to go again! People died along the way. And how was it in Chechnya? Everyone there died, too, they got sick. There are lots of mosquitoes there, swamps, but there aren’t any mosquitoes in the mountains. There was a malaria outbreak. They were supposed to plant corn, but our people had never seen it before. Some escaped and went back, to their native village, and they were caught and brought back by force,” he muttered gloomily.

Then, all of a sudden, he started laughing quietly.

“We had these elections... What a mess. Listen to this! The head of the administration beat up the local policeman. In Kidero. The policeman wanted to bring his people into the station because they’d fired the other candidate’s rifle at people’s feet. That was wild! And right then our mayor up and punched the policeman.”

“But he got reelected anyway!”

“Just barely! Those Bezhtans weren’t going to let him win. So what happened was, they sent us away and let the Bezhtans stay. They think they’re smarter than us, being closer to town. Their station chief wears a suit jacket. They were so mad when the district center got moved over the pass, from Bezhta to Kidero! Now they want the Bezhta precinct to be separate. Or for
Bezhta’s mayor to become the head of the whole administration. The Bezhtan has a brother, he’s sitting in the Popular Assembly, and he needs to be made to oppose Tsunt. They paid five or six thousand a vote! In Tliatsuda their other brother was director of the school, but our mayor closed it."

“What for, wah?”

“There were more teachers than children. It was their honeypot. What do they need a school like that for? There’s another school in Tliatsuda. There were so many rallies in Bezhta! Because they were stealing from the budget.”

“Vaia, did they ever steal,” Habib confirmed. “They steal here, too!”

“There were fights and meetings while the elections were going on. It was the editor of their newspaper, the Bezhtan’s relative, who was behind it. They weren’t sharing so the Bezhtan closed the paper. And the editor started making trouble. He held meetings and took videos of them. But the Bezhtan’s other brother, who works for the highway patrol, stopped the editor’s car, beat him and his people up, and took away the video.”

The Tsuntin started laughing quietly again.

“But maybe people are lying. There’s a fox sitting in Bezhta, but our administration chief is a real badger. He lies about distributing wages money among the old folks. ‘I have nowhere to live in the village,’ he says. Va, the badger!”

The Tsuntin chuckled and fell silent again, resting his palms on his knees and lowering his head.

“I wonder whether they’re going to choose our Ullubi for the district center?” a young man with prominent cheekbones wearing glasses and a peak cap asked.

“Ullubi is building a mosque,” Habib said respectfully.

“There was a flood here, and the bridge needs repair.”

“Ullubi will fix it!” The men nodded.

“He wanted to go for a principal’s job in town,” Habib grunted, “but there’s a Lezgin line there, no chance for him. He wanted to go for a court job, but the Magomedov brothers are there, it’s their turf.”

“And now Abdullaev might win.”

“Who said?” Habib was indignant.

“The Abdullaevs have this one billy goat kid with ‘Allah’ written on its side.”

“That’s not their’s! It’s some poor shepherds that have a kid like that!”

“That shepherd is Abdullaev’s second cousin. Abdullaev used to go visit
him and have his picture taken with the kid. People are saying it’s an omen.”

The young man shook his head and sighed.

“Now there’s going to be a ziiarat for the kid! Abdullaev’s an idiot, and everyone knows it.”

“Hey, watch how you talk about your elders!” Muhu exclaimed.

“Halilbek called,” Shapi interrupted them. “I’m calling him back now, he ought to be here.”

While Shapi was calling him back, everyone was silent. The hostess walked in, deftly collected the dirty dishes, and walked out. An old man in a skullcup was leafing through an Avar newspaper, leaning back wearily on a couch.

“No service. He must have gone into a tunnel,” Shapi said.

They got up, said their postprandial “Alhamdulillah,” and pushed back their chairs. While they were walking into the courtyard, toward the wooden benches, Muhu tapped Shapi and started saying something, smirking and pointing with his elbow toward the next village.

“Le, did you hear what happened to our neighbors this spring?”

“Yes,” Shapi responded disparagingly. “Each village here has different people, even though we’re all the same nation. Hard workers in one, mathematicians in another, poets in a third, scholars in a fourth, robbers in a fifth, artisans in a sixth, and fools in a seventh. Those”—he nodded in the direction Muhu had been pointing with his elbow—“are the fools.”

“So what happened?” puffy-cheeked Alexei inquired.

“On March 8th, one teacher congratulated another villager’s wife on International Women’s Day,” Muhu began, smiling. “When her husband saw him congratulating his wife, he got on his motorcycle, chased the teacher down, and bit off his nose!”

“His nose?”

“Yes, his nose! The tip!” Muhu confirmed. “And after that they—”

Muhu’s story was interrupted by the woman from the small store running into the yard.

“Vâi, Ghadamal!” the woman wailed, and she ran into the house.

In her wake, puffing and panting, flew Chamastak and, without looking at the men, scurried after the shopkeeper. Exclamations came from the house. The men startled. A towheaded boy of seven ran to Habib and said that Habib’s wife wanted him. His wife, Saniiat, the one with the large mole on her pale cheek, ran out into the yard and, trembling, watched Habib walk toward her, his ponderous body waddling from side to side.

“Someone abducted our daughter,” she said in a disembodied voice.
“What did you say?” Habib couldn’t believe it.

“Vá, Ghadamal!”\(^{18}\) she wailed, covering her face with her hands.

The mourners had already crowded around. A young man, his face darkened, his eyes wild, rushed out the gates. Habib started feeling unwell, and someone ran for his Corvalol.

“They must’ve gone through the district center yet,” Muhu hotly tried to convince Habib. “Let’s get in the van, take witnesses, and chase them down!”

Saniiat covered her face with her kerchief and sobbed. The others stood around in silence.

4

Panic set in. Habib, red in the face, breathing hard, shook Naida and then Bika by the shoulders and interrogated them: “Did she resist? Did she try to fight them off?”

Meanwhile, the young man in glasses and another, agitated, with a twitching eyelid (they told Naida he was Saida’s fiancé), got in a car and drove off. Bahu was standing in the middle of the yard in her velvet dress, keening softly about shame and her dead Hasan. Saniiat hid in the house, where women’s cries could be heard.

“Vallakh-billakh, my son isn’t going to clean other people’s toilets!”

Elmira listened closely, nervously fiddling with a lock of hair that had escaped her mourning kerchief.

“It’s her fiancé’s mama going crazy.”

Naida’s father came up to Elmira, awkwardly pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

“You’re going to go with Uncle Muhu and Uncle Habib now.”

“Where?”

“To tell them everything that happened.”

“I won’t go,” Elmira whined when he went to confer with the men. “I didn’t see anything.”

The mullah who had read the Quran over the deceased was in the crowd, and he began to speak, gesticulating. There was honking outside the gate. They took Naida by the arm and led her to the car.

“Take them all!” Muhu exclaimed.

“Elmira won’t go,” Bika complained.

“Yes, she will!” Manarsha’s voice rang out. Manarsha was leading Elmira,

\(^{18}\) Mother (Avar)
who kept repeating that she hadn’t seen anything and that Chamastak should go instead.

“There’s room. Climb in!” Muhu commanded.

Habib was breathing hard in the front seat, wiping away the sweat with his crumpled handkerchief by the minute and randomly pressing buttons on his phone. Naida noticed how often the blue vein on his fat neck pulsed.

The engine roared to life, someone slapped the trunk, as if seeing them off, and the car slowly set off down the slope. Naida leaned her head back and looked at the structures sailing by, at the cemetery fence behind which leaned gray tombstones with colored Arab script or names written out in Avar without dates.

Around the turn she saw the gleaming scales of the frothing, crashing river.

“Remember, yes, Elmira, how we went there, to swim at the waterfall, and then children started throwing stones at us?” Bika whispered, pointing to the narrow stream that split off from the river and took a turn around the mountain.

Walking toward them, bent under huge bundles of hay, were Abasilia and Karimilia, with their old, wrinkled faces, wearing dusty workers’ shirts over their baggy trousers. Muhu hit the brakes and got out with Habib to talk to them. Naida could barely make out what they were saying over the rush of the river and the wind that had blown in from somewhere. Straightening their chukhta strings under their chins, the women gestured toward a road that repeated the bends in the river and was lost between the mountains.

Muhu and Habib got back in and continued on. Naida could hear pebbles striking the car bottom. There was the sweet smell of gasoline—they must have been carrying canisters of reserve fuel in the trunk. She pressed her forehead against the vibrating glass and tried not to think about her incipient nausea. Mountain slopes with farmed terraces sailed by, and the river hissed in time with the tires, keeping the beat.

Naida started falling into a strange, unhealthy trance. She could hear the girls whispering, Bika describing the ill-starred Lada Priora (“it has this Dag tuning”), and Habib talking about Saida’s usual obedience and about how she never came home late at night, but mixed in with these sounds were new snatches of melody that seemed to be coming from nowhere. At first it was like the muffled tinkling of a pandur, then a zurna joined in, and a tambourine thumped. Naida felt as though she had levitated and was moving up, from terrace to terrace, toward the mountaintop.
She was speeding, faster and faster, her feet not touching the ground. Mountain women pulling weeds in their patches of grain crops were pottering about far below. Naida was spun and hurled to the most unimaginably distant points. She was thrown into shallow caves where natural springs seeped in from above, then into the thick Tliarata forest, where Dagestani goats, skittish deer, billy goats, snowcocks, grouse, and partridges hid from hunters, then to deserted passes crumbling in slate, and then she was squeezed into the dark Karadakh defile—a gigantic crevice gouged out of a hulking dolomite cliff by a rolling stream where wild bees nested high.

Try as hard as she could, Naida couldn’t pull herself out of it. She was being shaken and rocked. She was thrown into the luxuriant subalpine meadows of the Bogoss glacier with their sorrel, hellebore, whortleberries, rosemary, and clover, where countless herds grazed. Into gorges with abandoned and resettled settlements. Onto the bare slopes that rise over the dark Betsor River, where horses run and poor recluse farmers live who are visited in winter by hungry bears and wolves coming down from distant forests to get at the livestock.

She was flung above fields of hundreds of half-forgotten curses full of usurpers from all ends of the earth. She was hurtled over “the hill where they killed Ivan,” over crumbling signal towers that once passed news of imminent threat from peak to peak, from post to post. Over an enormous boulder where, according to legend, Shamil’s weapons arsenal was buried. Over the tomb of the Christian hermit Tamara, where bright rags tied to the trees flapped in the wind and where you could see, far below, the village of Batsada, whose inhabitants boil a black gum from birch resin and there is gray grass and tiny automobiles. And once again the zurna whined and the pandur tinkled.

“They’re calling!” Habib shouted so that Naida woke up and lifted her buzzing head. “What do you mean ‘but’?” The zurna! “I’ll find you and thrash you! I’m giving you an hour! We won’t let this go, vallakh! Huh? Where are you? Speak! Give Saida the phone! Hello!”

Habib cursed, making forceful, guttural sounds.

“What is it?” Muhu asked, steering onto a small stone bridge where the Santa Barbara Café stuck out by the side of the road.

“Khăăvan! An unlisted number.”

“Why did they take her, did he say?” Muhu asked.

19 Animal, cattle
“To disgrace my tribe! Why else? Uí, shaitan,” Habib rasped, opening the window and listlessly fanning himself with his handkerchief. “That’s it, he’s finished, I’m calling Zakir now, he’ll find that dog!”

Naida’s nausea was growing worse and worse. She looked at the retreating peaks of snowy Nukat’ ridge, where the great river was born, and closed her eyes again. Habib’s voice was moving further and further away. Once again she felt a change in pressure and, as if she were on an elevator, flew up to the peak of impregnable Saddle Mountain, walled in by cliffs. The mountain loomed over the plain of the Avar Koisu river for a kilometer and a half. Rocky footpaths and bridle paths snaked up its multistoried, vertical slopes from the settlements at the very bottom. The sky had cleared, and Naida saw clearly from above the bare Khunzakh plateau and the waterfalls plunging from it, and the Tobot River which hurtled from the plateau into Tsolotlin canyon but in winter froze in the form of a gigantic, hollow column.

Naida looked up, and she wondered why there were stars blinking in the thin air in broad daylight. She heard a whisper. Someone invisible was creeping toward her through the rustling meadow grass. Naida’s head started spinning. She lay down on her back, on the cold green clover, and asked, “Who’s here?”

The whisper sounded very close.

“Shaitans?” That frightened Naida. “Or a budalal?” She had heard something about the budalal . . . A blanket of snow, a bed of ice, trousers of bark, a dress of leaves, the people who don’t eat or drink, the kind that is neither male nor female, a happy budalal . . .

She felt the breath of strange beings forming an invisible ring around her. “Iasande!”20 a low voice commanded.

“Iasande!” ringing voices echoed.

Someone’s hands were shaking Naida by the shoulders, but their mouths kept shouting the same command. She heard the sounds of the lezginka. Naida was well and truly frightened, but driven on by the invisible beings, she began to dance. She stood up on tiptoe, straightened her shoulders, and minced over the wet earth, slowly rotating her wrists.

The drums beat, harder and harder, shouts rang out, louder and louder, Naida danced and spun, faster and faster. Eventually, driven past the breaking point, she collapsed and surrendered to the nausea rolling over her.

20 Dance (Avar)
Habib’s phone burst out in a lezginka. He pressed a button and shouted into the receiver, “Ia, 21 Shapi?”

“She’s sick to her stomach!” Bika wailed. “What’s the matter, Naida?”

“Open the door for her.” Muhu looked over his shoulder while stopping the car at a turn. “Poor thing, we shouldn’t have taken her.”

“She got a spot on my skirt,” Bika said indignantly.

Naida tumbled out of the car and, bending over, ran to the shoulder of the serpentine road. She threw up. After a few waves of nausea she felt better. She stood there a little longer on half-bent legs, looking at distant Saddle Mountain. The sun was already at its zenith and broiling. Naida felt herself break out in a sweat so she removed her light jacket.

“Feeling better? Let’s get a move on!” Habib waved to her from the car.

She went back and took her seat.

“Mama, I hope we find Saida there,” Bika whispered. Elmira, silent, had turned away to face the window. Habib wiped his neck with his handkerchief. The district center was a hundred meters off.

Soon after, the car braked at a dusty, circular marketplace and the entire group got out. A brick wall with huge barred gates, a gleaming iron eagle atop each point, stood out distinctly among the other marketplace structures. Behind the gate was a red, three-story building with a stylized tower and embrasures. Beyond that loomed the administration building, with a poster on the wall: “I have seen how the Dagestanis defend their land and Russia and I have come to love Dagestan and Dagestanis even more. V. Putin.” Beyond that were colorful stalls, shops, and gardens. Near a spring elegantly surrounded with stones, behind which the buildings rose in a pyramid, the tip of a minaret and a dense weeping willow peeked out with the public square spread below.

Habib and Muhu headed straight for the square, holding their hands out from far off and loudly greeting the men sitting there.

“Assalamu ala kum!”

The slap of handshakes and traded vaala kum assalam were heard. Muhu told the men sitting there that they were at the district center on their way to town from their village and thought they would stop by and visit their relatives at the same time. Habib added that their young friends must have

21 Reply to a call, “what?” (Avar)
already been here in a silvery Lada with tinted windows. To this the visitors
were told that lots of cars had come through because elections were the day
after tomorrow and there had just been a meeting between Abdullaev and
the current chief, Akhmedov (here an elderly man in a neatly patched shirt
gestured in the direction of the barred gates). And that Abdullaev had
brought his shepherd brother and the miraculous kid with “Allah” written in
white on its black side, which anyone who wanted to could pet and feed. And
that Ullubī was keeping up just fine and each day brought his wrestlers out
for a match, promising he would develop the sport and help the schools.

A crowd of adolescents and young men had already gathered in the mar-
ketplace. A large, bright green rubber mat was spread out in the middle.
Mustached men in sweaty white shirts were dragging cables, microphones,
heavy black loudspeakers, and benches out from the administration building.
They were setting up the sound. Habib was visibly nervous, but he was mak-
ing an effort to appear cheerful.

Schoolgirls crowded around the spring with their buckets and pitchers,
checking out the arriving young women.

“They may have taken us along, but you can bet your life they won’t go
to the police,” Bika said, letting spring water fill her hands. “Uncle Habib
won’t admit for anything that a disgrace like this has befallen him. But Saida
could at least have called us. At my university, when they abducted a girl,
she called right away and said where she was. They had a normal masliat.”

In the marketplace, meanwhile, more and more people assembled.
Women came down dressed in richly embroidered, brocade headscarves.
Ullubī himself appeared, short, balding, and beetle-browed, as did the town
officials, who didn’t know where to put their hands and so kept them clasped
over their belly. The men sitting on the square melted into the buzzing
crowd. Naida noticed Muhu and Habib circle a little, questioning the vil-
lagers, and also slip into the crowd and make their way closer to Ullubi, who,
after a brief speech in Avar, raised his fist and began in Russian:

“Our today we have had the honorable candidate Abdullaev speak. He
spoke from the heart, he spoke about iakhh-namus. Vakh, I think, now I’ll go
withdraw my candidacy and vote for him. But afterward people I know said to
me, ‘Ia, Ullubī! This man, sometimes, he never stops talking about the Almighty,
but he himself has nothing but fists.’ And I thought, ‘I am, alkhandulliliah, a Mus-
lim, and I don’t play those games with signs on animals. That is kharam.’”

22 Shame-guilt (Avar)
The crowd stirred.

“I wrestled for many years myself, and now I’m giving money for the sport, and if honorable Abdullaev would go out in the ring with me, I would throw him on a three-pointer!”

Ullubii laughed, as if to show that this was a joke. The officials smiled and whispered as well.

“However”—Ullubii frowned—“the district has many problems and they need to be addressed. There are destructive forces endeavoring to destabilize the situation. The current administration chief, honorable Akhmedov, has many resources. His brother, as it happens, is sitting in the State Duma in Moscow. Why haven’t I once heard from this brother? Why isn’t he solving our problems instead of just his own?”

The crowd began to hum.

“I’m not accusing anyone in particular, but no one has built roads in the district besides me. Word of honor, I did not want to enter the elections, but the president spoke to me at a banquet. ‘Ullubii,’ he says, ‘what about it, go for your native district, you’re needed there.’ That’s what he said to me. He and I spoke for a whole twenty minutes. There are witnesses. After that, how could I not run?”

Someone started applauding.

“A few people have approached me, I won’t say who, they asked me, saying, ‘So-and-so pays us five grand a vote, so how much are you going to pay?’ Ba! Such things they asked me! I say, I have iakhkh-namus, I don’t make deals. Instead, when you elect me, I’ll give you work. Because now, sometimes, there is no work.”

Ullubii had a brief coughing fit.

“Also, why isn’t any work being done with young people? It has come to my attention that certain young men are refusing to go to the mid-day prayer after Friday prayer, they’re going home, and they’re wearing shortened trousers.”

“Who said?”

“Where did they see that?” Voices came from the crowd.

“You know yourselves, I’m not telling you anything new,” Ullubii continued. “I’m opposed to having the police lock them up just because they left prayer, that’s wrong! But we need to bring in an alim or two, invite the sheikh, and talk it over! I am prepared to do all this. By the way, here we have the honorable alim Shakh-Abas. He would like to say a few words.”

Shakh-Abas, wearing a Persian lamb cap, a collarless shirt, and a heavy
jacket, stepped up to the microphone and began slowly in his native lan-
guage. A bearded young man in a skullcap took it upon himself to interpret
for some reason. Evidently the assembled officials included more than Avars.

“I have known Ullubiı˘ since the Soviet Union’s breakup. . . . At the time
many people came to see me . . . saying, how long are we going to put up with
this state of affairs? . . . Saying, we need to take up jihad and cleanse ourselves
of corruption and deceit. . . . At the time, shukru Allakh, I did not support them.
. . . Ullubiı˘ has said much here about our problems, but he has not said every-
ing. We are living in Akhirzaman. This is why we have so many prophets, and
each says, ‘Listen to me. Don’t listen to them!’ They have their own aims, selfish
aims in mind. You must do as the books teach, as each ustaz teaches, and keep
to their barakat. Ask the ustaz, even when you’re going to the toilet. But do not
be prideful. You will gain nothing by books alone. Tarikat brings hypocrites no
benefit. After all, there can be no sea without a shore, no belly without a back.
In the same way, there can be no prayer without conviction. You see, cattle are
colorful on the outside, but man is on the inside. Here the Wahhabites say that
the tarikatists are idol worshippers and first turn to the ustaz and only then to
Allah. That is not true. During the dua, we first ask Allah, and then the ustaz, and
then Allah once more. And the ustaz chain leads back to the Prophet, salalakh
allaı˘khi vassalam. Ullubiı˘ came to me, and I saw he was not a hypocrite but a
genuine, loving son of our people. I am not going to ask you to vote for him, that
is none of my affair, but I do believe in him as a true Muslim.”

The crowd applauded stormily, and a bearded man escorted Shakh-Abas
to a bench.

A woman’s shout was heard in the crowd: “Echchaı˘, ecchaı˘.” A woman
of about forty whose long scarf had slipped from her shoulders, baring a
heavy knot of hair at her nape, rushed to the microphone.

“I have a question for Comrade Ullubiı˘ Gaziev. How is he going to solve
the problem with our children who the police are torturing in Makhachkala?”

“Who are they torturing?” Ullubiı˘ asked, pushing away the arm of an
aide who was indignant about something. “What is your name?”

“My name is Zaza Makhmudova. Here they arrested my nephew, dislo-
cated his hip, left him with bruises, and won’t let lawyers see him. They say
he killed an Interior official. Ask anyone in the village. Everyone knows my
nephew. They’ll all tell you that Alishka could never have done that. He’s a

23 Thanks to Allah (Arabic)
24 The end times (Avar)
25 Let me through, let me through (Avar)
simple metalworker! Yes, Alishka worked for various people, but he is not responsible for their sins.”

“Have you gone to the prosecutor?”

“Who haven’t I gone to? In Makhachkala I went to a rally. Me and over there, Rizvan Magomedovich, our bookkeeper, he went with me, too. They drove me out everywhere I went,” the woman shouted furiously. “Here, look what they did!”

She showed her bandaged finger.

“They broke my finger!”

Voices were heard in the crowd.

“Zaza, sabur g’abul!”26

“Let’s have the fight!” someone hollered in a nasty voice.

“I know you have many questions, and I will try to address them all,” Ullubä exhorted the noisy square. “But right now let’s invite our champions to come out.”

While he was trying to conciliate the agitated woman, sturdy, barefoot wrestlers in body stockings stepped on the mat, one in red, the other in blue.

The referee appeared.

“Aisaul, start!” the scrawny youth shouted. “Tajudin is going to tear that zero apart. You can take that to the bank.”

The wrestlers started limbering up, then they walked toward each other, locked arms, and planted their feet.

Habib and Muhu tried to move toward Ullubä and the officials, but the crowd pushed them back. Each person was on tiptoe, trying to get a better view of the athletes.

All of a sudden, a tall ginger-haired man holding a cardboard box squeezed up to the microphone and shouted: “One moment!”

The crowd groaned.

“Wait up! Wait! This is an urgent matter!” Ginger continued. “We have representatives from the city here. Let them see, too.”

He looked around and waved to someone. Two men in cross-trainers were leading along a high school boy shaved bald. He was resisting and turning his face away.

“Look, we caught a guy. You know what we found in his box?”

He pointed to the cardboard box.

“Let’s have the fight!” the same nasty voice rang out.

26 Calm down (Avar)
“There isn’t going to be any fight. Order of administration chief Akhmedov,” ginger-hair said.

The crowd roared.

“Down with Akhmedov!” a few voices began shouting.

“Ullubiı Gaziev puts on matches here, while at the same time he’s making fake ballots. Here, in this box. If you don’t believe it, take a look!”

“What ballots?” Ullubiı exploded. “I’m telling you, I don’t know anything! This is not my man!”

He pointed at the frightened high schooler.

“This is not my man! This is a provocation. Don’t believe him!” He waved his arms in all directions.

“Let us see! Let us see!” was heard from the crowd.

The box ended up on the ground and ballots fluttered down.

“There, a checkmark for Gaziev!” one of the villagers rasped dumbfoundedly as he snatched up the scattered sheets of paper. “It’s everywhere! G’ale, g’ale!”

Zaza Makhmudova popped up again and started howling, “Tyranny!”

“Let’s have the fight!” the young people yelled.

“There isn’t going to be any fight until Gaziev withdraws his candidacy,” ginger-hair declared.

Fat officials were bent over the ballots and had started examining them with interest. A distraught Ullubi’s comrade-in-arms ran over and announced into the microphone, “Khiriial g’almag’zabi! This is a low provocation by Akhmedov. This boy . . . but where is he? He’s run away! We don’t know this boy at all! It was Akhmedov himself who made those ballots and set up all this khalam-balam just to keep the people from having their holiday! But we’ll have our holiday despite him! Just let him try to stop us!”

“Yea!” the crowd exclaimed.

The ballots flew up in the air. Someone ran over to Akhmedov’s barred gates and started throwing the ballots through the bars.

“Ma, take your paper scraps back!”

The police came and started driving people away from the gates. Meanwhile, the wrestlers started wrestling. Blue threw red over his shoulder, and red grabbed blue by the legs.

Habib and Muhu scrambled out of the crowd and returned to the spring. The girls were standing right where they’d been, leaning against the rocks set

27 Look, look (Avar)
28 Dear comrades (Avar)
around the spring, quiet and depressed. The village boys were hovering nearby, surveying them defiantly.

“Let’s go to the car,” Muhu said. “We have to talk.”

Inside the car Muhu for some reason took a stack of CDs out of the glove compartment and buried his nose in them. Habib was all red. He had started breathing heavily and suddenly started to shout.

“I told Saniiat to raise our daughter right! She was always spoiling her. ‘Leave her alone, Habib, let her go, let her spend time with her girlfriends…’ Always going to concerts and cafés, wearing eye makeup, and going to school. I paid good money to get her in! And look what happened! When I see her, I’m going to take her in my bare hands and strangle her just like this.”

Habib clasped his trembling hands.

“If I don’t bring her back today, I’m going up that mountain and throwing myself off. Let everyone say afterward that Habib went mad over his daughter the k’akhh’bys.29 That sniveling Kumyk must have abducted her. Who else could creep up like that, like a jackal, to the bukhon, and cause such a mess. I won’t just let this go!”

“What Kumyk?” Muhu asked, not tearing himself away from the CDs.

“Oh, this one boy came and brought some chh’andu.30 He wanted Saida to marry him. I wouldn’t even listen to him, va! That’s all I need is letting my only daughter marry some Kumyk!”

“It wasn’t a Kumyk who stole her, it was a Dargin,” Elmira said suddenly in a strained voice.

Everyone looked at her in astonishment. Elmira was sitting squeezed into the back seat rubbing her red eyes.

“How do you know?” Habib snapped.

Suddenly Elmira burst into sobs.

“Easy now, easy!” Muhu touched her shoulder and said to Elmira, “Don’t be afraid. Tell us what you know.”

Elmira sobbed and, without looking at him, said through her nose, “It’s a Dargin, Ismail from Levashi. He saw her in the park when she and I were out for a walk, and after that he wouldn’t let her alone at the university, he gave her flowers. He likes her.”

Habib blazed up scarlet red and rasped, “Who does he like? What are you going on about, iasaı˘!31 I’m going to tell your father and mother every-

29 Bitch, whore (Avar)
30 Garbage (Avar)
31 Little girl (Avar)
thing! It’s your fault we don’t know where Saida’s right now. Do you know his number? Tell me his number!”

Habib was overcome by a coughing fit.

“How could that be!” Muhu threw his hands up. “Why didn’t you say something?”

Elmira was shuddering from her sobs.

“Saida didn’t want to marry Rasul, she wanted to marry Ismail.”

“Vâi, dir rakh!” Habib exclaimed, and he ran out, slamming the door.

Muhu watched Habib waddle awkwardly to the spring to wash his face, and he got out, too, looking around at the girls ominously.

“Well, I never!” Bika let out a sigh. “So Saida knew they were coming for her?”

“N-no,” Elmira sobbed. “Ismail told her he’d abduct her. She wanted him to, but she was afraid of her father. She told me she loved him, but she should marry Rasul since he’d given her such wonderful presents and the dress was already bought.”

“She kept talking about the dress! I don’t think she wanted to be abducted,” Naida interjected.

“How do you know what she didn’t want?” Elmira moaned hysterically. “She wanted it badly. They would meet, we’d all go to a café together. She didn’t care if Rasul found out and took back his promise. So I was justified in everything I did.”

“How awful,” Bika murmured. “Elmira, why did you even admit this? They’ll kill you now.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“What do you mean what? You were helping this Ismail, you suggested we go back by way of the store.”

“Yes, exactly,” Naida recalled. “It was Elmira who suggested it.”

Muhu looked in the car window.

“Give over this hero’s number,” he ordered Elmira.

She got out her phone and, sobbing, dictated the eleven numbers. Muhu’s head disappeared. You could see through the windshield that the match was still going on in the marketplace and the wrestler in red seemed to be winning. Ullubî and the officials had slipped away. The policemen who’d been about to disperse the crowd had been drawn into the spectacle, too, and were closely following the match.

Habib and Muhu got back in the car.

32 Oh, my heart! (Avar)
“We’re going to Levashi. They haven’t done the nikiakh yet,” Habib said in a steely voice. “If we manage to collect her before sunset, she’s pure. If not, we’ll have to let this Dargin have her.” He spat through the lowered window.

Then he frowned and added, “I’m taking her anyway. Better she stay an old maid to the end of her days than get married like that, like a khhaïvan!”

“We’re not going to go see Ullubiı˘?” Muhu asked.

“How can I look him in the eye?” Habib said in a pained voice. “After what’s happened, I won’t leave the house for a month!”

Muhu hummed and started up the engine.

“Le!” A passing villager who’d been sitting on the square looked at him and asked why they were leaving so soon and why didn’t they stop in for khinkal and fortify themselves? Muhu and Habib immediately smiled and explained that they had to leave right away, early. The villager tried long and hard to talk them into staying after all and coming by, but eventually he relented and let them go with a farewell.

6

At the edge of the district center Muhu put on the brakes.

“We can’t take them with us,” he told Habib, nodding toward the back seat.

“Let them go to Aminat’s, Halilbek’s sister, it’s right here, around the corner. They can ask around. Someone will pick them up later,” Habib replied in a monotone.

“Okay.” Elmira nodded and opened the door.

All three got out of the car and for a while, in silence, watched it pick up speed and disappear down the slope.

“Saida didn’t call you?” Bika asked Elmira.

“She doesn’t have her phone with her.”

“This Ismail must be really handsome, right?”

“Better than Rasul.”

“Vaia, Rasul’s not bad.”

“Where does Aminat live, Halilbek’s sister?” Elmira asked a passing boy.

He didn’t understand.

“Gazieezul Aminat kiï ingai?” Naida repeated.

The boy told them the way.

Soon after, they came across a long, terraced garden with a white, one-story building at the top made of raw, cut stone. Aminat was childless and lived alone. But her nephew Hajik was sitting on the porch, his legs spread
wide. Naida noticed that, when she saw Hajik, Bika gave him a languorous look and made a moue.

After questions and greetings, Aminat treated them to sprouted barley porridge. Bika offered to serve and splattered her shiny top. They said nothing about Saida. Hajik ate with dignity and then said slyly to Bika, “I saw your photos on the Internet.”

“Yes, you and I spoke at the forum,” Bika confirmed affectedly. “You brought up a topic there, whether a wife should be covered.”

“That wasn’t me, that was Arip discussing that, my brother,” Hajik grinned.

“I was riding in a mini-bus recently”—Bika livened up—“and this girl had gone completely overboard, wearing expensive Muslim clothing, I don’t even know what tailor she ordered it from. All silk. She sits down and pulls out a stylish phone, almost like a Nokia 8800 Sapphire. An exclusive! And she starts talking, showing off. ‘Hello, this and that, blah blah blah.’ And right then, her phone starts ringing! We positively howled.”

Bika started laughing.

“I’m telling you, she stops the mini-bus and shoots out of there like a bullet!”

“Did Halilbek come for the mourning?” Aminat asked, looking out at the porch from the kitchen.

“I don’t know, we didn’t see him,” Elmira answered.

“I’m sorry Hasan died. He was such a cheerful man. He knew so many funny stories. He played so many jokes on us.” Aminat sighed and turned to Hajik. “What news in town, Haji?”

“Oh, the usual, chasing chicks.” Hajik grinned. “What about the elections here? Could Ullubiı win?”

Aminat gestured dismissively. “He’d better stay away!”

Then she invited the girls into the room and pointed to a pile of sheep’s wool lying on the floor.

“The wool needs combing. We’ll comb the wool.”

The girls exchanged unenthusiastic glances. Aminat continued.

“My mama used to say, ‘If you don’t comb wool, you won’t get married.’”

“But you didn’t.” Naida smiled.

“I didn’t want to,” Aminat replied, clipping on her glasses and deftly pulling the clumps of wool apart into a fluffy mass. “Do you know how it used to be in our village? When a girl wanted to get married, she came out in front of the square, stood on a roof, and announced it. The elders would ask her who exactly she wanted for a husband. And the girl would point him out. Isn’t that right, Kamil?” she asked someone who had appeared in the doorway.
He heard the question but didn’t answer.
“But what if that man didn’t want to?”
“He had to buy his way out. It’s all prescribed in an adat: how much he had to give in goods if he refused to marry, how much he had to give if he touched a girl’s elbow...”
Hajik poked his head into the room.
“Abdul and I are going to the white cliff.”
“What for?”
“We’re going to shoot cans.”
He nodded good-bye and disappeared.
Elmira’s phone rang and she stepped out, too.
“Yes,” Aminat continued, showing the best way to comb wool. “They used to raise girls differently. We knew so many poems! Kilometers of them! We knew all of Mahmud, we knew all Anhil Marin!”
“I know, she’s the one whose lips a naib sewed shut so she wouldn’t sing her free songs and he threw her into a crevice. And also, when she sang at a wedding, someone fired in the air and hit her daughter. But she still wouldn’t stop her song. She held her daughter in her arms and kept on singing,” Bika rattled on.
Aminat shook her head.
“That’s a lie about the lips and the crevice. That’s all made up. Who could have sewn her lips? When she was fifteen, a Rugudzhan’s cow destroyed their field, and she beat him so badly that he died a few days later. For this, she was sent out of her village, following the adat. It was the worst punishment for a mountain girl. Another time, after she’d come back and was living on a farm near Rugudzha, she looked out one morning and seven of her sheep had had their tails cut off. She went and followed the trail of blood to the next farm and slashed seven cows there. For revenge. Rugudzha women do not forgive an insult!”
Elmira came back into the room and went back to combing wool with all the rest.
“Aminat!” someone called to her from the porch.
Aminat took off her glasses and went out.
“Saida is married,” Elmira said when she was sure no one else could hear. “She called me from someone else’s phone. They did the nikiakh. ‘I won’t go back with Papa,’ she said, but she was crying.”
“Of course, she was crying. This Ismail, is he at least rich?”
“Yes. He’s building a big house in Reduktornoe right now. But she’ll have to return Rasul’s presents.”
Far off, a rooster suddenly crowed. They heard the sounds of a harmon-
ica. A folk singer was performing in the marketplace. People there were snapping their fingers in time, and someone shouted, “Vere!”

When he heard the rooster crow, Kamil, who had been dozing all this time on the porch, stood up and slowly walked down the stone stairs into the garden. It smelled of herbs, roots, rotting apricots, and dirt. He slowly made his way to the side gate, brushed the nameless yellow flowers curiously, and headed out for a walk.

Quickly passing the narrow lanes, Kamil found himself in the marketplace, where visiting tightrope walkers were dancing to the beating of drums and the moaning of a zurna. One was jumping on the rope, rising up and standing on his big toe, then sitting down and spreading his legs to either side. A second was encouraging him from below. The many spectators were following each movement with delighted whooping.

The sun was still clinging to the very edge of the western peaks. Kamil squatted on a rock and, squinting, followed the tightrope walkers. A daredevil who had only just been galloping along gaily to ecstatic shouts crawled into a bag and to the measured beats of the drum stepped to the middle of the rope, balancing with a pole. Reaching the middle, he took a three-rung stepladder from his assistant, stood it on the rope, and to the same uneasy yet even beating of the drum began his triumphant ascent. Kamil yawned, frowned, and gradually dozed off to the delighted clamor of the audience and the sounds of the monotonous melodies.

When he woke up he realized it was already growing dark. The marketplace was quiet now. The actors were whispering back and forth and sorting out the props. Kamil remembered he had something to do at the edge of town. When he was walking past the little boys, they shouted, “Kamil, Kamil! Come here!”

Kamil looked back at them guardedly, inquiringly, but continued on his way.

On the way out of the village he smelled grasshoppers, dust, herbs, and something else he couldn’t put his finger on. A little farther down, surrounded with sacks of cement, there was a checkpoint. Kamil stopped, hesitant, and began to study the figures stirring at the checkpoint. A capless policeman was idly examining his submachine gun; another was saying something in back, but what exactly, Kamil couldn’t hear.

Suddenly he heard pops. Kamil shuddered. The bored policeman swiftly squatted and shouldered his submachine gun, firing haphazardly across the road. The second grabbed his shoulder, doubled over, and took cover behind

---

33Come on, come on (Avar)
the bags. There were more pops and a strong smell of burning and smoke. Frightened, Kamil threw himself to the ground and then jumped back up and took to his heels. Running into the house, he dashed headlong past the porch and jumped onto the clean cover of his bed.

“Uchit, Kamil!” Halilbek’s sister shouted to him, and she drove the cat onto the floor.

“What were those pops?” Bika asked, sitting in front of the television.

“I’m going to find out right away,” Aunt Aminat replied, worried, and she left the house.

Awhile later a neighbor woman peeked in and said that one policeman had been killed and another wounded. Then Aminat appeared and an agitated Hajik, who paced from corner to corner babbling, “The guys say they didn’t have any idea where they were shooting from.”

“From the forest opposite, probably,” Aminat said.

Then her neighbor reappeared and started keening and throwing up her hands, saying, “Such poor things, such young things.” Then they started arguing and cursing Akhmedov and his entire clan for some reason.

Meanwhile, Bika’s mama had called from home and said that Habib and Muhu had left Saida in Levashi and were driving back, and that Habib had said he would never forgive Saida, but, she said, his voice was already calmer. Bika’s mama also warned her to keep away from Elmira.

“She’s the Gamidov branch, and almost all their girls are like that.”

Then, after straightening up a little, they lay down, and Naida looked at the black, nighttime ceiling and listened to the buzzing voices of Aminat and her neighbors on the other side of the wall discussing the killing and was amazed to remember flying high up Saddle Mountain. Half-asleep, she imagined the voices getting distorted and turning into an inhuman rumble, first fine, then low. Something awful, teasing, and sly was breaking through the rumble.

She remembered how, as a child, coming to the village, she was afraid of shaitans who were adept at perfidy. They could change their appearance, alter their voices, steal people away, and drive insane those who had fallen asleep in the field. “Even when your Mama calls you,” the village children said, “don’t answer her right away. It could be a shaitan calling for you in her voice. Say a spell and only then speak up.” Cold had crept into Naida’s chest, but gradually she grew too weak to think. The rumble was growing more and more muffled, and, finally, a meaningless pitch darkness fell.

\[34\] Shoo! (Avar)
Irina Bogatyreva (born 1982, Kazan) started writing when she was fifteen and is widely published in leading Russian literary magazines. Her works have been translated into English, Chinese, and Dutch; the most recent to be published in English is *Off the Beaten Track*, which was shortlisted for the Debut Prize. Her novel *Comrade Anna* was among the finalists for the 2012 Belkin Prize. Irina’s prize winning career extends to victories in the Eureka Prize, the Ilya Prize and the Oktyabr magazine prize.
Irina Bogatyreva
Stars over Lake Teletskoye

Translated by Arch Tait

After wading across the river, spaced out as if we had just made love, we lay on the sun-warmed slope and talked quietly together. The conversation consisted of modulation of a single phrase. “If you like, we could hitch a lift,” I said, as if agreeing to something Slava had just suggested. “We could hitch a lift, if you like,” he responded.

The truth was that just at that moment there was nothing either of us wanted. We lay on the bank, with our heads to the roadway, drying our trousers which were wet from the crossing. Now we could barely hear the Chulyshman, bearing its waters along slightly below the level of the bank and screened by willow scrub. Two handsome gray cranes circled clanging above us and settled on the bank slightly downstream, peering over to see what kind of guests these were who had come to visit their quiet, all but unpopulated, world.

For the previous three days we had been staying on the far bank with typical Russian gentle giants, hospitable forest rangers of the Altai nature reserve. They fed us canned borscht and a succession of tales of the taiga to encourage us to stay on and dilute their monotonous duties. Every day, for dessert, we were served identical accounts of their battles with the local poachers. Despite a balance of firepower clearly in favor of the well-armed rangers rather than the Altai hunters violating the conservation zone, the war was long, brutal and unfair. The rangers had no legal right to do more than detain the poachers and administer a fine, while by default the poachers were far less constrained. The three Russian giants complained that it was out of the question for them to show their faces in the villages bordering the reserve where drunken lawlessness was rife, and where the poachers, whom they knew by sight, lived. “Although it’s even dangerous for ordinary people to stop there,” they continued and, in a new burst of inspiration, told us about the stoning of tourists’ cars, muggings, and the abduction of a young student. “The militia spent three years looking for her, but what chance did they
have? She was taken off to an encampment and they didn’t let her go before she had a baby by them. After that what was the point? They are brigands, brigands straight out of the middle ages.” Our giants squinted at the fire, clearly gratified by this thought. For as long as there were brigands there would be a continuing need for their modest outpost.

Now, having bade farewell to our amiable hosts, we lay by the roadside with three legendary villages ahead of us: Koo, Kok-Pash and Balykchi, none less daunting than the others, none less infamous. We faced the prospect of passing through all three of them on foot, because we were far-out tourists who shunned cars, bicycles, and horses. “The best thing will be for you to get through Koo just as fast as you can in daylight. Under no circumstances must you be there in the dark. At nighttime it’s completely lawless and nobody is safe,” the rangers warned as they escorted us across the river.

We promised, although, in spite of all their stories, we had no real sense of danger. We promised, assuring them that under no circumstances would we talk to anyone, give anyone money for vodka, or buy anything even if we were offered cut-price gold and diamonds. “You’ll do best to have no contact at all with the locals,” the giants advised as we parted. “If you get in trouble, shout. We aren’t far away.” We pictured them spraying their enemies with bullets from the other bank of the Chulyshman, and found the fantasy hilarious. It instilled no sense of danger in us, just a happy, firm conviction that we were in paradise.

And who could deny it? The valley of the Chulyshman is a narrow canyon enclosing the river, heady with the warm, spicy winds of the steppe, suffused with reminiscences of the Scythians and pagan nostalgia. It is a sacred, secret place guarded since ancient times. There have always been battles for these bounteous lands, which saw the Christianization of the Siberian territories in the nineteenth century and civil war in the twentieth. On the cliff overhanging the road as it inches forward by the side of the river you can easily imagine Scythian archers in their high felt boots or Kaigorodov’s Altai partisans, equally ready to hurl rocks down on red or white troops, whoever was passing below. On the broad, bare earth of the steppe near the river are the remains of an early Iron Age irrigation system, and a little further, near the strait, the remains of an 18th-century Chinese military fortification. All their spirits, relics and memories live on in the stillness of the unpeopled wilderness of the Altaï’s most desolate valley. Three villages in a hundred kilometers of canyon. Three villages on a hundred kilometers of the steppe-side bank of a roaring, turbulent river carrying its waters to Lake Teletskoye.

This was not our first time in the Altaï, but we seemed never to have felt so
completely and absolutely happy as we did in this blessed land. After the city with its suffocating streets and flea markets, the metro and the exhaust fumes, we were certain that this was paradise and that those living in these three villages must be the happiest people in the world. We lay there, imagining our hike to Lake Teletskoye, the fabled beauty of Altyn-Kol, the Lake of Gold. When night fell the stars of the mountains would hang low over it and we would skinny-dip in its tingling cold water.

We did, however, know the Altai, and so could not entirely disbelieve our friendly giants, and pondered how to keep our promise not to come to the villages in the evening. If we went on now, we would make it to Koo just as night was falling. There were two solutions: we could stay here overnight and set off tomorrow morning, or hitch a lift and drive through the danger zone. Reckless tourists did, strangely enough, occasionally drive along the dusty clinker road which skirted the Chulyshman. Indeed, kind people had given us a lift to this spot where the Chulcha flowed into the Chulyshman. They had driven off and left us behind with our rangers. Now, deliriously happy with the sensation of at last being completely on our own in this corner of heaven, the last thing we wanted was to hear the noise of a car engine defiling the air. In the stillness, broken only by the distant roar of the river and the dry crepitation of the steppe's grasshoppers, it was so great just to lie and reiterate in every way possible our ritual incantation, "If you like, we could hitch a lift," "We could hitch a lift, if you like."

The denizens of paradise appeared without warning, leaning over and coming between us and the sun. Slava was instantly alert and sat up, but it took me some time to register that these were not clouds but people. When I heard a strange phrase above me, "Buy bear!", I opened my eyes.

Two young Altaians, blackened by prolonged alcohol abuse, were looking down at us the way extraterrestrials would probably look if they were ever to land on our sinful earth. Their faces registered puzzlement and tenderness. One, admittedly, also registered intense mistrust but the other smiled broadly at Slava as if they were buddies.

"Buy bear! You want bear? I sell cheap, only 2,000."

At this I sat up too and looked quickly around, expecting to see a brown bear tethered in the bushes. Instead some distance away stood a woman with a sack by her feet. She gave me a shy smile. I presumed the bear must be in the sack.

"What bear?" Slava asked meanwhile. "What for?"

"No, no, we don't want it," I gabbled, coming to my senses and remembering the counsel of the giants.

"We sell cheap," the Altaian with the smile repeated, but without much
enthusiasm. He sat down next to Slava, which was probably just as well because he could hardly stand. Ignoring me, he asked, “Where you come from, brother?”

“Barnaul,” Slava lied, subtracting 4,000 kilometers from the journey which had brought us here.

“Really?” The Altaian was rightly surprised. “I am Ermen. You have alcohol?”

“We don’t have anything,” I said, but the men did not look in my direction. It didn’t matter to them if somebody was cheering in the bushes.

“Today birthday of my friend. Of course we drink but never mind. Perhaps you have alcohol?”

The second man moved to the left of Slava, produced cigarettes, squatted down and poked him on the shoulder, evidently wondering if he had a light. Even to the untrained eye my highly educated Slava is unmistakably a graduate student, a future PhD, accustomed to address people rather formally, and genuinely surprised to meet anyone who has not read Homer as a child, Tolstoy as a boy, and The Life of Klim Samgin as an undergraduate. He smiled shortsightedly and shrugged as if to say, “I’m afraid I don’t smoke.”

“I go to your Barnaul, I go,” Ermen continued. Without looking he took out a cigarette lighter and obliged his friend. “Like I drive taxi. Mostly to Gorno-Altaisk, but sometimes come your way, sometimes. Don’t mind how we are. Today is birthday, it is sin not to drink, we celebrate. Pay our own money. This man Alik. He come back from Chechnya. See what he look like. He took their President Dudayev himself. You really, Alik?”

“Listen, brother, you give me one hundred rubles.” Alik turned unsteadily to Slava, whose eyes widened in surprise. “What for?” “What for!” For some reason this reply pleased Alik. “You hear, he say what for, eh?” He laughed to himself, slapped Ermen on the shoulder and himself almost fell over, then assumed a brutish expression and again looked at Slava. “Of course, you give us one hundred.”

All this time I had been simmering and now I burst out. “What are you doing here? Did we invite you? Go away, we don’t know you. And we have no intention of giving you anything!”

The Altaians jumped up as if they had been stung. Alik focused his eyes on me, but Ermen backed him off, prodding him in the chest, like a bullock.

“What are you thinking of, talking to them?” I hissed at Slava. “We were told not to have any contact with the local people!”

“They are cool, and peaceful. I have the situation under constant review. Anyway, didn’t you want to know yourself what kind of life people have here?”
Actually, no, not any more. I am not an ethnographer. All right, I am interested in the epic poetry of the Altai, its culture and history, but that does not mean I need to go on field trips or come into contact with the people of the region. I am not Maxim Gorky. Anyway, who says I don't know Altai people? I know them very well. I know modest, gentle Ayara who was two years behind me at university; and bouncy Chechek with her pirate eyes who translated the epics for me; and pensive Mergen, and Airat, and Emil; and graduates, musicians, actors, and singers. We came here to enjoy paradise and there is absolutely no need to find out how other people live here. I was in no mood to compromise. I needed none of them.

Our new friends had other ideas, and Slava with his humane attitudes and love of his fellow man was already feeling bad about my outburst. When they sought to make amends, he strode to meet them like a missionary encountering his flock.

“Do not mind, brother, we not mean anything,” Ermen began.

“No, of course, I understand,” Slava nodded.

“We just want to be friend,” Ermen continued. “We are not thief.”

“Of course, no problem, forget it.”

Within five minutes they were all sitting chatting together.

“You really walk here from Ulagan?” Ermen’s eyes widened.

“Well, not all the way, somebody gave us a lift, for about 10 kilometers.”

“Walk all from Ulagan, how about that!” Ermen said to Alik and started speaking Altai. They discussed this rapidly and turned back to Slava.

“And then you go to Teletskoye, yes? Oh, very lovely there! Very…” he searched for a word which seemed to be on the tip of his tongue, failed to find it, spat, and said again, “…lovely there. And where you go after?”

“We haven’t thought yet.”

“Only you know, you…” Ermen was suddenly anxious. “You walk through Koo also?”

“Well, yes, what else?”

“No, do not go, you must not do!” Ermen’s eyes were like saucers and he looked childishly frightened. “Bad people live there! Even we not go there, and really not you.”

I whistled to myself. The situation had changed: the Altaians had suddenly shifted from their location in the enemy camp, which for three days in succession had figured in scary stories by the campfire, to being on our side. This was getting interesting. What kind of place must Koo be if even people who lived here were afraid of it? Our new friends were excitedly discussing something.
“I tell you, brother,” Ermen thumped Slava on the shoulder when they had finished, almost knocking him over. “I drive you. I have truck, I drive you there.” (Slava and I exchanged glances: “If you like, we could hitch a lift!” the sly gleam in his eye said.) “But not today,” Ermen said. “You see today how I am. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I drive you there. Now we go visit my sister. She stand over there. That my sister. We go. You stay tonight with her and tomorrow I take truck and drive you there. And even not ask you money. We go.”

He and Alik stood up and drew Slava after them. “If you like, we could hitch a lift . . .” I hadn’t been expecting things to take this turn.

“Hey, where are you going? Slava?” I shouted at their retreating backs.

“Oh, who is that? Wife, yes?” Ermen asked, suddenly discovering me. They stopped and tried to focus on me. Slava just stood there and continued to smile that shortsighted and entirely disarming smile. When he smiles like that, no matter what our predicament at the time, I calm down and am reassured that everything is going to be fine.

“We bring wife with us,” Alik pronounced.

“No questions,” Ermen agreed. I flung my arms up.

“Slava, where is it we’re going?”

At this point I noticed he was furiously winking to me. He had a plan.

“The rucksacks!” I said delightedly. “We bring the rucksacks too.”

They picked them up and slung them on their shoulders, then linked arms with Slava and off they went. I rushed after them.

“How you tourists walk with the rucksacks,” Ermen said with a laugh, “I not understand. We go into taiga as we are, but you take house.”

He swayed under the unfamiliar weight and looked like a snail with an oversized shell.

“Friend, wait!” The woman with the sack caught up with me, heaved it across her shoulder, took me by the elbow and introduced herself. “My name is Masha, what’s yours?”

I relaxed. I was beginning to enjoy myself. Our cockeyed company wandered down the Chulyshman away from the road, across the steppe and the round boulders which were the remains of Scythian tumuli. Within ten minutes we were guffawing and enjoying ourselves as if we had known each other for a year, as if these were the very people we had come 4,000 kilometers by plane, bus, hitchhike, and on foot to visit. These simple, drunk people. “Don’t mind us being drunk,” Masha said, theatrically narrowing the already narrow eyes in her big
red face puffy with vodka. “We’re drinking on our own money, and anyway we’re celebrating. It would be a sin not to drink.”

What the people of the Altai consider a sin I did not know and right then preferred not to inquire. Despite my good general knowledge of their culture, I know little about their religion. They seem to be pagans who have been christened but are awaiting the coming of the White Burkhan, who have picked up a smattering of Mongolian lamaist Buddhism but thoroughly forgotten it all during the era of universal atheism. The devil only knows what Masha understood by sin. Anyway, why was she called Masha? Why not Ayana, or Karagys? It was a Soviet regulation that they had to have a Russian name in their passport, while their real name was used by their own people, like a return to the old times of paganism when people had secret names. Why did she still call herself Masha? Was it out of deference to the past, or to conceal her identity from us outsiders?

There was no time to think. We were already careering like rocks down a mountainside, or like startled highland goats down a slope, and where to we had no idea. Cheerful people, these dwellers in paradise, our new friends. They just laughed all the time. Ermen and Alik swapped our rucksacks between them as they went along. Ermen was the cheeriest of us all, laughing and making everybody else laugh.

I was even starting to like him. He had a pleasant open face, smiling and kind. Alik (if that was his name) looked worse, both less intelligent and more drunk. I heard Ermen call Alik his brother, but that could mean anything. Someone called a brother in Altai might be what we would call an uncle in Russian. I can never sort out their kinship terminology. The main thing this told me was that Alik was the younger.

Alik was taciturn, and only spoke up when Ermen started telling us about his time fighting in Chechnya.

“What, are you going back under contract?”

“Yep.”

“And will you fire an assault rifle?”

“Yep.”

“And a bazooka?”

“If they give, why not fire?”

“You know our infantry? They are the best. Can hit squirrel in eye at one hundred paces.” (This remark was addressed to Slava.)

“What, with a bazooka?” Slava asked in amazement. The friends froze for a moment, but then fell over each other to explain to this moronic, bespectacled towny what a bazooka was.
“Alik is my husband,” Masha suddenly whispered in my ear. I looked closely at her face: she was 35 at least, and Alik looked to be barely over 20. “Yes,” she nodded, happily closing her eyes tight as if sharing an intimate secret with me. “I have balaam,” she said, and mimicked rocking a baby. “Three,” she added. “Three children?” For some reason I was horrified. “Yes,” she narrowed her eyes again and smiled happily. We were falling behind. She kept tugging my elbow down and back so that it was impossible to keep up.

“Hey!” Ermen said turning toward us, but Masha waved her hand at him crossly. “What do you want? Go on! My friend and I are sharing secrets, can’t you see? Ermen is my brother. Younger,” Masha told me and carried on telling me her secrets, rolling her eyes and making vague intimate hints, all with that special strange accent, and half in Altai.

“What is your job?” she suddenly asked me and opened her hazel brown eyes. “Me, I work in Koo. At the school, I am a teacher. Of Russian.” I was dumbstruck, but she didn’t need me to say anything. “You really wanted to walk through Koo? You mustn’t, no. You absolutely mustn’t. Such people live there… Oh! Such people they are. We do not go there ourselves.”

“Well, where do you live? Not there?”

“No, of course not. It is thieves live there, not we. We have our house here, nearby. Not in Koo at all. Once a collective farm was there, my sister was chairwoman. But we are not there now. What are you thinking? Of course not.”

Oh, Altai, Altai! I had been hoping that just like this, arm in arm, we would dash through that village of ill omen and scamper all the way to Lake Teletskoye where the stars would be shining and the water would be chilly . . . but evening was already drawing in, the sun was falling behind the mountains, sizzling like a hot ember, into the distant Lake of Gold, and the waters of the Chulyshman were becoming dark and steely. The mountains surrounding us also seemed brooding and the air became heavy with the mixed aromas of cooling dust, wormwood and thyme.

The steppe ended. We entered a wood and began moving in the opposite direction from the road. We walked in a trackless straight line through the trees. The dirty feet of the Altaians marched confidently over the Chinese shale, while we stomped along in our mountain boots. In the dark we didn’t notice wandering through a shallow stream. Lone cows plodded somnolently among the trees and Masha, pointing to each of them, said, “That one is ours, this one too, and that one.” I looked forward to fresh milk and sleeping peacefully in a house, not a tent, with the prospect tomorrow of a speedy, relaxing drive to Altyn-Kol. We were in paradise after all, and shouldn’t forget it.
We emerged from the wood to find ourselves at the foot of a mountain. Right there was a yard, two houses behind a fence, one an ordinary Russian partitioned house and the other a traditional Altai conical ayil, a yurt made of logs, with six sides and a hole in the roof in place of a flue. I had slept once before in such a house and was pleased. It was so exotic with its unusual smells, the open fire, and the stars looking you in the face all night. It was a primeval delight. We really were in paradise.

We walked into the yard where a beat-up truck lurked behind the houses, only its nose poking out. The skeleton of a car was rusting by the fence. The door opened and two children appeared on the porch, a grubby boy and girl, naked and barefoot. Masha let go of my elbow and rushed at them like a she-wolf, hissing and shouting. She cuffed both of them and they disappeared howling into the house, from where a baby could be heard crying. Our new companions took the rucksacks off and also went inside. They seemed to have quite forgotten us as we stood there, rooted to the spot, but on the porch Ermen turned and said, “Come in.”

We climbed the stairs and went in reluctantly. An air of drunken poverty hung over the place and there was even a special smell, sour and dispiriting. There was almost no furniture or toys, or, come to that, locks on the door. I was taken aback by the broken glass in the windows, two of which were boarded up with plywood while two had polythene bags fixed over them. A warm draught made the bags fill out, rustling. I couldn’t help wondering how these people must live here in the winter when the temperature can fall below -40.

Masha was already sitting in front of the television breastfeeding the third infant and periodically quarreling with Alik. An Indian film was being shown, and this throwback to Soviet times astonished me. An inner door opened and Ermen came out, nodding to us to follow him outside. Photos of Indian film stars cut out of magazines were fixed to it with drawing pins. By now I didn’t know whether to be surprised.

We ran down from the porch and followed Ermen into the ayil. I was hoping that there at least we would find the ancient, authentic national spirit rather than this dehumanizing penury, but the ayil resembled a dirty summer kitchen. Ermen began laying a fire in the middle. There were old wooden cupboards round the walls and crockery lying about the place, an empty mesh bed and firewood. The dirt floor had been stamped down until it was as hard as asphalt. There really was a hole in the roof, and I looked up into it as if recognizing a dear friend, but my depressed, uneasy feeling did not pass.

Ermen hung a grimy pot over the fire and poured water in. Masha and Alik...
appeared and the little boy, now clothed, came in with them. His mother gave him a packet of instant Chinese noodles and a bowl and he began pulling them out. We eat them when we are hiking only in dire emergencies. He opened the packaging with his teeth and poured the contents into the bowl.

The girl arrived wearing knickers but still barefoot. She sat down beside her brother and joined in the game with the noodles. I inspected her with interest. She was swarthy. Her tangled hair, bleached by the sun, was practically white and cut in clumps. She looked like Mowgli. There was something pristine and savage about her. Her black eyes flashed in our direction. The Altaians talked among themselves, completely heedless of us.

The water boiled. Masha poured it into the piala bowls, let the teabags infuse, added milk and tolkhana, coarse barley flour, and served us the national Altai tea. We nodded gratefully. Then Masha noticed the girl was barefoot, fell upon her with a yell and gave her a smack. The little girl rushed to the door, tripped and hit her head on the threshold. There was much shouting and wailing, Masha picked her up and slapped and comforted her. The boy meanwhile was trying to lift the enormous bowl and shake the macaroni out into the pot. He dropped it and some was spilt. All three yelled at him.

Everybody calmed down eventually, and we sat there stunned and sipped the hot broth queasily. Alik and Ermen began talking Altay, and Ermen clearly did not like what Alik was suggesting. Masha was strongly opposed too, but Alik quickly shut her up. He moved away from them, sat down directly opposite us and was about to say something when Ermen pulled himself together and beat him to it. “Slava, brother, you buy bear!” he shouted and there was desperation in his eyes. We stirred but before we could say anything Ermen said no less desperately to Masha, “Show bear!”

She darted over to the corner, retrieved the sack which had accompanied us all evening, and shook out and spread on the floor in front of us the skin of a small bear, really only a cub. It smelt of something sour and I felt sick.

“Buy bear! We sell very cheap.”

“We don’t want your bear,” my Slava said, his voice unexpectedly stern. I even briefly turned to him. His expression was stony. He felt he was in the camp of the enemy and was prepared to fight. We will fight to the last, his suddenly implacable eyes said. I understood that and so did the Altaians.

They rolled the skin up without more ado and went back to talking among themselves. I could see that Ermen was trying desperately to save the situation. We were guests. We were sitting in their ayil, at their hearth, drinking their talkhanda chai, and they must not offend us. No matter how undermined these
people's traditions might be, the law of hospitality flowed in their veins. It was present in Ermen and Masha, who was reclining in her chair and looking like the suffering heroine of a Greek tragedy. It had been completely eradicated in Alik. Their wrangling did not last long. Alik gave us a wolfish look and roared like a terrified animal, “Brother, you give one hundred rubles!”

At this I suddenly felt unbearably sorry for all of them. I saw my Slava lean forward ready for battle but held him back, saying, “Perhaps you’ve done enough?”

My voice was quiet but it was heard. It was heard in particular by Alik and he instinctively turned to me, as desperate as a drowning man, his voice shaking. He was not happy.

“Sister, give one hundred rubles. For beer. We don’t need more. And tomorrow we drive you.”

Defeated, Ermen could only nod, “Yep, we will drive you. Yep.” What are you going to drive us in? I wondered, but said nothing.

“Only don’t drink vodka,” I said in a martyred voice and put one hundred rubles in his hand. Alik was jubilant. He could not sit still and leapt to his feet.

“Nowhere get vodka in this time!”

He was suddenly strong and cheerful and he ran out of the ayil.

“We, you know... we really not... we not you know... we come back very soon, and—” Ermen mumbled in total confusion and ran out after him.

“Let’s go and sleep in the house,” Masha said dully. She was terribly embarrassed and it was easy for us to assure her that the ayil was everything we could possibly dream of, and that we would sleep here in our sleeping bags.

When she left, taking her modest supper, we closed the door and barred it with a log. It became dark. There was little light from the dying hearth. We could hear the men out at the truck, trying to get it going, swinging the starting handle. It finally started. Doors were slammed and it drove throbbing and rattling past the ayil. Someone opened the gate and did not bother to close it. The sound of the engine became more distant and then was completely lost in the woods and the darkness. Everything was dark and still.

Five minutes later, without a word, we quickly started gathering up our belongings. We helped each other on with the rucksacks and peeped out the door. The yard was empty, the darkness blinding. Steering clear of patches of light from the windows in the house, we crossed the yard and rushed from this place. Turning back in the woods to look at the house, I saw the flickering of the television inside the empty eye sockets of the windows and heard Indian music, merry and bright. We fled.
We ran easily in spite of the rucksacks, our legs carrying us of their own accord. We did not think about the direction, just wanting to get as far away as possible. Instinct drew us back the way we had come. Ahead was fearsome Koo while back there were our amiable giants, if on the other bank of the Chulyshman, but with rifles with telescopic sights. We ran in confusion but were not ashamed. We did not fear these people, but we found it intolerable to inhabit their hapless, wrecked, poverty-stricken world, its penury all the more disfiguring in contrast with the beauty of the blessed and promised land of Altay.

We again crossed the stream, descended into the canyon, crossed the road and rushed on toward the river bank. We crossed the steppe, jumping the ancient ditches of the irrigation system, the drumming of our boots sacrilegiously disturbing the repose of the Scythian warriors in their forgotten graves, and ran and ran back to our place where it had been so wonderful and peaceful to sunbathe and relax after wading the river.

From a distance we saw a campfire at our site and tents as dark as boulders. A Jeep crouched by the bushes. Slowing down, we crept stealthily toward the camp. “Hey!” someone shouted at us, rising from the campfire. “Who are you?”

It was a relief to hear a sober voice. I felt like bursting into tears, like blurring out everything there and then, but instead I heard Slava’s voice, steady and even cold. “We are tourists. May we pitch our tent with yours for the night?”

“Go ahead,” the man said, instantly losing interest in us.

“Slava, what on earth are we going to do tomorrow?” I asked when we were already in the tent. We seemed to be surrounded. The world had collapsed and in the darkness of the night I could make no sense of its fragments.

“Sleep,” my courageous Slava replied severely.

We were awakened by a familiar phrase and a familiar voice, “Buy bear, brother.” Ermen was going round the tents. I was afraid to move and only blinked out of the sleeping bag. Slava signaled me to keep quiet. Our luckless salesman was soon sent on his way, the familiar truck started up and drove off. Only then did we stick our heads out of the tent.

“Perhaps we should hitch a lift?” I asked, looking wistfully at the off-roader. Slava was more decisive and initiated negotiations, but to no effect. They had no spare seats, they had too many people already, and they were going in the opposite direction. We were treated to tea with condensed milk. “Get ready,” Slava said then. “We have fifty kilometers to cover today.”

Half an hour later our tent was down, the rucksacks packed, and we were
hiking along the road in the direction from which we had been running yesterday. The tourists looked at us as if we were a kopek short of a ruble. I felt I was going to war.

We walked obdurately and in silence, trying to keep a little way off the road. We listened out for the sound of a car engine and were ready to jump into the bushes. We were nervous and did not notice passing the house of our companions of yesterday.

We entered the village of Koo in full accordance with the precepts of our giants: in the morning and ready for battle. Nobody noticed us. Nobody appeared outside, unless you count the dogs and calves between the squalid, neglected houses. I was afraid of looking at their windows, fearing that none of them would have glass. I was afraid to look around feeling that the same sour, drink-sodden poverty was watching us from all sides.

Our first rest stop was a few kilometers beyond the village. We drank the water of the Chulyshman, scooping it from the waves with mugs, and our joyless break was like a wake for our personal prehistoric paradise.

A pair of handsome gray cranes accompanied us with their clanging, and landed well away from us when we stopped, slightly further downstream. They strutted and pecked at something in the mud by the bank. Raising their heads, they looked sideways at us with their kind, wise eyes, as if they understood everything.

"Will we reach Teletskoye by evening?"

"Probably, we'll get there."

That was the way we spoke now, and the prospect of two more villages of alcoholics threw a shadow over our route. We were not afraid, only everything seemed odd and unclear. I tried to cheer Slava up by picturing us running down to Lake Teletskoye in the night, with the stars twinkling above us, reflected in its dark enigmatic waters. We would throw off our clothes and bathe naked, scooping up the cold starry ripples. It was a lie, as both of us knew. Paradise was yesterday, and equanimity and blessed ignorance were yesterday. Today all we had to look forward to was the kilometers we had to cover.

"What do you think? Perhaps, if we see someone, we could hitch a lift?" I suggested as a last resort.

"Let's go," my strict Slava replied.

We pulled on the rucksacks and set off, not yet knowing what it feels like to cover 50 kilometers on foot in one day.
ALEXEI LUKYANOV (born 1976, Bryansk) is an intriguing representative of the new generation of fantasy writers. Since his literary debut in 2000, he has been widely published in leading literary magazines and book series. His innovative writing, sharp satire, and outstanding imagination have been recognized by the Pushkin Prize, awarded in 2006 for his short story *The Petrograd Savior*, and the Bronze Snail Award, for his novella *Deep Drilling* in 2010.
I'm just a grade-three mechanic: run, fetch, give a hand, pull on your dick, get lost . . . The rest of the crew is above grade four, and the foreman is way up there at grade six and wouldn't raise a finger to help any of us lowly suckers. Igor and Vova are welders with a heavy workload who do work on the side on top of it. Oskar Kamerlocher turns a lathe and is a real aristo, and I have no idea what Mitya and Kolya do. They're mechanics, too, but they're experienced. They even know how to work on a machine bench.

Lekha is our smithy. He forges sledgehammers and crowbars for railroad workers, and then he makes a bunch of other stuff, like iron fences to go around cemetery plots, and skivs out of valves, and other odds and ends.

In a word, we have a good crew at the factory—a warm and friendly atmosphere—despite the fact that the head of our shop is a muff-faced prick. As Oskar says, the more they kick our butts, the stronger we get. Especially since all of us could give a flying crap about the boss.

One day Mitya came to work holding his cheek: his tooth was killing him. It was his last tooth, the very last one. Even worse, it was his wisdom tooth, which is hard to pull out. And besides, Mitya was scared. The quacks in our dental clinic are something else—they'll break the tooth and then you'll really be miserable.

But Oskar had an idea. “Listen,” he said, “let's ask Lekha. He's got strong fingers and powerful hands. He'll give it a pull and alles bitchinstuk.” He always speaks German, it being his native language and all.

“Yeah, bitchinstuk schwein,” Lekha nodded. He and Oskar are pals.

“You pricks,” Mitya said, offended.
Everyone laughed. If Lekha went for your tooth, he’d pull it out along with your skull. Once when he was kidding around, he whacked me on the back of the head, and ever since that spot is going bald.

Joking aside, Mitya was in agony and couldn’t take it much longer. He asked Muff-face if one of us could take him to the dentist, since he was too scared to go by himself. They sent me.

We went to the clinic. The old bat at the front desk was handing out chits for regular tooth extraction, but when our turn came, she said, “The chits are gone. I don’t have any more.”

Mitya wheedled her every which way, going on about how he was dying and all the rest. But the cow wouldn’t budge. “Pay for it. If you pay for it, we’ll do it.”

But Mitya is a cheapskate. He can’t stand to spend money. Even though he’s a grade five mechanic and rakes in twice what I do, he’d rather die than fork over even a kopek. He even hoards the scrap metal for sale and won’t share it with anyone. I told him, “That’s a lousy thing to do, skip work and make me look bad. Pay up or I’ll say you hit on me in the showers.”

No one wants people to think badly of them. So we head up to the private dentist.

When we got up to the third floor, there was a door on the right with a sign: “Private Dentistry.” That’s like a license to rob us blind. Next to it was another sign: “NT services—no wait.”

I asked Mitya, “What’s NT? No tax? No trauma?” He said, “No titties.” But I could see he was curious because he started trying out words: neuro-technology, nerve tablets, no tubs, new tongs. Then he gave up, took out his cell and called Igor at work, maybe he’d know. Igor didn’t know, but said he’d ask Lekha since he went to college for a couple of years. Five minutes later he called back and said that NT means “nanotechnology.”

I didn’t get it. “What’s that, onano-technology?”

“Onano-technology—that’s your specialty, you wanker,” Igor said. “It means they implant a little sucker into your body, like a little robot, and it cures you from inside. It’s like, you know, a Kremlin pill.”

Mitya got scared. “How do they implant it? Do they cut you open?”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “They implant it orally-genitally.”

Igor called me a fag and said next time he’d pour vodka into me rectally, and that he wasn’t going to spend any more of his cell phone minutes on this kind of shite with an “e,” pardon my French. It was nice talking to him.

Mitya took off his jacket, cap and boots and went in through the NT door.
I stood for a while by the door and then thought maybe he’d be in there for an hour. I figured I’d done my duty and could go back to work.

On the way back I ran into Vitaly Goralik, our blast furnace worker. “How about some vodka?” he said. I said I couldn’t, I’d taken Mitya to the clinic and now had to go back or the Prick would chew me out. Vitaly didn’t give a flying crap. “He can suck my dick. So he kicks your butt, what’s he going to say? Come on, I’ll pour you a round and tomorrow Mitya will cover for you.”

So we went. We were sitting there having a drink when Goralik asks why the hell I went with Mitya. I told him what happened and about NT, too. “The crap they think up.”

Vitaly got all offended. “You dickhead, what do you know about high technology? I implanted an erector, it even plays mood music, and now I can do half the town.”

I didn’t get it. “Implanted what? A detector?”

“You ignorant prick. Erector. So your johnnie stays hard.”

“You mean it doesn’t get hard at all?”

“Ah, suck a duck,” Vitaly said, getting angry. “You’re used to slam-bam and out the door. But if you give a woman a good time, she won’t want to crawl out from under you.”

I looked down at my potbelly and said, “I’d crush her.”

There was definitely a failure of communication here. We swore at each other and went our separate ways. Then I remembered that Goralik was impotent. And he’s only five years older than me, he just turned thirty in November.

I went home. On the way I bought a bottle of vodka, sucked it down, and forgot about everything.

I woke up the next morning with a splitting headache. In the kitchen, my mother rattled the dishes without saying a word. She was mad. It looked like I went after her the night before when I was drunk. Well, I wanted to eat something so I had to go in. I looked and saw breakfast on the table, a glass of kefir and a pill for my headache.

I mumbled hello so that she wouldn’t notice me, threw the pill down my trap, washed it down with kefir, and headed for the door. In the entryway my mother pushed me up against the wall and said, “So, Andrusha, how long am I going to have to put up with your drunken shenanigans?”

I grunted something—I don’t even remember what—and then she went in for the kill.
“Listen up,” she said. “I’m sick of this. So I bought a sobriety microchip. I hope it will do you some good.”

“What?” My headache was gone.

“Nothing. Go on, you’ll be late for work.”

And she shoved me out the door.

I stood for a bit and then went off to work. But I kept thinking that I had missed something important. And on top of it I was shitting bricks. I hadn’t come back to work after lunch the day before and Muff-face would run me through with an iron cross.

But I was in luck. After lunch the Prick had taken off on some business trip and so no one noticed my absence. Well, the foreman gave me hell, but then he and Vova got called out on a burst pipe—a pipeline broke at the Vostok plant—and life took a turn for the better. Mitya was real pleased; his tooth didn’t hurt. In fact, it was growing back.

We decided to drink to science. I was sent off to sell scrap metal and use the haul to buy vodka, some beer, and something to eat.

I had enough copper scrap for three bottles of vodka, two big bottles of beer and a half kilo of smoked sardines. I did it all on my lunch break. Igor and Oskar topped it up with a couple of bottles of vodka they got for helping the supply chief Yura move furniture to his dorm room. So considering that the smithy doesn’t drink and Mitya and the foreman only drink beer, we had a bottle of vodka a head.

We were sitting there shooting the shite with an “e.” The boss was out, there wasn’t any work, and we had vodka.

I said, “Goralik’s impotent.”

Everyone lit into me.

“What, he didn’t do you?”

“He should have tried at least.”

“You feel bad about that?”

I said, “Knock it off, you homos. He said that he had one of those nano-suckers like Mitya has, only his is in his prong. It’s got a vibrator. His dick’s hard and life’s a dream.”

That had them on the floor. We put away a shot, then another, and then another . . . But what was this crap? I was drinking and drinking and nothing was happening. I mean, I could taste it—vile stuff—but it didn’t do anything to me. Igor and Oskar were red-faced and happy. They poured another round, for me, too.

I said, “Pour me a full glass.”
Igor said, “Are you friggin’ nuts? We already put away a whole bottle. Who’s going to carry you home?”

“You can’t even smell the booze on my breath.”

“Suck my dick. Have Lekha smell your breath.”

Lekha looked at me.

“Igor, he’s not drunk.”

“What kind of crap are you peddling?” Igor said. “Mitya, smell his breath.”

Mitya got all offended.

“What the hell do you take me for, a bloodhound? Dickheads.”

But he sniffed anyway. He couldn’t believe it.

“It’s true. You can’t smell a thing.”

Oskar was shocked. “What the friggin’ . . . Everyone saw you toss down a whole bottle.”

And then I remembered what my mother had said to me that morning.

I said, “Boys, I’m screwed. I’m on the wagon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Instead of an aspirin my mother gave me some nanosucker to eat—a sobriety pill.”

That smithy prick laughed like hell. “What a kicker. Andrusha had a microchip implanted. I told you to move out and live on your own. This is what you get for being dependent on your mommy. You drink vodka and don’t get tanked.”

“What’d you say? They stuck a robot in you?” Mitya was catching on.

“Orally?”

At first Igor didn’t get it. And then when he caught on, he got pissed. “You friggin’ ape. We wasted a whole bottle of vodka on you.”

“That wasn’t right, Andrusha,” the lathe turner said. “That’s not friendly like.”

“It’s not my friggin’ fault,” I said, getting mad. “She slipped it to me on the sly and I didn’t even know it.”

Everyone thought about this.

“All right, then,” Oskar said. “Put your glass down. No sense wasting the good stuff.”

My jaw dropped—literally. Then I stood up and said, “Suck my dick.” And I left.

That was just the beginning. Everywhere you looked there were ads for NT services. Lena, who works in the laundry, came to work after her medical
exam and said that there was a notice in the VD clinic about treatment by microchip.

“How’s it work?” asked Kolya Schtoltz.

“The device probably looks like skin crabs,” Lekha speculated.

“Mechanical crabs?”

“You’re a dickhead, Kolya. Nanotechnology is opening doors in medicine—diagnosis, treatment, and all that stuff. All you can think is crabs. Look at Mitya over there. Three teeth have grown in. And Andrusha isn’t drinking. ’Course, they’re still dickheads.”

“What was that?” Mitya half-rose from his bench.

“Nah, you’re not a dickhead. Take it easy. You’re just a little bit on the dim side.”

Mitya’s teeth really were coming back in. He even had some new ones. On the other hand, he started to get headaches, run a temperature and have dizzy spells. But shite, with an “e,” no one said life was a picnic. And this way he didn’t have to get dentures.

Television and the press were all filled with how nanotechnology would lead to the victory of communism, or capitalism, or maybe both. They kept pounding it into our heads about those erector things, because of the problems with the birth rate these days and all that stuff.

True, it turned out that not everything small was NT. Mitya did have some kind of nanosucker, like a lot of little robots that you could barely see under a microscope. I just had a microchip. But our people are pretty backward and started to call everything “nanotechnology.”

Everything was pretty much okay, but it still didn’t sit well with me. Well, first of all and most importantly, I couldn’t drink. Once I tried drinking a whole liter of vodka. I bought the best stuff and sucked it down right out of the bottle, but nothing happened. Lekha said that the microchip in my body turned the vodka into carbohydrates and water. Life lost all its meaning. I stopped talking to my mother and went to live in the dorm. I even figured that if the Kremlin pill wouldn’t come out, I’d get married. That little sucker was really stuck in there.

And secondly, a nasty rumor started going around that the Americans were using those microchips for mind control. Igor sneered that America had no other problems but to control the minds of Kolya Schtoltz and our muff-faced prick of a boss. The Prick, by the way, also implanted some little sucker into his ear instead of a cell phone. I just couldn’t figure out how he dialed. Did he press on his belly button or what?
Then we heard that our office bought a bunch of chips for the whole crew, and that in other factories NT-vaccines were mandatory. Lekha grimly predicted that they’d stick a little sucker in your ass right up to the glands and we’d drink tea and even go to the john by a signal from Space Control. I didn’t get the last bit and asked him what face control he was talking about. He said, “The Center for Space Control,” and I got it: we were going to fly, like in the army.

I was right. They issued a directive saying that in order to increase productivity and improve discipline we all were going to be implanted with an electronic module that would control our work morale.

“In other words,” Muff-faced Prick hissed, “from now on you won’t even want to skip work. You’ll come to work every day like you’re going on vacation. You’re going to work without smoke breaks, and output is going to go way up.”

“How about our pay?” Mitya asked. “Will that go up, too?”

“What the hell do you need pay for?” the Prick snorted. “You don’t even work off what you get now.”

Of course everybody was in an uproar. What was this crap? What if we didn’t want to become zombies? Muff-face said there’s always a waiting line outside the gates and no one is indispensable. Then the foreman jumped up and announced that he didn’t need this crap, that he’d been busting his gut for forty years without some module thingie, and they could all suck their dicks. But Muff-face trumped him. “You’re about ready to retire, aren’t you?” The foreman stuck his tongue between his legs.

Lekha the smithy got on the Internet and found some site where it said that this was a state program, a new version of serfdom. It was easier to do mindcontrol through these chips. They’d mess up people’s brains for three or four generations and then they wouldn’t even have to brainwash us through TV. They’d just do it through that module in the brain.

Oskar said philosophically, “An empty mind is a beautiful thing.”

They won’t even have to pound anything into your head. They’ll just say, “Life’s good,” and everyone will be happy.

They had us coming and going.

Just when we thought things couldn’t get worse, they did. That nanosucker in Mitya didn’t restore his teeth out of nothing. It made them from the calcium in his body, from his bones, in other words. And from the closest bone—his skull. So that motherfriggin’ medical sucker used up half of his skull. His teeth turned out great, no crap, but Mitya’s head was as soft as a boiled beet.

My module started screwing up, too. I stopped drinking vodka and every other kind of alcohol, but it started working on the food I ate before I could di-
gest it. It was like programmed to work on alcohol, but there wasn’t any. It had to get energy somewhere. By the time the presidential elections came around, my belly was flat, my skin was hanging off my bones, and I could barely walk. When my mother came over to make up, she started wailing as soon as she saw me. I told her, “Get me an operation to take out that sucker or I’ll croak.”

She wailed, “I can’t. They forbid taking out an implanted microchip. They say it can kill you.”

I said, “But the chip is killing me. What can we do?”

My mother didn’t know.

The boys came to my rescue. They bought a load of food, three cases of vodka and about 12 vials of pure grain alcohol. I began to pour the grain alcohol down my throat onto the module and tore into the food. I ate for an hour, then another, and then another and I felt like maybe I was getting full. The food made me light-headed and sleepy.

When I woke up, I felt like I’d gotten some of my strength back, but I couldn’t move my arms or legs. My body was pleasantly weak. I felt like I was dying. I didn’t panic, which I was proud of. But I was ravenously hungry.

Just then the door flew open and the boys hauled in—you’ll never believe it—a whole roasted pig. I fell on it and started to eat, but before I’d even gotten to the legs, I threw up. That startled the boys so much that they puked, too, although less than me. There was something moving in my puke. I looked closer. That son of a ditchdigger was the size of a pill, but it was crawling around and buzzing. Lekha the smithy grabbed his sledgehammer and pounded it with all his might. The module hiccuped and died. Lekha picked it up, wiped it on his apron, and said, “There isn’t any high technology in the world that you can’t fix with a crowbar and sledgehammer.”

“Golden words,” said the lathe operator.

What are friends for?

It was vaccination day. By that time I’d gotten back on my feet. I even had my potbelly back, I’d moved back in with my mother, and of course I was drinking vodka again. I blacked out how much I drank after that Kremlin pill. But they told me I even called the boss a muff-faced prick to his face.

We all filed into the factory doctor’s office, where there was a line of men with automatics slung over their shoulders. The doc kept glancing at them apprehensively.

She injected something in our veins and then gave everyone a kind of lozenge with tentacles.
“Swallow it.”

Everyone swore, but swallowed. What the shite, with an “e,” were we supposed to do? At least we took it by ourselves, and by mouth. One of the guys, they said, had it implanted rectally, those sons of bitches.

We all went back to the shop silently, without any joking. What were we going to joke about when we’d just volunteered to become slaves? The Prick asked, “Did you all get implanted?”

We all replied, “Go suck your dick, you muff-faced prick.”

That shook him up. And he actually left.

Lekha said, “All of you, go and throw up. Get moving, you dickheads. And don’t forget to wash that sucker or I won’t touch it.”

I didn’t get it. I asked the lather, “Why the frick are we supposed to wash the little sucker? What’s he going to do, masturbate with it? And why are we supposed to throw up?”

“Do what I do,” Oskar said, sticking two fingers down his throat. That did it. He puked so much that I didn’t have to stick my fingers anywhere, it all came up. Mitya committed sacrilege—he got sick on his workbench.

We picked our modules out of the puke, washed them under the tap, and all trooped back together to bring them to the smithy. Lekha had the furnace stoked up. His tongs, hammers and chisels were at the ready. He gathered up all of our microchips into his huge paw and tossed them into the furnace.

Oskar looked defiant. “I don’t know what you call this in Russian, but in the language of Goethe and Rammstein, it’s bitchinstuk zwanzig.”

It really was incredible. The smithy pulled the first microchip out of the furnace, threw it on the anvil, and starting pounding it—this way and that way and standing up and lying down and from the side. Then he plunged it into oil to temper it, cooled it in water, and swallowed it down.

“The smithy’s lost it,” I said.

“What the frick are you saying, moron?” Lekha shouted. “I can forge a flea—you think I can’t unbend some friggin’ module?”

He worked over all our chips. In a word, he fixed them.

And I’ll tell you this—the friggin’ state program was a bust. Either the modules were defective, or maybe no one can change the way we think. Now it’s like you want to work more, but when you realize that you don’t get paid more for working more, you think, Go suck my dick.
IGOR SAVELYEV (born 1983, Ufa) is a talented young author acclaimed for his attention to detail and distinctive satirical style. He was the Debut prizewinner in 2004 for Pale City, an engagingly conversational novella about hitchhiking, and in 2008 for his innovative play Portwein, Cobain, and Tied Hands, co-authored with Andrei Yurtayev.
In the St. George Hall of the Great Kremlin Palace, way back in the 1970s (those were the days!), she had received a prestigious award from “dear Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev” himself, along with one of the lingering kisses that were his trademark. “She” was the distinguished Soviet writer Vera Mikhailovna Ilm. Now, twenty years later, she was no longer “distinguished,” merely old. In the shabby offices of the district housing authority one meddlesome secretary yelled to another through the wall, “Hey, Lyuda, can you check if people who’ve received a State prize are entitled to any benefits?” She glanced at Vera Mikhailovna. “There’s a . . . lady here who wants to know.”

A deliberate pause before “lady.” The little madam had probably been about to call her an “old bag,” or something worse. She was looking at her with such disdain. “Fascist!” thought Vera Mikhailovna. Jerking her chin up, she turned round and walked out.

“What on earth was I thinking, barging in there and humiliating myself by asking for handouts?” she muttered indignantly to herself. Her mouth felt dry and unbearably bitter again, and there was a stabbing pain in her chest. She was eighty years old. “It’s nothing serious, though,” she thought. “I’ll live. Just to spite you all…”

Over the course of her long life Vera Mikhailovna had written a number of worthy, instructive books. It was reputed that Maxim Gorky himself may even have leafed through some of her earlier works. After her epic novel The Pioneers was published in the 1960s, she’d had a number of youth groups named after her. They’d even tied a Young Pioneer’s red scarf around her not-so-young neck. Pioneers, brave and patriotic, they’d all worshipped her. But now not a living soul cared about her. No one offered to help carry her heavy shopping bags, or
to sweep the cobwebs from the high ceilings of her “Stalinist” apartment, as they were called nowadays.

Yes, Vera Mikhailovna lived alone. There was nothing particularly unusual about that, such was the fate of many Soviet (ex) prima donnas. But in their case it was largely due to a succession of abortions and divorces, side-effects of the eternal struggle for success, whereas Vera Mikhailovna . . . To cut a long story short, she’d never met the right person. She’d never had time for a private life. They’d dedicated their lives to the cause: writing books, building socialism. For all the good it had done.

Socialism was a thing of the past. These days it was getting harder and harder to find the energy to get out of bed in the morning, and she struggled to lift the heavy kettle with her right hand. She was certainly feeling her age.

But Vera Mikhailovna wasn’t one to complain. Old habits die hard, and her life still revolved around work. Her daily outings were all that she lived for. Every day, after lunch, she would check that the gas and the water were off and that the windows were all shut. Then she would get dressed and walk over to the mirror, where she would brusquely apply her lipstick. She would put a ball-point pen and a notebook into her handbag, although she never actually seemed to use them when she got there. (The notebook was the old-fashioned kind issued to delegates; this one had “XXVII Congress” printed on the cover in gold letters.) But over and above all these little rituals the period prior to her departure was characterized by an intensity of focus, a rush of energy and something akin to adrenaline surging through her old veins. She was like a tiger preparing to pounce. Once her preparations were complete, Vera Mikhailovna would lock the door behind her and set off. You’ll be surprised to hear where she was going, after all that fussing and fretting. The market! Yes, an ordinary street market, which had sprung up three blocks away.

Oh, the chaos of those street markets in the 1990s! The ubiquitous flattened cardboard boxes, reduced to a sodden mush and squelching underfoot. Hawkers selling fruit, household cleaning products, Chinese dusters . . . All of it soaking wet, frozen and forlorn. And so many old people! Some selling, others buying, standing in queues or shuffling round in a big circle, like inmates in a labour camp. Jams, pickles, a few pathetic flowers in a jar. Anything to avoid holding out an empty, upturned palm. And there would always be some old dear wearing the most incongruous pair of brightly colored, synthetic Chinese trainers. There was something farcical about it all.

Vera Mikhailovna was in her element there. No trace of her former arrogance remained. She would spend hours wandering around the market, talking
to the sellers, to the buyers, to anyone and everyone. She bargained and she queued. She argued and she agreed. She laughed and she cried. Muttering to herself, trying not to miss a single word, she would memorize everything that she heard: poignant tales of everyday hardships, grievances, gossip, lines from folk songs, jokes and hate-filled tirades about the “democrap” spewed by the enemy government. As far as Vera Mikhailovna was concerned, the Soviet nation was alive and kicking, it had simply gone underground, like an enormous partisan detachment operating throughout the whole of Russia, and she was writing a book about it. A documentary account. A chronicle of its sufferings, its sorrows and—in spite of everything—its joys. Nothing like the novels she used to write, with their conventional format and narrative plots. As part of an adult education course at the Literary Institute, Vera Mikhailovna had read, or rather mastered, a colossal tome—a collection of German folklore from the sixteenth century entitled *The People’s Book of Doctor Faust*. It contained hundreds of folk tales and historical details. And now she was working on something similar. Every evening, when she came home from the market, she transferred everything she had heard into a large journal. It was going to be her Chronicle. Her *People’s Book*—yes, that was a good name for it! The culmination of her creative odyssey.

The following day saw Vera Mikhailovna back at the market, getting caught up in the maelstrom, feeling like a part of the whole. A couple of policemen in uniform appeared and began patrolling the rows of stalls at a leisurely pace. There was something unpleasantly authoritative about the way they were walking. “We’re in charge here!” was the message. “We could send you all packing with a wave of our truncheons, if we felt like it. Or maybe we’ll settle for a share of your profits...” Vera Mikhailovna (author of the epic novel *The Policemen*), like all the other old women at the market, was filled with a passionate hatred. Just look at them, strutting about like they own the place! Trying to intimidate us. Gestapo bullies. How nice, how simple it must be to live like that, dividing the world into black and white.

They approached one ample old woman who was arranging cans of insecticide on a cardboard box. Lots of them.

“How much are you charging?”

“Eleven roubles.”

“How come you have so many?”

“They give them to us at the factory, instead of wages. They’re probably trying to kill us all off, the evil bastards! They’re the ones who need exterminating!”

“Here, here!” the others chimed in.
Moments later, Vera Mikhailovna was delighted to witness the following scene, which took place at a stall set with an array of bottles, jars and boxes containing every conceivable variety of household cleaning products.

Everything was cold and wet. The girl behind the counter was wearing so much makeup it looked like war paint. Effectively, it was.

A wizened old woman in a black coat approached the counter and jabbed a finger at one of the bars of soap. Addressing the seller calmly and matter-of-factly, she remarked, “And it’s five roubles here too. To hell with you!”

The girl was stunned. Her mouth fell open rather unattractively, and she stared at the old woman’s back as she walked away. Everyone within earshot was shocked too. A large woman in a ludicrous bright yellow quilted coat called after the old woman, “Why have a go at her? It’s not her fault!”

Vera Mikhailovna was overjoyed. Her People’s Book was writing itself!

She always walked home the long way, across the square and around the tram ring. Vera Mikhailovna had never been prone to daydreaming or indecision, preferring to get on with things rather than endlessly procrastinating, so it must have been strange for her to have so much time alone with her thoughts. What did she think about as she walked? She didn’t really know. And this September was turning out to be particularly cold and wet.

This time she just walked, without thinking about anything except what she would do when she got home. She would light the gas under the kettle, and the apartment would fill with warmth. She would put on her favorite terry-toweling dressing gown. She would walk over to the table and switch on her enormous old lamp with its green glass shade. She would open her journal and fill another page with writing. It would be warm and comfortable, and everything would be right with the world.

In anticipation of a hot cup of tea, her dressing gown and her warm dog-hair socks she decided to take her time, risking frostbite, even prolonging her walk by taking additional detours through courtyards. Her soul was at peace. Even though she hadn’t had anything published since 1986, or been invited to talk at a school since 1990. On that occasion, in a quavering voice, she had read the children one of her old stories, in which a Young Pioneer heroically met his end in a burning cornfield.

“You mean . . . his pants caught fire?” asked one particular smart aleck, with feigned innocence. The little brat had been sent to the headmaster, of course, but it had ruined her evening. She hadn’t been to another school since. Not that she’d been overwhelmed with invitations. Her books were of no interest to anyone anymore. Neither was she.
The lift was out of order, as usual, so Vera Mikhailovna had to walk up the stairs, panting and stopping after every few steps to catch her breath. There were two people on the landing: a man holding a bunch of flowers and her neighbor, a formidable old woman whose late husband had worked at the Moscow City Committee. They had always irritated Vera Mikhailovna, this woman and her husband. On 9th August 1963, a story on page two of Pravda had referred to her as a “distinguished Soviet writer”; later that day she’d answered her doorbell to find the two of them standing there, all dressed up in their Sunday best. They’d invited her to their apartment for a cup of tea, so that they could get to know one another better, even though they’d lived on the same floor for ten years. “You’re part of our circle now!” It was so long ago that Vera Mikhailovna couldn’t remember whether the City Committee man had actually said this, or whether it had merely been written all over his beaming face.

“Here’s our Vera Mikhailovna,” gushed her neighbor. “Back from the market, empty-handed again . . .” She trailed off without finishing her sentence.

“Silly old bat,” thought Vera Mikhailovna. “Do you really think I can’t afford a loaf of bread? That I hang around the market begging for charity? You know nothing about the creative process!”

“Hello! I’ve been waiting to meet you!” The man with the flowers suddenly bowed.

At first she assumed it was one of the Young Pioneers, all grown up. She found this idea very amusing.

Her second thought was that he was very presentable. Nice clothes: an expensive-looking suit, gold-framed glasses. He seemed very polite, too. But he wasn’t an intellectual, definitely not. More like a “businessman,” as they were called nowadays. A big shot, too, by the look of it. One of the head honchos.

What did he want? Should she let him in? Alive one minute, dead the next! Vera Mikhailovna felt a mixture of fear and excitement. What did it matter? If he wanted to kill her and ransack her apartment, then so be it. Murdered in her own home while she was still working, still fighting! It would certainly be an appropriate conclusion to her People’s Book.

“Come in.”

Inside the apartment, her guest seemed to suddenly remember the flowers.

“Oh, I’m sorry. These are for you. And here’s my card. I’ve got a business proposition for you.”

“I dare say you’ll be expecting a cup of tea now,” thought Vera Mikhailovna. His card had gold writing on it: vice-president of something or other. Not the Academy of Sciences, naturally.
Meanwhile her guest had started talking. His tone was impassive and he wasted no time getting straight to the point (after all, he was a businessman, a busy man). Apologizing repeatedly, he reminded Vera Mikhailovna that she was old, that she had no family, that her pension was a pittance and that ownership of this magnificent apartment would be transferred to the state once she died. Didn’t that bother her? Actually, no, it didn’t. She’d already given everything to the state anyway. A different state, admittedly, but still…

She didn’t understand the exact phrase her guest used, but essentially he was suggesting that they sign some kind of contract, whereby legal ownership of her apartment in the legendary Stalinist skyscraper on Kotelnicheskaya Embankment would be transferred to him in the event of her death. In return she would receive significant monthly payments for as long as she lived (which wouldn’t be much longer, he no doubt hoped). A thousand dollars a month! It would pay for all her medicine, and she could get all her groceries delivered too. Why? So she wouldn’t have to come home from the market empty-handed!

“Everyone else in your circle is doing it,” said the man, apparently feeling the need to justify himself. “You know Tikhonov, for example? He used to be really high up in the Soviet government, Chairman of the Council of Ministers. Well, he’s been receiving an extremely generous allowance from the entrepreneur Boris Berezovsky, ever since he signed his dacha over to him.”

Our circle again—ha! Those mercenary bastards! She could remember Tikhonov, but only vaguely. Berezovsky, on the other hand, was notorious. A contemporary Russian Mephistopheles. She’d heard more than enough about him. A fine example to follow!

Her guest kept on talking, and Vera Mikhailovna studied him without really listening. He was a smooth operator, no doubt about it: well-groomed, self-possessed, impeccably dressed. Clearly intelligent. Unscrupulous, too. The kind of man who would wear white gloves to murder people. The kind of man who could be moved to tears by a photograph of his dog, whilst sending thousands of children to the gas chambers. Like Doctor Goebbels. Yes, that was it! She couldn’t remember what Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda looked like, but this smug face in its gold-rimmed glasses would have fitted perfectly. Well, you’ll get what’s coming to you, “Doctor Goebbels”!

“You look as though you’ve come to a decision, Vera Mikhailovna.”

“Yes, I have. Get out!”

Her guest may have been expecting her to react like this, but if he did he hid it well. Apparently disappointed, he got up to leave.
“Well, it’s a pity that we haven’t been able to come to an agreement. But you’ve got my card. Why don’t you have a little think about it…”

“Your card is going straight in the bin! I don’t want to see you ever again!”

The years fell away, and she felt a rush of joy as she threw him out. Her heart was pounding. She was drunk on her own valor, exhilarated by this heroic deed. For all she knew, it might be her last.

The telephone rang. Damn, the flowers were lying next to it. She should have thrown them in his face!

“Hello. Is that Vera Mikhailovna Ilm?”

She gave a start. What now?

“Good evening, this is the director of District Housing Authority 182. I heard that you came in to ask about benefits earlier today. I can confirm that you are entitled to certain benefits. But I gather that you walked out without the information you requested. Why? If you fill out an application form, we can—”

“I don’t want anything from you! Leave me alone!”

She slammed the receiver down. Oh, her heart . . . She could feel that stabbing pain in her chest again. It’s nothing serious, though. I’ll live. Just to spite you. One shuffling step after another, she reached the table. There was her journal, with its red cover. Her People’s Book. It was nothing—she, poor old Vera Mikhailovna, would be fine. She would sit at the table and write about the day’s events. The new era had burst in on her, catching her off-guard with its new rules, and its representative had been a perfect illustration of the changing times: a modern-day Raskolnikov, armed with a pen instead of an axe. A demon of our time. Had she been tempted? He had tried his best to persuade her to sign the contract, but she would never sell her soul! She had to finish what she’d started, her grim and merciless chronicle of a people betrayed.

Yes, the new era had forced its way in through her door. Once upon a time people had screamed and fainted when they saw the Lumière brothers’ legendary cinematic train rushing toward them. Some had even fired guns at the screen. Now it was the new century rushing headlong toward them, every bit as relentless and terrifying, and people were firing at it for all they were worth. Desperate measures, taken in vain.

Vera Mikhailovna Ilm died later that night. The state did indeed take ownership of her apartment, as her guest had foretold, and the district housing authority lost no time in disposing of her personal effects. No one knows for certain what happened to the People’s Book, but it was never seen again.
German Sadulaev’s (born 1973, Shali) insightful works have garnered critical acclaim and recognition, winning several of the most prestigious literary awards. His war novel *I am a Chechen!* , a lyrical fusion of exotic legends, stories and memories, was nominated for the National Bestseller Prize and made Sadulaev “the literary find of the year.” It was translated into English and published by Harvill Secker in 2010. His latest novel, *The Raid on Shali*, a lyrical meditation on life in Chechnya in the 1990s, was shortlisted for the 2010 Russian Booker and the Big Book Award.
I awoke as dusk was falling. There was no one in the whole house. I went out onto the veranda and into the yard. No one was there. I realized that I’d been left on my own. Everyone had left me all alone, forever. Why had they abandoned me? Where had they all vanished to while I slept? What had I done? Where was everyone? Things were strewn around as though they had left in a hurry. Left before I could wake up. How long had I been asleep, and why had I only woken now, toward evening?

Mother, Father, Sister, Uncle—they had all disappeared. How would I ever cope alone? How would I manage?

In the barn a cow mooed. It is milking time, I thought, but I can’t milk, don’t know how to, the cows were always milked by my sisters. I can feed the cows, I can rake out the manure, but I don’t know how to milk! Which means she will carry on mooing miserably. Mooing miserably, miserably mooing. And her mooing will make me miserable. Oh no!

Suddenly the cow stopped mooing, I heard a ting, the kind that only occurs when a jet of warm milk hits the enamel pail placed under the udders. That meant someone had stayed behind! Someone was milking the cow!

I ran to the barn, opened the door and peered inside. I saw our cow being milked by Auntie Mariya, our neighbor. Auntie Mariya was a stout and ruddy woman from Omsk, where her kith and kin remained. She came here when she married, then she bore five children. They were our closest neighbors, just across the flimsy fence. Our verandas were joined, and we never locked the door between them. Auntie Mariya would come and visit, she brought us milk when our cow was dry. And when our cow was in milk,
Auntie Mariya came once a week to milk her dry, out of pity, because my sisters weren’t skilled at milking, and they didn’t milk her dry, which could make the cow ill. Also, Auntie Mariya’s relatives in Omsk used to ring her on our phone. We would run and fetch her, and she’d come running joyfully.

I remembered that Auntie Mariya had died two years ago, and I woke up.

I was terribly thirsty.

I walked around the house and came to the tap in our yard, at the back of the house. Near the tap was a metal mug, I could take a drink of water, cold and pure. Delicious. The water pump stands right by the spring, at the source. I walked round the corner of the house and saw the Teacher.

The Teacher was there. And I fell over backwards.

He said there was no need to bow to him like that, falling flat like a stick, in order to express my reverence. Because I was a layman, and for lay people that was quite unnecessary. I told him that I felt like bowing to him like that. I was guilty, I had let him down, all was lost and I felt awful.

He said that I had not let him down and all was not lost, I had done everything that I was meant to do. I’d already done everything, I’d fulfilled my purpose. And now I was simply living out the rest of this life. That was why it was so dull. He said that it happens to many people. They fulfill their purpose, complete their mission, perhaps in one year, perhaps in two, and then they simply live, they live out this life. For years and years, sometimes reaching a ripe old age. Depending on your luck. It’s like if you travel to another city on an important task. You do what you went there to do. Then you wait for the train. You sit on a bench, you pace about the platform. Or you pace the streets, looking into windows. Perhaps you go to the cinema. There’s nothing else to do here! The train home doesn’t leave until the time shown on your ticket. You could have a long wait.

He was terribly kind, the Teacher, and I felt better. I wanted to ask him something, but woke up.

For some reason I wasn’t at all thirsty, yet I got up and forced myself to swallow half a glass of lukewarm boiled water from the electric kettle in the kitchen. The water tasted unpleasant.

I felt better. The water diluted the alcohol in my organism, and a new dose entered my blood and brain. I don’t get hangovers. I always feel fine the next morning. I only get hangovers when I’ve had nothing to drink the night before.

Lately I have seldom had hangovers of that sort.
All I need is to take enough fluid in the morning. Up till lunchtime I have to drink copiously, in order to water down the internal alcohol.

Outside it was not too sunny, in fact it was cloudy and dull, but I put on my dark sunglasses. I always wear dark sunglasses in the morning, unless I have a hangover. I feel good in dark glasses, the bright daylight doesn’t hurt my eyeballs as it does if I take off my glasses. In sunglasses it always feels agreeably dusky.

These dark glasses must make me look like a drug addict. A girl outside the metro handed me a leaflet. A leaflet about the dangers of heroin. About what awaited me should I start using heroin. According to the leaflet, the price of the heroin high was insomnia, pancreatitis, gastritis, rotting teeth, impotence, depression and premature aging. I took off my glasses for a moment and checked my reflection in the dark glass of the metro compartment. I had insomnia, which I was treating with alcohol, pancreatitis, which I wasn’t treating at all, gastritis, which I was aggravating with spicy food, rotting teeth, no matter how much I had them treated, impotence, simply because I couldn’t get it up, depression, hardly surprising when life was such shit, and old age, though I was not yet forty.

And I had never injected heroin in my life.
So I had lost out big time.
Why, I could have jolly well enjoyed heroin’s high! All these years!

I didn’t even start drinking until fairly recently.
Just five years ago I seldom drank. And if we go back twelve years, then I didn’t drink at all.
I could drink for a good while yet. Because I know how to drink. Oh yes, I approach the process rationally. The important thing is to take plenty of fluids in the morning, and it’s a good idea not to eat anything. You can eat at some point in the afternoon. But you have to drink constantly. Ayran is a great help, a yogurt drink which the warriors of Genghis Khan used to drink. In the Yassa, the code of conduct left to us by Temuchin, it says that you can get drunk once a month. But then again, you can drink once a day, if not as copiously as once a month. And ayran will help the next morning, it has always helped since the times of Genghis Khan.

I think I must be a Genghisoid. I am one of the descendants of Temuchin. I have good reason to be his spitting image when I grow a long beard and mustache! There are thousands, millions of us Genghisoids on this earth. Because plenty of clans died out, leaving no descendants, while
Temuchin’s clan conquered the earth. Temuchin had one hundred children, and each of his children had ten of their own, giving Temuchin a thousand grandchildren. His great-grandchildren numbered ten thousand, and within three generations the tally of Genghis’s descendants exceeded a million. We are all Genghisoids, and we ought to live according to the Yassa, which we were given by our leader. Get drunk once a month. Or every day if you like. Because we have already conquered the world, and now we simply have nothing left to do. Mission accomplished.

I went into a shop, without taking my glasses off, and asked for ayran. “A bottle of ayran a day keeps the doctor away!” I announced, and the sales assistants smiled. They too were slant-eyed and angry, like Genghisoids.

Then I thought about my dream. Once long ago, when I was small, I had an epileptic fit. That day remains the most vivid memory in my life. It was summer, I woke up late and there was no one at home. Everyone must have been out working in the vegetable patch. The sun shone through the windows, the green branches of the trees swayed in the gentle breeze, the birds sang and chirruped. I walked barefoot across the warm floor of the veranda. And all at once, a wave of warmth and brilliance penetrated me, I opened up my eyes, I even raised my arms, I felt life, and happiness, and the entire universe, and it was perfect, the most splendid of worlds, and the harmony knew no bounds or limits, and all this together was love, bliss, and God was with me and held me in His palms. And I wanted to express this, to sing of it, I wanted to shout for joy!

But I couldn’t shout, because I couldn’t fill my lungs with air. My rib cage was paralyzed, my shoulders froze like stone, my diaphragm wouldn’t move.

Then I wanted to scream with fear, I wanted to call for help, but I couldn’t breathe and again I couldn’t shout. I just wheezed feebly and collapsed unconscious.

They found me on the veranda, alive, they managed to bring me round and took me to hospital. I stayed in hospital for a whole month, maybe more. They treated me for “fluid in the lungs,” although the analyses and x-rays failed to confirm the diagnosis. Then they simply discharged me.

In the hospital I knocked a boy out for the first time with a single hook to the face, I read a few adventure books, at the garden fence I built models of some famous battles, assembling armies of mock soldiers with dry sticks.
of assorted colors, I formed a tepid friendship with a curly-haired Georgian boy and experienced mildly erotic feelings toward a girl in the ward next door. She looked pale, delicate, noble and romantic. She was being treated for kidney failure.

The second time an ambulance came for me was when I was twenty-five or twenty-six. The fit caught me at home. At first it wasn’t exactly a fit. I had aches, vomiting, fever. Perhaps I’d caught a cold or a tummy bug. But it triggered a fit, and once more I could not breathe and lost consciousness.

My wife called an ambulance, the ambulance took me to casualty and dumped me on a bare couch in a cold room. It was winter. I was half-clothed, the temperature in the room was barely above zero, I was feverish, and lay shivering on the couch. An hour passed, a second, then a third. When I was almost on the point of death, a trolley came for me and took me to an upstairs ward. It was warm in the ward, I had a bed with a blanket, they injected me with something pleasant and I fell asleep. Happiness exists, after all.

This time the doctors decided that something was wrong with my stomach, and they began investigating. The tests were inconclusive, so they performed a gastroscopy—for anyone who knows what that is, the mere mention will make you shudder. You swallow a tube so a doctor can look inside your belly.

The doctor didn’t find anything. And the tests showed nothing. They could not establish a diagnosis, yet all the same they treated me for something. They inserted drips and gave me injections.

Once my friend came and brought me a couple of apples.

And once during the whole time I was there, my wife came. My wife didn’t bring any food, but she brought our child in her arms. She said she couldn’t find anyone to leave the child with, and that was why she couldn’t come to the hospital more often. And she had brought no food because there was no food. She asked if I had any money, because hers had run out, and she and the child had nothing to eat.

I didn’t have any money, all my money was at home, I hadn’t thought it would run out so fast. In any case, it was only a small sum, we lived from hand to mouth, we had no savings.

The next day I left the hospital. I wasn’t discharged, I didn’t even tell the doctor. I went down the stairs to the back exit, got changed and left. I went straight to work and soon made a little money.

I haven’t been back to hospital since. But when I got some money for a
German translation, I put it in an envelope, sealed it and set it aside in case of sickness or death.

Recently I had a fit again, though only a minor one. I was getting ready to go to work, I’d managed to take a shower and then collapsed in the doorway. I couldn’t breathe.

When I was a child we used to tell a joke about the dinosaurs dying out because they forgot how to breathe. Now I suffer from the same.

I’m talking about the epilepsy. Or para-epilepsy, as some doctors consider it. There is generally much debate on this topic. But whichever. Later I learned about the “sacred madness,” and its usual “forerunners”—the euphoria before the fit. Many great men suffered from this illness. Dostoyevsky did, and Gogol. Napoleon and Genghis Khan, of course, too. And also a neighbor who lived on our street when I was small. That neighbor, true, had no other claim to fame. He was humble and dull. But he regularly fell on the pavement and started foaming at the mouth, and people would run up to pull out his tongue so he wouldn’t choke.

Here’s what all this has to do with my dream. The dream begins in the empty house, no one is there, I go out onto the veranda. This is the scene of the first fit, and this theme recurs continually in my dreams. Then come fear and loneliness. And further still, a feeling of guilt, which is removed by the Teacher. The redeeming third “I” in the structure of my personality. This is roughly how it can be understood.

Though it can be interpreted another way.

For in this dream there were cows. And Auntie Mariya.

Suddenly I realized this was the day. The day when you phone the dead.

That morning I had been sitting on the edge of my folded-down bed in my flat, holding my head in both hands. I held it to stop it splitting down the middle like an overripe watermelon, and also to stop it snapping off my neck like a pumpkin snaps off the shriveled umbilical cord of its stem, creeping across the autumn vegetable patch.

Then I decided to busy myself and picked up my telephone. I urgently needed to put things in order, and I didn’t have enough energy to tidy my room. So I decided to tidy my mobile phone. I deleted all the text messages in all the folders. The photos taken with the unsteady and blurry built-in camera. And I started on my list of contacts.

Delete. Are you sure you want to delete this contact? Yes.
Delete. Are you sure you want to delete this contact? Yes.
Delete. Are you sure you want to delete this contact? Yes.
Delete. Are you sure you want to delete this contact? …
What the devil, yes, yes, yes! I am sure I want to delete it, to hell with it!
I nearly selected the option “delete all.”
But at the next contact my finger froze above the button.
“You’re sure you want to delete this contact?”
Oh here we go again . . . Stop! . . . Who said that? ? ?
Talk of the Devil—and he will appear!
I turned round and saw: he swung his feet (?) onto the bed and peered
over my left shoulder into the display of the telephone.
“Do you want to delete this contact?”
Silently I nodded.
“Why?”
“He’s dead.”
“In what sense? He’s disappeared, doesn’t call you, doesn’t answer your
calls, doesn’t answer your text messages?”
“Well yes, that too. But that’s not all. He has died. This person is truly
dead. For good.”
“Ah!”
“Yes, that’s right…”
“And what, do you have many of these . . . dead contacts?”
“I don’t have all that many yet. But as the years go by their number
will grow. That is, unless I myself become a dead contact in someone else’s
mobile phone.”

The Devil nodded with an understanding look and started strenuously
scratching his shaggy head, as though it were infested with lice. Then he said,
unceremoniously and somewhat nonchalantly, “Don’t delete it.”
“Huh?”
“Wouldn’t you like to ring them, at least one more time? Haven’t you
thought for hours on end about what you didn’t have time to say to each of
them, to your dead ones?”
“Huh?”
“Blockhead.”
“Who are you calling a blockhead? Me?”
“Look, my tongue got the better of me. Yes, you are a blockhead, who
else?” and the Devil walloped me round the back of the head, though more
to taunt than to hurt.
“Hey, you . . . keep your hands off me!”
“Hands??? Do you see any hands?” and the Devil showed me his paws, clawed and hairy, first palms down, then palms up, the way children show they’ve washed their hands before eating.

“That’s sophistry.”

The Devil wearily waved, as though to say he’d had enough of this topic of wallops round the head and arms with paws, and that wasn’t at all what he’d hoped to discuss.

“You must have heard that once a year an unloaded rifle will actually shoot?”

“Sure. And ferns flower, too.”

“Nope. About the fern, that’s all a load of cobblers. The fern family multiplies by spores, like fungi do, they do not have flowers. Any botanist will tell you that. Or even just a schoolboy, unless, of course, he’s a straight-D student and a blockhead.”

“Don’t even think of walloping me again! I know mantras which would instantly on the spot turn you into a heap of ashes!”

“Oh must you . . .” the Devil put on a semblance of looking away with wounded feelings, while furtively rubbing his paws together. “Deary me, what a sensitive soul we have here! Well, ferns do not flower once a year. But an unloaded rifle really does shoot each year. Many people die as a result, apparently by accident, but there is no such thing as accident, you know, it is karma. And the telephones ring too. Once a year. Even the phones of the dead.”

The Devil moved nearer and embraced me, though cautiously, glancing at my lips, checking they weren’t whispering a mantra, and my hands weren’t forming a mudra, a sacred ritual gesture.

“Take you, for example. Do you enjoy it when people phone you? Do you look forward to it?”

“I used to love it. I couldn’t wait. I used to wait for the phone to ring and for my friends to say: Well, come on now, that’s enough… we miss you, and all that. We can’t do without you. We desperately need you. I waited a long time. No one rang. And I stopped waiting. Now, when the telephone rings, I don’t get excited. Of course all these people who ring me also need me. But not in the same way, not for the reason I dreamed of.”

The Devil sighed, expressing sympathy and understanding on his mercurial mug. The room filled with a sulphurous smell. Involuntarily I screwed up my face. The Devil noticed and pulled out from somewhere a packet of “Hell’s Breath” chewing gum. He showed me and grimaced as if to say, They make me chew this muck. It goes with the job!
And here he shifted his expression to a romantic, wistful one:

“But do you know what it’s like to wait for a phone call *there*! They carry their mobile phones everywhere they go. Well, *there* they have absolutely nothing to do for ages on end! They don’t even have anything to read. Only their old text messages, though they already know them by heart. And they wait and wait for somebody, some day, to call them. But no one calls. Even on the day when the telephones work.”

“But how can they work… *there*?”

“Ah… roaming calls!”

“Oh, right, I see.”

“Yup.”

“Roaming.”

“That’s the one.”

“I always thought so.”

“What?”

“About roaming. That it’s the name of a demon who carries words through the air across long distances. Carries them between worlds even, it turns out. Yes, and the entire cellular network consists of nothing but little devils, shuttling about between the handsets. And aeroplanes, too—how can they fly without waving their wings? I get it: they are hauled through the skies by special demons.”

“You know too much. You must find it hard to live.”

“I know.”

“But think about it, why do you automatically assume it must be devils? It could be those, what do you call them, oh, angels, for example?”

“I see.”

“So, then. On an ordinary day, if you ring up a dead person, you’ll be met with long beeps. Or music, if he managed to put music on his phone instead of beeps. Or a specially trained girl will tell you that the handset is out of range. Or the number you have dialed is no longer available or is not in use. Or the number has not been recognized. Just occasionally the call will be answered by someone else entirely. Because people don’t take a dead person’s SIM card away, they place it in the coffin, bury or burn it along with the deceased, as they used to bury knives, urns and other items essential to man. But on the day when *Roaming* works… you just dial the number and *Connection* takes place… and you can hear a voice from the *other* side.”

“But how will I know?!”

“Know what?”
“How will I know when that day has come?”

“Well, you’ll know, somehow or other… maybe you’ll have no one else left to ring, no one from among the living. Maybe you’ll encounter your dead person on the street, he will flash past, and you will think: Was that him? And you will think: Should I phone? Or here’s another example: do you often dream about… say, cows?”

“Cows? What cows?”

“How do I know what cows? They are your dreams and your cows. And your dead people. What, do you think I know all your cows by name?”

“No, hardly ever. To tell the truth, practically never.”

“Well, then. This time you’ll dream of them.”

“Why cows?”

“Well I just chose them for illustration. Perhaps it won’t be cows at all . . .”

Time taught me to talk with the dead. It happened when “midway through life’s journey, I found myself in a gloomy forest.” Yes, at around thirty-five. That is half a lifetime. No one seriously expects to live to a hundred. And when your distance from the starting point grows greater than your distance to the finish, when you become nearer to death than to birth, nearer to the dead, then you start to hear their voices, and they hear yours.

Before, I had heard nothing. And didn’t understand. When I visited the cemetery, I felt bored and puzzled to hear the adults talking with crosses or gravestones, stroking the grass as though it were hair, filling saucers with water and the whole time talking and talking. About what had happened to whom, who’d got married, who’d given birth to a daughter. And who had passed away, so you’ve probably met up already…

When they buried Ilya in Moscow, I could not get to the funeral. It all happened so quickly. His body was sent from England, from the hospice where he passed away. His friend who was with him to the end said that Ilya had embraced Islam on his deathbed. His widow and some other people insisted on Christian rites. A civil funeral was held.

I arrived in Moscow several days later. I rang someone who used to work in Ilya’s publishing house which had since closed. She told me which cemetery to go to and where to find the grave.

It was winter, the earth was covered in thick, deep snow. And there was snow on the grave. Snow and wreaths. A metal rod with a plaque. There was no gravestone. They don’t erect gravestones straight away. First the coffin and corpse must rot and sink down, the grave must settle. Only then is the
gravestone erected, to avoid it sagging. That is how it is always done. People are practical, they even arrange things securely for their dead.

I walked into the snow, added two carnations to the snow-coated wreaths. Then from my coat pocket I produced two quarter-liter bottles of vodka. I opened both. One I placed at the grave. Ilya, I don’t know, maybe you can’t drink vodka if you embraced such a faith? Then again, maybe now there are no restrictions on you. Well, either way, I’ll drink up. Drink with you and to you.

I knocked back a quarter of the bottle and chased it with a gulp of cold air.

Look, here’s what I wanted to tell you, Ilya, when you were in the hospice, I really wanted to phone you, it’s the truth! Each day I thought, I’ll call today!

Thus I failed to notice that I had started talking to a grave, which I’d never done before, hadn’t been able to. Hadn’t understood and couldn’t hear. Probably because I was far away. Now I am much closer, now I hear.

No it’s true, honestly, I was meaning to phone you! I just wondered what I’d say to you. Something like, Hold out, brother, everything will be all right! And . . . get well soon?! Get well soon, when secondaries had spread. You know, I couldn’t lie about such things, couldn’t cheer you up, and all that. I mean maybe I believed that everything would be all right. In fact that’s exactly what I believed! It’s just that I have a different idea of what all right means. And it is not in the slightest disturbed by death. Rather, death is a part of the plan through which later on everything’s certain to get better. Ilya, when I was small, whenever anyone upset me, or I simply felt sad, I would think to myself: It doesn’t matter. None of this matters. Because in any case I’m going to die.

And it would all immediately become so light and calm. Everything else was so trivial, so paltry. I would think, So I got a grade D. But I’m going to die! Why worry about a grade D!

And it’s such optimism, really! It’s just people don’t understand. They think I am a gloomy pessimist. But I don’t understand why. If I am glad that I am going to die, then where is the gloom in that, where is the pessimism? I really will die in any case! And when I don’t feel happy about it, then more’s the sorrow! That really is doom and gloom! But if I think about it, then why am I glad that I’ll die? Well, because I know that after death I’ll live forever!

While people who think that they’ll die straight after death, and there’ll be nothing more, and they’re frightened of death, and they say, No, no, not yet!, they are the pessimists!
I know, what I’m saying is all muddled up. I’ll drink a bit more, to help the words come out more coherently.
So I drained the bottle and gulped some biting air.
I have long noticed that people don’t understand me. For example, they don’t get my jokes. I said to my dentist, “Could I have a false tooth fixed to my root?” She says, “Let’s fit an implant, implants last forever!” I replied, “I don’t need eternal teeth. I don’t plan to live forever.”
Good joke, don’t you think?
But she was embarrassed. What are you talking about, you’re so young...
What did I say? Surely it’s true that I will die? Then why would I need eternal teeth? Why do I need anything eternal here, when I will be eternal somewhere else?
Then that’s where we ought to amass riches, open savings accounts and deposit accounts, purchase shareholdings, acquire real estate and even have tooth implants. Eternal ones.
But you understood! You were like that yourself, only better! I could tell you anything I thought. But… all the same I was afraid of something. Yet I should have tried. Tried to start speaking, and then . . . then it would have happened all by itself . . . and it really was that simple! Here it is, your number, still in my telephone. Only no one will ever answer it now. No one will pick up the receiver. The handset is out of range. Out of action. Outside the network. It has broken free.
Why didn’t I ring you, Ilya? What a moron I am, forgive me Lord!

Well, then, I must have already said everything. And he already answered. He continues to speak to me through the lines of his songs on the radio each day. Shimmering over us, shimmering, diamond roads. To walk in the footsteps of gods, you need feet of gold.
Things aren’t that simple.
You need feet of gold!
There too you need feet to follow the gods and leave footprints on diamond roads.
Well then, I must have asked, and he answered a long time ago.
So I didn’t phone him. Instead I dialed another number:

2-11-36. I generally have a poor memory for numbers. I don’t remember the number of my house or the apartment where I live. I don’t remember my
own number plate. I’m no good at memorizing phone numbers. But this number I memorized for life.

2-11-36. The telephone number of our house. In Shali we had a small telephone exchange. Five-digit numbers sufficed. We had our own telephone. Our number was 2-11-36. I memorized it. Now you’ll remember it too.

Our house no longer has a telephone. They blew up the exchange long ago, no wires or posts remain. It doesn’t matter. Now everyone has cell phones. Yet all the same I so badly want them to install a landline again, to extend a cable, from far away, from the distant past, and to make sure they restore our number: 2-11-36.

I dialed this number, after the code, from a long-distance call center near Palace Square. An eternally hungry and freezing student. I used to go there by foot, at night, from the hostel in St. Petersburg’s Petrograd district. Waited my turn to be called to the booth. To dial the number and hear home, hearth, and love.

Almost twenty years have passed, and once more I am dialing this number. Why? For the same reason: to hear home. Hearth. Love. No codes, just five digits. I will be connected. If today really is the day.

When I heard “hello” from the other end, I began sobbing again. Silently, without tears, just a numb throat, and shaking shoulders. As I did that evening.

. . . The doctor says she’s getting gangrene. If they amputate both legs . . . the blood is infected anyway and . . . well, then she could have another six months . . .

“Mama, my dearest, beloved Mama, please! Have the operation! Don’t leave us! We won’t be able to . . . I . . . I can’t carry on living if you . . . if you . . . Maaaaaamaaaaa . . .”

This went into a telephone receiver one-and-a-half thousand kilometers away, while at the other end my sister’s muffled lamentations could be heard in the background. Then, with unexpected cold and calm:

“You will be able to. It’s nothing, everyone can do it, including you. But my time has come. And just as I came into this world, with two legs, so I will depart from it, whole. What, you want me to die one part at a time? Have my legs buried in one place, and the rest of me in another? How will they assemble me on the Day of Judgment, pull me out of the earth in different places? Who will do this? Are the archangels going to haul my bones about? No. I will rise by myself, the same as I always was.”
Then, already vexed: “That’s enough, I am tired of talking.”
Tu. Tu…
That was the last time we spoke.

Today she is still just as young and plucky: “Hello! Hello, who’s there?”
But in the background, geese cackle. A tape is playing. A besom broom
sweeps the yard, shoo, shoo, shoo. I know it’s Mama, standing in the white sitting
room where the telephone is, at the window, and the window is open,
the geese are in their pen, and my sister sweeps to the music: Saturday post-
man, bring me a letter . . .

Mama! It’s me! . . . It’s me, you know . . . that vase which broke . . .
damnit, oh it wasn’t me who smashed the vase, it was little Volodya Ulyanov* from the book who did it, then honestly owned up. I don’t mean the vase, it’s just that I did the same. I deceived you about something important.

About the fact that . . . I grew up? The fact that I didn’t save you from
death? And didn’t die with you?

I left you, I went in search of God and eternal life—but for you, Mama!
For eternal life. You thought I betrayed you? I didn’t!

But I ran out of time. Or I didn’t find it. And time passed, I became a grown up. Like all the others, just another Genghisoid on this earth.
You thought I would always be yours, always with you. But I deceived you, I grew up.

And I deceived you about the fact that I didn’t grow up.
I never did grow up.

But you did everything right, Mama . . . you lived proudly and died
proudly. While I can’t . . . I’m like . . . here . . . as you can see . . . I rang you
because . . . in order to say, so that you would know that I . . .

“Mama, who is that?”

“I don’t know, son. I can’t hear anything. Just hissing and crackles, as if from very far away. Maybe they’re calling for Auntie Mariya, from Omsk?"

* Lenin (born Vladimir Ulyanov)
ALEXANDER ILICHEVSKY (born 1970, Sumgait) is a prolific poet and writer of various genres, whose works have been published in Russia’s most prestigious literary journals. His analytical approach, precision and sensitivity towards characters and history as well as his distinctive style have been widely acclaimed by critics and readers alike. His novel *Matisse*, the story of a physicist whose hunger for freedom leaves him homeless after the collapse of the Soviet Union, won him the Russian Booker Prize. His recent novel *The Persian*, depicting the author’s return to his native Azerbaijan, was awarded the Big Book Prize in 2010 and the Bunin Prize. His works have been translated into German and French.
The Sparrow

Translated by Benjamin Paloff

The sparrow perched on the sill, hopped, looked around, cocked its little head, and pecked at the pane. Then it flew up and through the transom window. Kulyusha tilted the window closed, grabbed a towel, lunged, and knocked it behind the bench.

Twisting its head like a chicken’s didn’t work.
So she gripped it between two fingers and pulled it off like a flower off its stem.

Dark rheum gushed from her ears, it washed over her eyes.
Racked with pain, she dragged herself on all fours, fainted, and fell onto her side—to rest.

The headless sparrow jerked its wing, seized up, issued two more scarlet drops from the straw of its larynx, and then it, too, went silent, collapsing onto its side.

Ivan watched, motionless, from the stove. Till dusk, not budging, he looked at his prone mother, at the beak, at the eye, half-obscured with bluish-gray film. It shone like a little bead, resting in his mother’s bloodied palm. Now and again Ivan sank into the sparrow’s eye—into its gray, breezy light, which rocked on a bare and supple branch; the swinging made him feel ill—and he resurfaced, and again saw the ben, all awash in light, and his mother, lying there peacefully, and the ray of light creeping across her cheek, the dusty window, the fence, the black street, and the steppe beyond.

His mother regained consciousness at sundown and sat up on the floor. She looked into her black palm, at the bird’s head, and didn’t move.

The cold, crimson steppe, like a wing that had been sucked into the sky beyond the ravine, absorbed a lasting wind. Dying down, the wind followed the bloodied sun as it dipped over the horizon, like the mantle of the tsar-oppressor.
Long drifts of gray stretched across the glistening stubble-field—the first snow, prickly and fine. It settled as dust does on things, unnoticed, from a terrible attic of motionless, spindly clouds, rippling in waves. These dusky clouds resembled ruddy sand dunes and, at the same time, the pattern of steaming fish meat, baked and collapsed along the spine.

Kulyusha had seen the dunes on the road to Astrakhan, where her husband had taken her to get fish: the sandy waves billowed from the wind on their crests. And last night she had had an unexpected vision of a fish, though she had long since stopped dreaming of food.

For the first two months, however, it was food that had tormented her in her sleep, worse than the specter of death. Now her sisters would bring frosted pastries and giblet pies for Easter. Now she herself would bake sweet rolls and sit down by the children, to have a grand old time washing it all down with hot cherry cordial...

And then—it just broke off. The dreams were left empty, like a field that had been cleared.

This is what she dreamt of now. A horseman was standing on the knoll, a black silhouette against the solar prominence. She saw the horse shift, shake its head, step now here, now there, and the peak of lights from under its snout now moved to the cavesson as crimson blackness, then dissipated, to her relief.

The stubble-field pricked her body all over. Falling, she pulled Ivan with her, pressing him into the earth, and nearly poked her eye out: a short, stiff stalk drew blood under her eye.

The desire to merge with the earth, to submit utterly to its cold, was insurmountable. It merged with her longing for her husband. Her husband had been her home, and she could sense him there, far away, in the earth, as a vine senses water—cold, dark, but kindred, massive, strong, like death itself.

She didn’t manage to bury him; she’d fainted there on the street. They had been going house to house since October—and they picked him up. He’d been lying there no more than a day; she couldn’t look at him enough. The children crawled over him, played at waking him, tugged at his nose. They came, dragged him by the arms from the porch. She wouldn’t allow it, but what could you do? She clung to her husband. The Social Aid people drove them away: this was hard enough. They carried him out through the courtyard, out the gate, laid him out in a row – next to the other corpses. She gazed at the dead, didn’t recognize anyone. Settling down sorely, she looked
all around. The cart was the same one—with carved, painted posts—upon which Kopylov used to come to them to pick up the food surplus. “Here now,” she muttered then. “Here’s your grain. Here’s your share. What, isn’t that what you wanted?”

She sat down in the dirt, and the cart rolled away. But the driver said, “Whoa,” turned around, and looked at her: “Hey, lady, maybe you should get in beside your man. No use drudging around here.”

The horseman peered into the steppe from under his hand; he whipped his boot with his crop. Finally, he saw them. He trotted up to them heavily. Now he was quite close, the hoofbeat against the earth was audible through the chest—but the horse isn’t stopping, it’s heading right for them, smashing the thigh, the shoulder blade, the head—and the head breaks apart into oily clumps of black earth.

Then, at night, she dreamt of fish, because it was now the third day of these towering clouds standing at sunset, going nowhere, wavy like sand dunes. She looked at them, and it seemed to her that she and her husband were walking over those orange crags on the way to Yenotayevka. Now they cut downward, trudging waist-high in sand, now they ascend a long way up a hard incline—Kalmyk sacks in hand, for fish—peering ahead until the village appears on the horizon, the church, the wooded, inundated banks of the Volga . . . In the sacks they carried bits of pressed oilseed cake from the creamery—for bait. When they arrived, on the very first day, with that seed cake, Alyosha hooked his first carp in an eddy, a fifteen-pounder, which it took him a good hour to pull in, suffering in the scorching heat. The line, trembling on its way from the spool to the lead, cut zigzags across the water. Later, he strung the fish on a cord, passing the fibers expertly under the gills so that it wouldn’t suffocate—and from time to time, taking it down from its peg, he walked it around the shallows like a foal. In the end, he baked it in clay. God, the beauty that then radiated all around: on the sand and in the water, a sifting of large scales, ruddy in the sun, like copper coins. There was an enormous, whiskered head, its eyes baked, and a mighty, pinkish frame. Amazed, she lifted the skeleton to her eye—she aimed down the spine, as you would a spyglass, at the heavenly orb—and the fish caught fire before her, it caught the light and started swimming uncontrollably, powerful, expansive, and proportionate, like the temple at the Cossack village of Grigopolissky . . .

So there it was, in her dream, this gargantuan, golden carp, thick-bodied, like a golden-maned steed, and with fanned gills, fins, tail—just like the
golden fish had in the children’s book—and it swam back and forth through the ben, knocking into her arms, her ear, her shoulders, kissing her cheeks, her eyes, as a slow moth does a dying lamp.

She had shown the illustrations from that book to her younger son as she walked with him in her arms, saying goodbye. In the afternoon he suddenly went silent, his little face slackened, and, understanding that he was dying, she took him in her arms and walked back and forth, rocked him, showed him the fairytale, cooed, laughed. Seryozha died in the evening, but she walked with him in her arms all through the night, until she herself collapsed. Ivan woke her: he got down off the stove and bit her hand. She regained consciousness, casting the cold little lump from her breast.

She and Ivan carried Seryozha into the field and, after digging their way in, laid him in a marmot burrow. They filled it in. They sat there awhile, rested. They looked around, out of habit, on the off chance that a fat, gray little stump might pop up. Though they knew that the marmots had left their fields back in October. And even if they had seen one, they wouldn’t have had the strength to catch it.

Kopylov showed up on horseback from the village. He rode up indifferently. Wasting no time, Ivan turned out his pockets. And he put out his empty palms. As if to say, To hell with you, no grain, see for yourself: there’s nothing left in the field. Regaining consciousness, his mother also turned out her jacket pockets, straightened her skirt. Nights in October, they’d made their way to this spot in the field; they’d ransacked the mice dens with their fingers, ravaging their winter’s store of grain. They might get a handful out of it. But now there was nothing left, not a speck.

The horse snorted, jerked its tail, and was now at a gallop. With a whinny, it dropped a clump of steaming dung.

Kopylov disappeared beyond the bare trees in the ravine.

Their eyes closed, for a long time mother and son breathed in the delicate, fading trail of the warm, filling scent.

When they stood up, they felt like they were full.

Kulyusha plucked and gutted the sparrow, didn’t cut the claws off, rather singed the whole thing over some kindling, singed the head as well. She stoked the flame with straw; the dung logs had gone the way of the cows. She cut up some saltbush and ground-elder into a pot, threw in the sparrow, poured in some water, and added salt.

Ivan followed his mother’s movements at first, but then that vague, dark
wind carried him away again. Ivan found the soup quite tasty. He half-stood. The long stems of ground-elder made it hard to suck up the meaty stock. His mother did not give up, guiding the spoon, draped with grass, toward his lips. Fine: glaring into the spoon, where the bare sparrow head now rested, he took it into his mouth himself and sucked at it carefully. Right then he ate the half of the bird his mother had cut off for him. Waiting for her son to finish chewing, Kulyusha started to eat as well. She’d now tasted her third spoonful, and she greedily gulped down the fourth, biting the edge with her teeth.

“More,” Ivan called out.

She lifted her head. Ivan was stretching his little hand toward the other half of the tiny sparrow, the few matchstick bones and threads of meat she had gathered into the spoon and was holding to her mouth.

“How clever you are, Ivan,” Kulyusha said, and she slurped and gulped down what remained.

In the evening, Ivan remained unusually long in the cool, breezy darkness. He was rocked on the branch, tossed mercilessly, scarcely enough strength in his little claws to hold on. The wind whipped through his feathers, and he hid his head, now under one wing, now under the other, blew into his skin to warm himself on his breath, but he was so battered on the branch that the time came to pull his head out for the sake of balance. He wanted with all his might to regain consciousness, to surface, to peel his eyes on his mother—it was awful without her, but a strong gust suddenly hit him in the back, his claws let go—and the icy emptiness pounced, leeching him dry.

Kulyusha walked with Ivan in her arms and, trying to reach him in his sleep, rocked him as hard as her strength would allow. When she felt him getting colder, darkness washed over her eyes and, falling, she hit the back of her head on the bench.

That winter of 1933, Akulina lost her husband, two children, her mother, and two brothers.

Besides herself and her three sisters—Natalia, Arina, and Polya—there was a fifth, her youngest sister, Fenya, whose husband, being the godfather of the secretary of a collective farm, managed to stow a young heifer in a secret cellar. So that it wouldn’t low, he cut out its tongue and sliced its lips. Just at the beginning of December, it started to give milk.

Things got better that spring. The ice came off the river. Kulyusha bound some twigs into a cross, stretched a downy scarf over it, and, barely shifting her swollen legs, she crossed the kitchen gardens to the river. “Spider-style,”
she strained out a half-pot of whitebait and stewed it in the oven. It was her first solid meal.

In May, when her senses returned with her vigor, she was overcome by grief. She left the village at dawn and crossed the steppe, bearing a little to the right, following the rising sun. She kept going until dusk, when she fell to the ground. Upon waking, she got scared, the worst fright in all her life: the sky, full of huge stars, was uncontainable and falling on her, and there was nowhere for her to hide. The next night she heard wolves circling nearby, but she figured out how to kindle last year’s grass all around. On the sixth day, Kulyusha encountered a salt cooperative: a barracks and two sheds. A wolfhound darted out from the buildings, and so she found herself lying face-down until evening, when the people returned from the steppe. The cooperative took her in. For a few months she went with everyone else to the salt flats, gathered salt, carried it to the station, waited for the Astrakhan train, and traded some of it—by weight, one-to-one—for fish.

In the fall, Kulyusha registered for work in Arkhangelsk, but the recruiters mixed up the listings, and she ended up in Baku. She rode the roof of the train car through Astrakhan; again she saw the crags near the Volga, the great realm of water, the lifeblood of the Russian land, the islands, a wall of reeds, channels, endless bursts of seashore, and on it a flock of swans. On the right, the Streletsky sands stretched for a very long way, and from their crests the wind blew smoky, liquid, ruddy plumes, as nimble as flames.

In Baku, Kulyusha got herself involved in one of the construction projects of the great Five-Year Plan: the country’s first synthetic rubber factory. When she was enlisting at Personnel, she dictated: “My husband died in the famine.” The personnel officer went white, settled back, leaned over, and told her through his teeth: “Foolish girl. Bite your tongue.”

But she didn’t bite her tongue. I loved listening to Kulyusha, to her stories, expansive as the steppe, about her childhood, about peasant work, about her widowed grandmother’s pilgrimage on foot to Jerusalem, from which she never returned, but wrote to her family a year later to say that she had married a certain Rabbi Pinkas ben-Elisha and become a Jew; to listen to her witty judgments about life—sometimes absurd on first examination, though they also turned out to be prophetic—and even to these terrible, detailed accounts of the famine. Now, when I remember Kulyusha, it is finally and absolutely clear to me why the Lord molded man from earth: so that a soul might sprout from him, like a plant, even if he’s dead . . .

I especially loved to see myself walking with her in her stories, along the
salt flats—along an absolute flatness of salt, sprinkled all the way up to the horizon with muddy bluish crystals—to see the circling of improbable Volga fish at a modest depth, and sometimes to imagine myself as Ivan. Ivan, ever beside his inconsolable Kulyusha. I was generally interested in thinking about how people live after they die. About how death is the most far-reaching of mysteries. And besides, it somehow seemed to me that, thinking about Ivan, I was also helping his inconsolable Kulyusha to ask his forgiveness.

Then I grew, Kulyusha died, I grew some more, forgot about childhood, its domain—the sea, the little river, the field, the forest, the great round space of happiness had dissolved like a rainbow—and I gradually began dying from numbness, from the stillness of melancholy. Having understood too early and too starkly that life without childhood is so short as barely to exist at all, I plunged unwillingly into an anabiotic condition, as if the waters of the Lethe had suddenly burst forth from the faucet in my apartment . . . All this lasted over ten years, and it would continue now, but for the event I chanced to endure the year before last, and which drew me suddenly from my torpor.

At that time, before I could free myself definitively from a certain boring desk job, I received a month-long assignment of a curious nature. I was dispatched to a warehouse that was being liquidated, and of which I was supposed to conduct the final audit. Our office was closing our wholesale monitors division, and thus it was clearing out the warehouse space these monitors had occupied. This warehouse was located on the north side of the capital, on Admiral Makarov Street, near the Circle Line of the metro. It was an ancient brick hangar, one of a few dozen such buildings scattered among the ruins of the freight station of the old railroad. Each had a sign laid out in white wooden bricks: No Smoking.

It was the height of June, the work was a piece of cake, and I relished the solitude. After calculating and chalking out a section of the lofty stacks strewn in haphazard pyramids here and there around the hangar, I sat myself on a chair and took great pleasure in smoking at the bottom of a towering well of cardboard boxes, penetrated slantwise by shafts of sunlight that emerged near the rafters from gaps in the old slate roof. The swirling smoke rose into the air, dispersed, faded, and hung in transparent silver strata. Swifts, surfacing from under the half-dark of the gable, described exclamatory zigzags in the light and, at various altitude, stitched triangular holes, blurring slightly at the edges, in the trails of smoke. It was dry and warm and quiet. With a mug of strong, sweet tea in hand, I was reading a book about Admiral Makarov that I had made a point of taking from the library, about his genius in naval
and navigational sciences; about his error at Port Arthur, which proved fatal for him and, later, for the entire fleet at Tsushima; about the incendiary bombs of the Japanese, because of which our Russian battleships were defeated. All around, in the entire territory of the warehouse district, it was palpable, the bustle of shipping, of unloading, of inventory, and of the occasional scandals that erupted over what went missing. For my part, in my own domains, I had spent the week savoring the serenity.

How quickly it was broken. A band of sparrows had gotten into the habit of slipping under the roof of my hangar. Occasionally, with a hurricane of chirps and flutters, they circled astoundingly and swooshed over the complex cardboard landscape, like Japanese fighters over the fleet at Pearl Harbor. For three days straight there was no relief from the sparrows, and it came time to take matters in hand. From a bicycle pump, a bit of planking, a tourniquet, a dollop of grease, and a scrap of felt, I fashioned an air rifle. I loaded bullets of industrial adhesive, which I stripped from the jamb of the doors to the hangar; for lethality, I peppered the shot with metal pellets. One day went to target practice. Towards evening, the boxes in my shooting range were riddled with holes.

For the next two days I sat in ambush, my air gun cocked, and didn’t hit a single one. And that’s how the depot watchman found me—armed.

I explained myself. The old man heard me out sympathetically and explained how the sparrows were the scourge of all the warehouses around here: drifting from hangar to hangar, they soil the goods, disturb the peace, and startle the loaders, a horde of them unexpectedly flying out from the corners and into one’s snout . . . I learned that the sparrows were a vestige from older times, when this entire warehouse district, built at the very beginning of the 1930s, still served as a storehouse for Moscow’s strategic grain reserves. There used to be tons of sparrows here, enough to blacken the sky, and now—it’s just what’s left . . .

After the watchman left, I went out to the back of the hangar, scraped together two handfuls of earthen dust with the butt of the rifle. I went out into the light, and on a cardboard box I sorted through the refuse that was mixed in with the dirt. In my palm there remained four black grains.

I lifted them to my eye and saw. Carts of grain from Ladovskaya Balka, Novoaleksandrovka, Grigorpolis’sky Village, from the entire Stavropol District, from Kuban and Ukraine—they stretched toward the railroad stations, they were loaded onto troop trains, some of which went abroad in exchange for gold and industrial equipment, some of which went to Moscow—and the
grain was unloaded right here, at this secret depot, under the heavy security of the NKVD.

I folded them into a hundred-ruble note and slipped it between the covers of my passport.

Having left my job, I carried these grains to Velegozh and soaked them in yeast solution. One sprouted. Last year, in a pot filled with genuine black earth—for which I made a special trip to Michurinsk—it grew a stalk.

And this year my plant bed has already born twenty-two spikelets. And in a year I hope to treat Ivan to a flat-cake. Not a big one. No bigger than a prosphoron.
Elena Shubina is one of contemporary Russian literature’s most respected editors and specialists. After graduating from the Faculty of Literature and Language at Moscow State University, she worked as an editor in literary journals. In 1997, she joined Vagrius, one of the Russia’s first independent publishing houses, which pioneered the publication of a prestigious series of works by leading Russian authors and played an important part in the formation of the current face of Russian literature. Her anthology *The Prose of New Russia* was recognized Book of the Year at the Moscow International Book Fair in 2003. Elena Shubina is currently editor-in-chief of the Elena Shubina Editorial Office, which is part of the AST publishing house, and is an active promoter of Russian literature abroad.
Credits


“Chechnya, to Chechnya!,” copyright © 2009 by Sergei Shargunov. Translation copyright © 2012 by Debut Prize Foundation.


“Stars over Lake Teletskoye,” copyright © 2012 by Irina Bogatyreva. Translation copyright © 2012 by Debut Prize Foundation.

“Strike the Iron While It’s Hot, Boys!” copyright © 2009 by Alexei Lukyanov. Translation copyright © 2012 by Debut Prize Foundation.


“The Day When You Phone the Dead,” copyright © 2009 by German Sadulaev. Translation copyright © 2009 by Academia Rossica.