THE SUITCASE

Sergei Dovlatov

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But even like this, my Russia,
You are most precious to me…

Alexander Blok

Foreword

So this bitch at OVIR says to me, “Everyone who leaves is allowed three suitcases. That’s the quota. A special regulation of the ministry.”

No point in arguing. But of course I argued. “Only three suitcases? What am I supposed to do with all my things?”

“Like what?”

“Like my collection of race cars.”

“Sell them,” the clerk said, without lifting her head.

Then, knitting her brows slightly, she added, “If you’re dissatisfied with something, write a complaint.”

“I’m satisfied,” I said.

After prison, everything satisfied me.

“Well, then, don’t make trouble…”

A week later I was packing. As it turned out, I needed just a single suitcase.

I almost wept with self-pity. After all, I was thirty-six years old. Had worked eighteen of them. I earned money, bought things with it. I owned a certain amount, it seemed to me. And still I only needed one suitcase – and of rather modest dimensions at that. Was I poor, then? How had that happened?

Books? Well, basically, I had banned books, which were not allowed through customs anyway. I had to give them out to my friends, along with my so-called archives.

Manuscripts? I had clandestinely sent them to the West a long time before.

Furniture? I had taken my desk to the second-hand store. The chairs were taken by the artist Chegin, who had been making do with crates. The rest I threw out.

And so I left the Soviet Union with one suitcase. It was plywood, covered with fabric and, had chrome reinforcements at the corners. The lock didn't work; I had to wind clothes line around it.

Once I had taken it to Pioneer camp. It said in ink on the lid: "Junior group. Seryozha Dovlatov." Next to it someone had amiably scratched: "Shithead". The fabric was torn in several places. Inside, the lid was plastered with photographs: Rocky Marciano, Louis Armstrong, Joseph Brodsky, Gina Lollobrigida in a transparent outfit. The customs agent tried to tear Lollobrigida off with his nails. He succeeded only in scratching her. But he didn't touch Brodsky. He merely asked, "Who's that?" I said he was a distant relative…

On May 16 I found myself in Italy. I stayed in the Hotel Dina in Rome. I shoved the suitcase under the bed.

I soon received fees from Russian journals. I bought blue sandals, flannel slacks and four linen shirts. I never opened the suitcase.

Three months later I moved to the United States, to New York. First I lived in the Hotel Rio. Then we stayed with friends in Flushing. Finally, I rented an apartment in a decent neighbourhood. I put the suitcase in the back of the closet. I never undid the clothes line.

Four years passed. Our family was reunited. Our daughter turned into a young American. Our son was born. He grew up and started misbehaving. One day my wife, exasperated, shouted, "Into the closet, right now!"

He spent about three minutes in there. I let him out and asked, "Were you scared? Did you cry?"

He said, "No. I sat on the suitcase."

Then I took out the suitcase. And opened it.

On top was a decent double-breasted suit, intended for interviews, symposiums, lectures and fancy receptions. I figured it would do for

Nobel ceremonies, too. Then a poplin shirt and shoes wrapped in paper. Beneath them, a corduroy jacket lined with fake fur. To the left, a winter hat of fake sealskin. Three pairs of Finnish nylon crêpe socks. Driving gloves. And last but not least, an officer's leather belt.

On the bottom of the suitcase lay a page of *Pravda* from May 1980. A large headline proclaimed: "LONG LIVE THE GREAT TEACHING!" From the middle of the page stared a portrait of Karl Marx.

As a schoolboy I liked to draw the leaders of the world proletariat – especially Marx. Just start smearing an ordinary splotch of ink around and you've already got a resemblance…

I looked at the empty suitcase. On the bottom was Karl Marx. On the lid was Brodsky. And between them, my lost, precious, only life.

I shut the suitcase. Mothballs rattled around inside. The clothes were piled up in a motley mound on the kitchen table. That was all I had acquired in thirty-six years. In my entire life in my homeland. I thought, "Could this be it?" And I replied, "Yes, this is it."

At that point, memories engulfed me. They must have been hidden in the folds of those pathetic rags, and now they had escaped. Memories that should be called *From Marx to Brodsky*. Or perhaps, *What I Acquired*. Or simply, *The Suitcase*.

But, as usual, this foreword is beginning to drag…

The Finnish Crêpe Socks

This happened eighteen years ago, when I was a student at Leningrad University.

The university campus was in the old part of town. The combination of water and stone creates a special, majestic atmosphere there. It’s hard to be a slacker under those circumstances, but I managed.

Since there is such a thing as the exact sciences, there must also be the inexact sciences. It seems to me that first among the inexact sciences is philology. And so I became a student in the philology department.

A week later a slender girl in imported shoes fell in love with me. Her name was Asya. Asya introduced me to her friends. They were all older than us — engineers, journalists, cameramen. One was even a store manager. These people dressed well. They liked going to restaurants and travelling. Some had their own cars.

Back then they seemed mysterious, powerful and attractive. I wanted to belong to their crowd. Later many of them emigrated. Now they’re just regular elderly Jews.

The life we led demanded significant expenditures. Most often they fell on the shoulders of Asya’s friends. This embarrassed me considerably. I still remember how Dr Logovinsky slipped me four roubles while Asya was hailing a cab…

You can divide the world into two kinds of people: those who ask, and those who answer. Those who pose questions, and those who frown in irritation in response.

Asya’s friends did not ask her questions. And all *I* ever did was ask, “Where were you? Who did you meet in the subway? Where did you get that French perfume?”

Most people consider problems whose solutions don't suit them to be insoluble. And they constantly ask questions to which they don't need truthful answers.

To cut a long story short, I was meddlesome and stupid.

I acquired debts. They grew in geometric progression. By November they had reached eighteen roubles – a monstrous sum in those days. I learnt about pawnshops with their stubs and receipts, their atmosphere of dejection and poverty.

When Asya was near I couldn't think about it. But as soon as we said goodbye, the thought of my debts floated in like a black cloud. I awoke with a sense of impending disaster. It took me hours just to convince myself to get dressed. I seriously planned holding up a jewellery store. I was convinced that all the thoughts of a pauper in love were criminal.

By then my academic success had diminished noticeably. Asya hadn't been an outstanding student to begin with. The deans began talking about our moral image. I noticed that when a man is in love and he has debts, his moral image becomes a topic of conversation.

In short, everything was horrible.

Once I was wandering around town looking for six roubles. I had to get my winter coat out of hock. And I ran into Fred Kolesnikov.

Fred was smoking, leaning against the brass rail of the Eliseyev Store. I knew he was a black marketeer. Asya had introduced us once. He was a tall young man, about twenty-three years old, with an unhealthy complexion. As he spoke, he smoothed his hair nervously.

Without a second thought, I went over to him. "Could you lend me six roubles until tomorrow?" I tried to act pushy when I borrowed money, so that people could turn me down easily.

"Without a doubt," said Fred, taking out a small, square wallet.

I regretted not asking for more.

"Take more," said Fred.

Like a fool, I protested.

Fred looked at me curiously.

“Let’s have lunch,” he said. “My treat.”

His demeanour was simple and natural. I always envied people who could be that way.

We walked three blocks to the Chayka restaurant. It was empty. The waiters were smoking at a side table. The windows were wide open. The curtains swayed in the breeze.

We decided to go to the far corner. A young man in a silvery Dacron jacket stopped Fred. They had a rather mysterious conversation.

“Greetings.”

“My respects,” said Fred.

“Well?”

“Nothing.”

The young man’s eyebrows rose in disappointment. “Absolutely nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“But I asked you.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“But can I count on it?”

“Indubitably.”

“It would be good sometime this week.”

“I’ll try.”

“What about a guarantee?”

“No guarantees. But I’ll try.”

“Will it be a label?”

"Naturally."

"So, call me."

"Of course."

"Do you remember my phone number?"

"Unfortunately I don't."

"Please write it down."

"With pleasure."

"Even though this is not a conversation for the phone."

"I agree."

"Maybe you'll just come by with the wares?"

"Gladly."

"Do you remember my address?"

"Afraid not…"

And so on.

We went to the far corner. The clear folds of the ironing showed on the tablecloth. The cloth was rough.

Fred said, "See that wannabe? A year ago he ordered a set of Delbanas with a cross — "

I interrupted him. "What are Delbanas with a cross?"

"Watches," Fred replied. "It's not important… I brought him the goods at least ten times. He wouldn't take them. He came up with a new excuse each time. In the end, he never did take them. I kept thinking, "What's he playing at?" And suddenly I realized that he didn't want to *buy* my watches, he just wanted to feel like a businessman who needed a shipment of brand-name goods. He wanted an excuse to keep asking me, 'How is our arrangement?'"

The waitress took our order. We lit up our cigarettes and I asked, "Couldn't you be arrested?"

Fred thought about it and replied calmly, “It’s not out of the question. I’ll be sold out by my own people,” he added without anger.

“Then maybe you should stop?”

He frowned. “I used to work as a shipping clerk. I lived on ninety roubles a month…” Then he suddenly stood up and shouted, “It’s a farce!”

“Prison isn’t any better.”

“What can I do? I have no talents. I refuse to cripple myself for ninety roubles… Well, all right, so I’ll eat two thousand hamburgers in my lifetime. Wear out twenty-five dark-grey suits. Leaf through seven hundred issues of the local newspaper. And die without scratching the earth’s surface. Is that it?… I’d rather live only a minute, but live it right!”

Our food and drink was brought.

My new friend continued to philosophize. “There’s nothing before our birth but an abyss, and there’s only an abyss after our death. Our life is but a grain of sand in the indifferent ocean of infinity. So let’s try to keep the moment from boredom and despair! Let’s try to leave a scratch on the earth’s crust. Let the average Joe pull the load. He’s not going to perform miracles. Or even commit crimes…”

I almost shouted at Fred, “Then why don’t *you* perform any miracles!” But I controlled myself. He was paying for the drinks.

We spent about an hour in the restaurant. Then I said, “Time to go. The pawnshop will close.”

And then Fred Kolesnikov made me an offer. “Want to get in on the share? I work carefully, I don’t take hard currency or gold. You’ll improve your finances and then you can quit. How about it? Let’s have a drink now and talk tomorrow.”

The next day I thought my pal would stand me up, but Fred was merely late. We met near the idle fountain in front of the Astoria

Hotel. Then we went off into the bushes. Fred said, “Two Finnish women will be here in a minute with the goods. Grab a cab and go with them to this address.”

He handed me a scrap of newsprint and went on. “Rymar will meet you. Easy to recognize – he’s got the face of an idiot and an orange sweater. I’ll be there after ten minutes. Everything will be OK!”

“But I don’t speak Finnish.”

“That doesn’t matter. The important thing is to smile. I’d go myself, but they know me here…” Fred suddenly grabbed my hand. “There they are! Go to it!”

And he disappeared into the bushes.

I went to meet the two women, feeling terribly nervous. They looked like peasants, with broad, tanned faces. They were wearing light raincoats, elegant shoes and bright kerchiefs. Each carried a shopping bag as swollen as a soccer ball.

Gesticulating wildly, I finally led the women to the taxi stand. There was no line. I kept repeating, “Mr Fred, Mr Fred,” and plucked at one woman’s sleeve.

“Where is that guy?” the woman said angrily. “Where the hell is he? What’s he trying to pull?”

“You speak Russian?”

“My mama was Russian.”

I said, “Mr Fred will be coming a bit later. Mr Fred asked me to take you to his house.”

A car pulled up. I gave the address. Then I started looking out the window. I hadn’t realized how many policemen there could be in a crowd of pedestrians.

The women spoke Finnish to each other. They were clearly unhappy about something. Then they laughed and I felt better.

A man in a fiery sweater was waiting for us on the sidewalk. He said to me with a wink, “What a couple of dogs!”

"Take a look in the mirror," Ilona said angrily. She was the younger one.

"They speak Russian," I said.

"Terrific," Rymar said without skipping a beat, "marvellous. Brings us closer. How do you like Leningrad?"

"Not bad," Maria said.

"Have you been to the Hermitage?"

"Not yet. What is it?"

"They have paintings, souvenirs, and so on. Before that, tsars lived in it," said Rymar.

"We should take a look," Ilona said.

"You haven't been to the Hermitage!" Rymar was shocked. He even slowed his pace a bit, as if being with such uncultured people was dragging him down.

We went up to the second floor. Rymar pushed open the door, which wasn't locked. There were dirty dishes everywhere. The walls were covered with photographs. Colourful dust jackets of foreign records lay on the couch. The bed wasn't made.

Rymar put on the light and quickly neatened up. Then he said, "What have you brought?"

"Why don't you tell us where your pal with the money is?"

There were footsteps at that moment, and Fred Kolesnikov appeared. He was carrying a newspaper that had been in his mailbox. He looked calm, even indifferent.

"*Terve*," he said to the Finns. "Hello."

Then he turned to Rymar. "Boy, they look pissed. Have you been hitting on them?"

"Me?" said Rymar indignantly. "We were talking about Art! By the way, they speak Russian."

“Wonderful,” said Fred. “Good evening, Madame Lenart; how are you, Mademoiselle Ilona?”

“All right, thanks.”

“Why did you hide the fact that you speak Russian?”

“No one asked.”

“We should have a drink first,” Rymar said.

He took a bottle of Cuban rum from the closet. The Finns drank with pleasure. Rymar poured another round. When the guests went to use the bathroom, he said, “All these Laplanders look alike.”

“Especially since they’re sisters,” Fred explained.

“Just as I thought… By the way, that mug of Mrs Lenart’s doesn’t inspire confidence in me.”

Fred yelled at Rymar, “And whose mug does inspire confidence in you, besides the mug of a police investigator?”

The Finns soon returned. Fred gave them a clean towel. They raised their glasses and smiled – the second time that day. They kept their shopping bags on their laps.

“Cheers!” Rymar said. “To victory over the Germans!”

We drank, and so did the Finns. A phonograph stood on the floor, and Fred turned it on with his foot. The black disc bobbed slightly.

“Who’s your favourite writer?” Rymar was bugging the Finns.

The women consulted each other. Then Ilona said, “Karjalainen, perhaps?”

Rymar smiled condescendingly to indicate that he approved of the named candidate – but also that he himself had higher pretensions.

“I see,” he said. “What are your wares?”

“Socks,” Maria said.

“Nothing else?”

“What else would you like?”

“How much?” Fred inquired.

“Four hundred thirty-two roubles,” barked Ilona, the younger one.

“*Mein Gott*!” Rymar exclaimed. “The bared fangs of capitalism!”

“I want to know how much you brought. How many pairs?” Fred demanded.

“Seven hundred and twenty.”

“Nylon crêpe?” Rymar demanded.

“Synthetic,” Ilona replied. “Sixty copecks the pair. Total, four hundred thirty-two roubles.”

Here I have to make a small mathematical digression. Crêpe socks were in fashion then. Soviet industry did not manufacture them, so you could buy them only on the black market. A pair of Finnish socks cost six roubles. The Finns were offering them for one tenth that amount. Nine hundred per cent pure profit…

Fred took out his wallet and counted out the money.

“Here,” he said, “an extra twenty roubles. Leave the goods right in the shopping bags.”

“We have to drink to the peaceful resolution of the Suez crisis! To the annexation of Lotharingia!” said Rymar.

Ilona shifted the money to her left hand. She picked up her glass, which was filled to the brim.

“Let’s ball these Finns,” Rymar whispered, “in the name of international unity.”

Fred turned to me. “See what I have to work with?”

I felt anxious and scared. I wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

“Who’s your favourite artist?” Rymar asked Ilona.

And he put his hand on her back.

"Maybe," Ilona said, moving away.

Rymar lifted his brows in reproach, as if his aesthetic sense had been offended.

Fred said to me, "The women have to be seen off and the driver given seven roubles. I'd send Rymar, but he'll filch part of the money."

"Me?!" Rymar was incensed. "With my crystal-clear honesty?"

When I got back, there were coloured cellophane packages everywhere. Rymar looked slightly crazed.

"Piastres, krona, dollars," he mumbled, "francs…"

Suddenly he calmed down and took out a notebook and felt-tip pen. He made some calculations and said, "Exactly seven hundred and twenty pairs. The Finns are an honest people. That's what you get with an underdeveloped state."

"Multiply by three," Fred told him.

"Why by three?"

"The socks will go for three roubles if we sell them wholesale. Fifteen hundred plus of pure profit."

Rymar immediately arrived at the precise figure. "One thousand seven hundred twenty-eight roubles." Madness and practicality coexisted in him.

"Five hundred something for each of us," Fred added.

"Five hundred seventy-six," Rymar specified.

Later Fred and I were in a shashlik restaurant. The oilcloth on the table was sticky. The air was filled with a greasy fog. People floated past like fish in an aquarium.

Fred looked distracted and gloomy. I said, "That much money in five minutes!"

I had to say something.

“You still have to wait forty minutes to get some greasy pies cooked in margarine,” Fred replied.

Then I asked, “What do you need me for?”

“I don’t trust Rymar. Not because Rymar might cheat a client, though that’s not out of the question. And not because Rymar can stick a client with old certificates instead of money. And not even because he tends to put his hands on the clients. But because Rymar is stupid. What destroys fools? A longing for Art and Beauty, and Rymar has this longing. Despite his historical limitations, he wants a Japanese portable radio. Rymar goes to the hard-currency store and hands the cashier forty dollars. With his face! Even in the most ordinary grocery store, when he hands the cashier a rouble, the cashier is sure the rouble’s stolen. And here he has forty dollars! A clear violation of the hard-currency regulations. Sooner or later he’ll wind up in jail.”

“What about me?”

“You won’t. You’ll have other problems.”

I didn’t ask which ones.

Taking his leave, Fred added, “You’ll get your share on Thursday.”

I went home feeling a strange mixture of anxiety and elation. There must be some vile power in crazy money.

I didn’t tell Asya about my adventure. I wanted to amaze her. To turn suddenly into a rich and expansive man.

Meanwhile, things were growing worse with her. I kept asking her questions. Even when I was putting down her friends, I used the interrogative form: “Don’t you think that Arik Shulman is a jerk?” I wanted to compromise Shulman in Asya’s eyes and achieved just the opposite, of course.

I’ll tell you, running ahead of my story, that we broke up in the fall. For sooner or later a person who keeps asking questions is going to learn to give answers…

Fred called on Thursday. “A catastrophe!”

I thought Rymar had been arrested.

“Worse,” said Fred. “Go into the nearest clothing store.”

“Why?”

“All the stores are flooded with crêpe socks. Soviet crêpe socks. Eighty copecks a pair. Quality no worse than the Finnish ones. The same synthetic shit.”

“What can we do?”

“Nothing. What could we do? Who would have expected a low blow like this from a socialist economy? Who can I give Finnish socks to now? They won’t take them for a rouble now! *I* know our damned industry. First they screw around for twenty years and then – bam! And all the stores are filled with some crap or other. Once they get a production line going, that’s it. They’ll stamp out millions of those crêpe socks a minute.”

We divided up the socks. Each of us got two hundred forty pairs. Two hundred forty pairs of identical, ugly, pea-green-coloured socks. The only consolation was the “Made in Finland” label.

After that, many things happened. The operation with the Italian raincoats. The resale of six German stereos. A brawl in the Cosmos Hotel over a case of American cigarettes. Carrying a load of Japanese cameras and fleeing a police squad. And lots of other things.

I paid off my debts. Bought myself some decent clothes. Changed departments at college. Met the girl I eventually married. Went to the Baltics for a month when Rymar and Fred were arrested. Began my feeble literary attempts. Became a father. Got into trouble with the authorities. Lost my job. Spent a month in Kalyayevo Prison.

And only one thing did not change: for twenty years I paraded around in pea-coloured socks. I gave them to all my friends. Wrapped Christmas ornaments in them. Dusted with them. Stuck

them into the cracks of window frames. And still the number of those lousy socks barely diminished.

And so I left, leaving a pile of Finnish crêpe socks in the empty apartment. I shoved three pairs in my suitcase.

They reminded me of my criminal youth, my first love and my old friends. Fred served his two years and then was killed in a motorcycle accident on his Chezet. Rymar served one year and now works as a dispatcher in a meat-packing plant. Asya emigrated and teaches lexicology at Stanford – which is a strange comment on American scholarship.

The Nomenklatura Half-boots

I must begin with a confession. I practically stole these shoes…

Two hundred years ago the historian Nikolai Karamzin visited France. Russian émigrés there asked him, “What’s happening back at home, in two words?”

Karamzin didn’t even need two words. “Stealing,” he replied.

And they really are stealing. On a broader scale every year.

People carry off beef carcasses from meat-packing plants. Carders from textile factories. Lenses from photographic firms. They swipe everything – tiles, gypsum, polyethylene, electric motors, bolts, screws, radio tubes, thread, glass.

Often this takes on a metaphysical character. I’m talking about completely mysterious thefts without any rational goal. That can happen only in the Russian state, I’m convinced.

I knew a refined, noble and educated man who stole a pail of concrete from his job. Along the way the concrete set, of course. The thief threw away the rock-hard lump not far from his house. Another friend broke into a propaganda office and removed the ballot box. He brought it home and promptly lost all interest in it. A third friend stole a fire extinguisher. A fourth stole a bust of Paul Robeson from his boss’s office. A fifth, the poster column from Shkapin Street. And a sixth, a lectern from an amateur theatre club.

I, as you will see, acted much more practically: I stole good-quality Soviet shoes, intended for export. Of course, I didn’t steal them from a store. Soviet stores don’t carry shoes like that. I swiped them from the chairman of the Leningrad City Executive Committee – otherwise known as the mayor of Leningrad. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

After the army, I took a job with a factory newsletter. I spent three years there. I realized that ideological work was not for me. I wanted something more direct, posing fewer moral doubts.

I remembered that I had attended art school a long time before (the same one, incidentally, which graduated the famous artist Shemyakin). I had retained a few skills.

Friends with pull got me into a DPI, a decorative and applied arts studio. I became an apprentice stone-cutter. I decided to "find myself" in monumental sculpture.

Alas, monumental sculpture is a very conservative genre. The cause is the monumentality itself. You can secretly write novels and symphonies. You can secretly experiment on canvas. But just try to hide a twelve-foot-high sculpture!

For work like that you need a roomy studio. Significant support systems. A whole staff of assistants, moulders and loaders. In short, you need official recognition. And that means total dependability. And no experimentation…

Once I visited the studio of a famous sculptor. His unfinished works loomed in the corners. I quickly recognized Yuri Gagarin, Mayakovsky, Fidel Castro. I looked closer and froze – they were all naked. I mean, absolutely naked. With conscientiously modelled buttocks, sexual organs and muscles. I felt a chill of fear.

"Nothing unusual," the sculptor explained. "We're realists. First we do the anatomy, then the clothes…"

But our sculptors are rich. They get paid most for depictions of Lenin. Even Karl Marx's labour-intensive beard doesn't pay as well.

There's a monument to Lenin in every city, in every regional centre. Commissions of that sort are inexhaustible. An experienced sculptor can do Lenin blind – that is, blindfolded. Though curious things do happen.

Once, for instance, in the central square of Chelyabinsk, opposite the city hall, they were going to erect a monument to Lenin. A major

rally was organized. About fifteen hundred people showed up. Solemn music played. Orators gave speeches.

The statue was covered with grey cloth.

And then the moment of truth. To the sound of a drum-roll, the bureaucrats of the local executive committee pulled down the cloth.

Lenin was depicted in his familiar pose – a tourist hitching a ride on the highway. His right arm pointed the way to the future. His left was in the pocket of his open coat.

The music stopped. In the ensuing silence someone laughed. A minute later, the whole crowd was laughing.

Only one man did not laugh: the Leningrad sculptor Viktor Dryzhakov. The look of horror on his face was gradually replaced with a grimace of indifference and resignation.

What had happened? The poor sculptor had given Lenin two caps, one on the leader’s head, the other one clutched in his fist.

The bureaucrats hurriedly wrapped the rejected statue in grey cloth.

In the morning the statue was unveiled once more to the crowds. The extra cap had been removed overnight…

We have been sidetracked once again.

Monuments are born this way: the sculptor makes a clay model. The moulder casts it in plaster. Then the stone-cutters take over.

There is the plaster figure. And there is the formless hunk of marble. Everything extra has to be removed. The plaster prototype must be copied with absolute accuracy.

There are special machines for that, called dotters. They make thousands of chips in the stone. In this way the contours of the future monument are determined.

Then the stone-cutter arms himself with a small perforator. He removes crude layers of marble. Picks up the hammer and chisel. All that’s left is the finishing stage, the filigree, very demanding work.

The stone-cutter works on the marble surface. One wrong move and it's the end. Because the structure of marble is like that of wood. Marble has fragile layers, hard spots, cracks. There are structural clots, something like knots in wood. Many traces of other ores are mixed in. And so on. In general, this is exacting and difficult work.

I was put into a team of stone-cutters. There were three of us. The foreman's name was Osip Likhachev. His helper and friend was called Viktor Tsypin. Both were masters of their craft and, of course, confirmed drunkards.

Likhachev drank daily, while Tsypin suffered from chronic binges. Which did not keep Likhachev from having an occasional binge or Tsypin from having hair-of-the-dog at any opportunity.

Likhachev was grim, severe and taciturn. He said nothing for hours and then suddenly pronounced brief and completely unexpected speeches. His monologues were continuations of complex inner thoughts. He would exclaim, turning sharply to whoever happened by, "And you say capitalism, America, Europe! Private property!… The lowliest darkie has a car!… But the dollar, let me tell you, is falling!"

"That means it has somewhere to fall," Tsypin responded merrily. "That's not so bad. But your shitty rouble has nowhere to fall."

But Likhachev, plunged once more into silence, did not react.

Tsypin, on the contrary, was talkative and friendly. He liked arguing.

"The car's not the point," he said. "I like cars myself… The point is that under capitalism you have freedom. If you want to, you can drink from morning till night. If you want to, you can slave away around the clock. No ideological education. No socialist morality. Magazines with naked babes wherever you look… And then there's the politics. Let's say you don't like some minister – fine. You write to the editor: the minister is full of shit! You can spit in any president's kisser. To say nothing of the vice-president's… But a car isn't such a rare thing here, you know. I've had a Zaporozhets since 1960, and so what?"

And Tsypin had indeed bought himself a Zaporozhets. However, since he was a chronic drunkard, he didn't drive it for months at a time. In November the car was covered with snow. The Zaporozhets turned into a small snow hill. The neighbourhood kids were always around it.

In the spring the snow melted. The Zaporozhets was as flat as a sports car. Its roof had been squashed by the kids' sleds.

Tsypin seemed almost relieved. "I have to be sober at the wheel. But I can get home drunk in a taxi…"

Those were my teachers.

In due time we received a commission, a rather lucrative rush job. We were supposed to hack out a relief depiction of the great writer and scientist Mikhail Lomonosov for a new metro station. The sculptor Chudnovsky quickly prepared the model. The moulders cast it in plaster. We came to take a look at this business.

Lomonosov was shown in a suspicious-looking robe. In his right hand he held a rolled paper. In his left, the globe. The paper, as I understood it, symbolized creativity, and the globe, science.

Lomonosov himself looked well fed, feminine and unkempt. He resembled a pig. In the Stalin years, that's how they depicted capitalists. Apparently, Chudnovsky wanted to reaffirm the primacy of the material over the spiritual.

But I liked the globe. Even though for some reason it showed the American side to the viewers.

The sculptor had diligently modelled miniature Cordilleras, Appalachians and Guiana Highlands. He hadn't forgotten the lakes and rivers, either – Huron, Titicaca, Manitoba…

It looked rather strange. I doubt that such a detailed map of the Americas had existed in Lomonosov's era. I mentioned this to Chudnovsky. The sculptor grew angry.

"You talk like a tenth-grader! My sculpture isn't a visual aid! Before you is Bach's Sixth Invention, captured in marble. Rather, in

plaster… The latest thing in metaphysical syntheticism!”

“Short and sweet,” said Tsypin.

“Don’t argue,” Likhachev whispered. “What’s it to you?”

Unexpectedly, Chudnovsky softened. “Maybe you’re right. Nevertheless, we’ll leave it as is. Every work must have a minimal dose of the absurd…”

We started work. First we worked at the studio. Then it turned out that it was a bigger rush. The station was going to be opened during the November holidays.

We had to finish up on-site. That is, underground.

Lomonosovskaya Station was in its completion stage. Stoneworkers, electricians and plasterers were at work. Innumerable compressors created a fiendish din. It smelt of burnt rubber and wet lye. Bonfires burned in metal barrels.

Our model was carefully lowered underground. It was set up on enormous oak scaffolds. A four-ton marble slab was suspended next to it on chains. You could make out Lomonosov’s approximate contours on it. The most delicate part of the work lay ahead.

And here an unexpected complication arose. The escalators were not working yet. To go up for vodka meant climbing six hundred steps.

The first day, Likhachev announced, “You go. You’re the youngest.”

I’d never known that the metro was so deep, especially in Leningrad, where the soil is damp and friable. Twice I had to stop to catch my breath. The Stolichnaya I brought back was consumed in a minute.

I had to go up again. I was still the youngest. That day I went up six times. My knees hurt.

The next day we tried a different plan. To wit, we brought six bottles with us. But it didn’t help: our supplies attracted the attention

of the men around us. Electricians, welders, painters and plasterers came by. In ten minutes the vodka was gone. And I went upstairs again.

By the third day my teachers had decided to quit drinking. Temporarily, of course. But the other men were still at it, and they treated us generously.

On the fourth day, Likhachev announced, “I’m no punk! I can’t drink on other people’s money any more! Who’s the youngest among us, boys?”

And I went upstairs again. It was easier this time. My legs must have become stronger.

So basically it was Likhachev and Tsypin who did the work. Lomonosov’s image was getting clearer. And, I must add, more repulsive.

Occasionally the sculptor Chudnovsky stopped by offering guidance and making some changes as he went.

The workers were also interested in Lomonosov. They asked questions like: “What’s that supposed to be, a man or a woman?”

“Something in between,” Tsypin replied.

The holidays approached. The detailed work was coming to an end. The Lomonosovskaya Metro Station was taking on a festive and solemn look.

The floor was tiled with mosaics, the arched vaults ornamented with cast-iron sconces. One of the walls was intended for our relief. A gigantic welded frame was set up. A bit higher hung the heavy blocks and chains.

I cleaned up the garbage. My teachers were putting on the final polish. Tsypin was working on the lace jabot and shoelaces. Likhachev was polishing curls on the wig.

On the eve of the opening we slept underground. We had to hang our ill-starred relief. That meant lifting it with a tackle, putting in what

they call pitons, and finally pouring epoxy over the fastening to make it sturdier.

It’s rather complicated lifting a slab like that four yards into the air. We spent several hours doing it. The blocks kept getting stuck. The pintles missed the holes. The chains creaked and the stone swayed. Likhachev kept shouting, “Keep away!”

At last the marble lump was suspended. We took down the chain and stepped back a respectful distance. From afar Lomonosov looked better.

Tsypin and Likhachev drank in relief. Then they prepared the epoxy.

We left near dawn. The formal unveiling was at one.

Likhachev came in a navy suit. Tsypin wore a suede jacket and jeans. I’d had no idea he was a dandy. What’s more, both were sober. That changed even the colour of their complexions.

We went underground. Well-dressed, sober workmen (although many of them had suspicious bulges in their pockets) strolled among the marble columns.

Four carpenters were quickly finishing off a rostrum. It was being set up under our relief.

Osip Likhachev lowered his voice and said to me, “There’s a suspicion that the epoxy has not hardened. Tsypin put in too much solvent. Basically, that marble fucker is hanging by a thread. So when the rally starts, stay to the side. And warn your wife.”

“But the cream of Leningrad will be standing there! What if the thing falls?”

“Might be for the best,” the foreman replied wanly.

The celebrated guests were to appear at one o’clock. The city mayor, Comrade Sizov, was expected. He was to be accompanied

by representatives of Leningrad society – scholars, generals, athletes, writers.

The programme for the opening was this: first a small banquet for the select few. Then a brief rally. Handing out of certificates and awards. And then – as the station chief put it, “by preference” – some would go to a restaurant, others to an amateur concert.

The guests arrived at 1.20. I recognized the composer Andreyev, the weightlifter Dudko and the director Konstantinov. And, of course, the mayor.

He was a tall, middle-aged man. He looked almost intellectual. He was guarded by two grim, beefy guys, who were distinguished by a light air of melancholy, evidence of their clear readiness to get into a fight.

The mayor walked around the station and lingered in front of the relief. He asked softly, “Who does he remind me of?”

“Khrushchev,” Tsypin whispered to us with a wink. The mayor did not wait for an answer and moved on. The station chief, laughing obsequiously, ran after him.

By then the rostrum was wrapped in pink sateen. A few minutes later the inspection was over. We were invited to sit down at the table.

A mysterious side door opened. We saw a spacious room. I hadn’t known it existed. This was probably intended as a bomb shelter for the administration.

The guests and a few honoured workmen took part in the banquet. All three of us were invited. Apparently, we passed for the local intelligentsia. Especially since the sculptor was not present.

There were about thirty people at the table: guests on one side, us on the other.

The first to speak was the station chief. He introduced the mayor, calling him a “firm Leninist”. Everyone applauded for a long time.

Then the mayor spoke. He read from a piece of paper. Expressed a feeling of profound satisfaction. Congratulated everyone who worked on the project on beating the deadline. Stumbled over three or four names. And, finally, proposed a toast to wise Leninist management.

Everyone raised a cheer and reached for their glasses.

Then there were a few more toasts. The station chief drank to the mayor. Composer Andreyev to the radiant future. Director Konstantinov to a peaceful coexistence. And the weightlifter Dudko to the fairy tale that turns into reality before our very eyes.

Tsypin turned pink. He had a tall glass of brandy and reached for the champagne.

“Don’t mix,” Likhachev suggested, “you’re in fine shape already.”

“What do you mean, don’t mix?” Tsypin demanded. “Why not? I’m doing it intelligently. Scientifically. Mixing vodka and beer is one thing. Cognac and champagne is another. I’m a specialist in that area.”

“I can tell,” the foreman said grimly, “judging by the epoxy.”

A minute later everyone was talking. Tsypin was embracing director Konstantinov. The station chief was courting the mayor. Plasterers and masons, interrupting one another, were complaining about the lowered rates. Only Likhachev was silent. He was thinking about something. Suddenly he spoke harshly and unexpectedly, addressing Dudko, the weightlifter. “I knew a Jewish woman. We hooked up. She was a good cook…”

I was watching the mayor. Something was bothering him. Tormenting him. Making him frown and strain. A suffering grimace played on his lips from time to time.

Then, suddenly, the mayor moved closer to the table. Without lowering his head, he bent down. His left hand abandoned a sandwich and slipped under the tablecloth.

For a minute the honoured guest's face reflected intense concentration. Then, after emitting a barely audible sound, like a tyre deflating, the mayor cheerfully leant against the back of his chair. And picked up his sandwich in relief.

Then I lifted the tablecloth imperceptibly. Looked under the table and straightened immediately. What I saw astounded me and made me gasp. I quivered with secret knowledge.

What I saw were the mayor's large feet in tight-fitting green silk socks. His toes were moving, as if he were improvising on the piano.

His shoes stood nearby.

And here, I don't know what came over me. Either my suppressed dissidence erupted, or my criminal essence came to the fore. Or mysterious destructive forces were at play.

This happens once in every lifetime.

I recall subsequent events in a fog. I moved to the edge of my seat. Stretched out my leg. Found the mayor's shoes and carefully pulled them towards me.

And only after that froze in fear.

At that moment the station chief rose and said, "Attention, dear friends! I invite you to a brief ceremony. Honoured guests, please seat yourselves on the rostrum!"

Everyone stirred. Director Konstantinov adjusted his tie. The weightlifter Dudko hurriedly buttoned the top button of his trousers. Tsypin and Likhachev reluctantly put down their glasses.

I looked at the mayor. Anxiously, he was feeling around under the table with his foot. I didn't see it, of course, but I could guess from the expression on his bewildered face. I could tell that the radius of his search was increasing.

What else could I do?

Likhachev's briefcase was next to my chair. The briefcase was always with us. It could hold up to sixteen bottles of Stolichnaya. It

became my job to carry it around.

I dropped my handkerchief. I bent over and stuffed the mayor's shoes in the briefcase. I felt their noble, heavy solidity. I don't think anyone noticed.

I locked the briefcase and stood up. The other guests were standing, too – everyone except Comrade Sizov. The bodyguards were looking in puzzlement at their boss.

And here the mayor showed how clever and resourceful he was. Holding his hand to his chest, he said softly, "I don't feel well. I think I'll lie down for a minute…"

The mayor quickly removed his jacket, loosened his tie, and lay down on a nearby sofa. His feet in their green socks stretched wearily. His hands were clasped on his stomach. His eyes were shut.

The bodyguards went into action. One called the doctor. The other gave orders.

"Clear the room! I said, clear the room! Hurry it up! Start the ceremony!… I repeat, start the ceremony!"

"Can I help?" the station chief asked.

"Get out of here, you old fart!" came the reply.

The first bodyguard added, "Leave everything on the table! We can't rule out an assassination attempt! I hope you have the names of all the guests?"

The station chief nodded obsequiously. "I'll give you the list."

We left the room. I carried the briefcase in trembling hands. Workmen moved amid the columns. Lomonosov, thank God, was still on the wall.

The ceremony was not cancelled. The famous guests, deprived of their leader, slowed down near the tribunal. They were ordered to go up. The guests settled under the marble slab.

"Let's get out of here," Likhachev said. "What is there for us to see here? I know a beer joint on Chkalov Street."

“It would be good to know that the monument hasn’t collapsed.”

“If it does,” Likhachev said, “we’ll hear it in the bar.”

Tsypin added, “We’ll hear the laughter…”

We went upstairs. The day was cold but sunny. The city was decorated with holiday flags.

Our Lomonosov was taken down after two months. Leningrad scientists wrote a letter to the paper, complaining that our sculpture demeaned a great man. The complaints were directed against Chudnovsky, of course. So we were paid in full.

Likhachev said, “That’s the main thing.”

A Decent Double-Breasted Suit

I'm not dressed too well right now, and I used to dress even worse. In the Soviet Union I dressed so badly that I was rebuked for it. I remember when the director of Pushkin Hills told me, "Comrade Dovlatov, your trousers ruin the festive mood of our area."

The editors of places where I worked were also frequently unhappy with me. At one newspaper the editor complained, "You're compromising us, clear and simple. We sent you to the funeral of General Filonenko, and I have been informed that you showed up without a suit."

"I was wearing a jacket."

"You wore some old cassock."

"It's not a cassock. It's an imported jacket. And incidentally, it was a present from Léger."

(I really did get the jacket from Fernand Léger. But that story is to come.)

"What's a layjay?" the editor asked with a grimace.

"Léger is an outstanding French artist. Member of the Communist Party."

"I doubt it," said the editor, and then blew up. "Enough! You're always getting sidetracked! You're never like anyone else! You must dress in a manner befitting an employee of a serious newspaper!"

So I replied, "Then let the newspaper buy me a jacket. Or better yet, a suit. Naturally, I'll take care of the tie myself…"

But the editor was not being straight with me. He didn't care in the least how I dressed. That wasn't the point. There was a simpler explanation: I was the biggest one at the office. The tallest. That is,

as the bosses assured me, the most presentable. Or, in the words of Executive Secretary Minz, “the most representative”.

If a celebrity died, the newspaper delegated me to represent them. After all, coffins are heavy. And I approached these assignments with enthusiasm. Not because I liked funerals so much, but because I hated newspaper work.

“You’re pushing it,” the editor said.

“Not at all,” I said, “it’s a legitimate request. Railroad workers, for instance, get uniforms. Watchmen get warm jackets. Divers get diving suits. Let the newspaper buy me my special clothes. A suit for funerals.”

Our editor was a kind man. With his big salary, he could afford to be. And the times were comparatively liberal then.

He said, “Let’s compromise. You give me three socially significant articles by the New Year, three articles with broad socio-political resonance, and your bonus will be a modest suit.”

“What do you mean by modest? Cheap?”

“Not cheap, but black. For formal occasions.”

“OK,” I said, “we’ll remember this conversation.”

A week later, I arrived at work. Bezuglov, head of the propaganda department, called me into his office. I went down a flight of stairs. Bezuglov was talking on two phones at the same time.

“A Belorussian won’t do. Loads of Belorussians. Give me an Uzbek, or at least an Estonian… Wait, wait, I think we have an Estonian… The Moldavian is doubtful… What?… The labourer gets dropped, we have enough proletarians… Give me an intellectual or someone from the service sector. Best of all, career military. Some sergeant… Well, get going!”

Then he picked up the other phone. “Hello… I urgently need an Uzbek. Any quality, even a parasite… Try, be a pal, I won’t forget it.”

I greeted him and asked, “What’s with the ‘International’?”

Bezuglov said, “It’s almost Constitution Day, so we decided to do fifteen sketches. One for each republic. Encompass representatives of various nationalities.”

He took out his cigarettes and went on. “Let’s say there’s no problem with Russians. Plenty of Ukrainians too. Found a Georgian at the medical academy. An Azerbaijani at the meat-packing plant. Even located a Moldavian, a teacher at the regional Komsomol. But there’s a real problem with Uzbeks, Kyrgyzes and Turkmen. Where am I going to get an Uzbek?”

“In Uzbekistan,” I prompted.

“What a genius! Of course in Uzbekistan. But I have deadlines. Not to mention the fact that our travel allowance has been used up… So listen, do you want to make fifty roubles?”

“Sure.”

“I thought you would. Find me an Uzbek, I’ll give you fifty. I’ll call it a bonus for dangerous working conditions.”

“I have a Tatar friend.”

Bezuglov grew angry.

“What do I need a Tatar for? I’ve got Tatar neighbours on my floor. So what? They’re not a Union republic. Find me an Uzbek. I’ve divided up the Kyrgyz and the Turkmen among the freelancers. Sashka Shevelyov seems to have a Tajik. Samoilov’s looking for a Kazakh. And so on. I need an Uzbek. Will you do it?”

“All right, but I’m warning you: the article will be socially significant, with broad socio-political resonance.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“No. Is that an offer?”

“Don’t be silly, it’s out of the question. I drink only in the evenings… Not before 1 p.m.”

I’d known Bezuglov a long time. He was a special man. Came from Sverdlovsk.

I remember I had been on my way to the Urals on a business trip, and I had to stop in Sverdlovsk. It was around the May holidays, which meant trouble getting hotel reservations.

I had asked Bezuglov, “Could I spend the night at your parents’ house in Sverdlovsk?”

“Naturally!” he’d shouted. “Of course! As long as you like! They’ll be very glad to have you. They have a huge place. My pop is a corresponding member of the Academy, my mother is an honoured worker in the arts. They’ll give you home-made *pelmeni*… One condition though: don’t tell them you know me. Otherwise, forget it. I’ve been the black sheep of the family since I was fourteen!”

“All right,” I now said, “I’ll find you an Uzbek.”

I began. I flipped through my phone book. Called three dozen friends. At last, one acquaintance, a trumpet player, said, “We have a trombonist, Baliyev. He’s an Uzbek by nationality.”

“Terrific,” I said, “give me his phone number.”

“Write it down.”

I wrote it down.

“You’ll like him,” my friend said. “He’s a cultured guy, well-read, good sense of humour. Got out recently.”

“What do you mean, got out?”

“He served his term and got out.”

“You mean he’s a thief?” I asked.

“Why a thief?” My friend was insulted. “He was doing time for rape…”

I hung up.

Just then Bezuglov called. “You’re in luck,” he shouted. “We found an Uzbek. Mishchuk found him… Where? At Kuznechny Market. A small businessman – that’s even a good thing, it’s got unofficial

support now. Private allotments, all that… So everything's fine with the Uzbek."

"Too bad," I said, "I just got an excellent candidate. A cultured, educated Uzbek. Orchestra soloist. Just back from touring."

"Too late. Save him for another time. Mishchuk brought in the article. I have a new assignment for you. It's almost Efficiency Day. You have to find a modern Russian handyman. And do an article on him."

"Socially significant?"

"You bet."

"All right," I said, "I'll try."

I had heard of a handyman like that. My older brother, who worked in newsreels, had told me about him.

The old man lived on Yelizarovskaya Highway, near Leningrad, in a private house. It was easier than I expected to find him. The first person I ran into showed me the way.

The old man's name was Yevgeny Eduardovich. He restored antique cars. He dug out rusty, shapeless hulks from garbage dumps. Somehow he managed to recreate the car's original look. Then he *really* went to work: moulding, gluing, chroming…

He had restored dozens of antique models. There were Oldsmobiles and Chevrolets and Peugeots and Fords among his collection. Multicoloured, with glistening leather, brass and chrome, awkwardly refined: they created a smashing impression. And all the models worked. They vibrated, moved, honked. Rattling slightly, they passed pedestrians. It was an impressive sight, almost like a circus act.

Yevgeny Eduardovich sat high behind the wheel. His old leather jacket shone. His eyes were covered with celluloid glasses. A wide-brimmed cap completed his unique look.

By the way, he was practically the first Russian car driver. He had started driving in 1912. For a while he was Mikhail Rodzyanko's

personal chauffeur. Then he drove Trotsky, Lazar Kaganovich and Andrei Andreyev. He ran the first Soviet driving school. He ended the war as a commander of an armoured tank division. He had received numerous government awards. Naturally, he spent time in prison. In his declining years, he took up restoring antique cars.

His production was shown at international fairs. His models were used for domestic and foreign films. He corresponded in four languages with innumerable car magazines.

When his cars took part in movies, their owner accompanied them. Film directors noticed Yevgeny Eduardovich's impressive mien. First they used him in crowd scenes. Then he got bit parts: Mensheviks, noblemen, old-time scientists. He became something of an actor as well.

I spent two days in Yelizarovskaya. My notes were filled with interesting details. I couldn't wait to start writing.

I came back to the office. I learnt that Bezuglov was on a business trip. And he had told me that the travel funds were used up.

All right… I went to Borya Minz, the executive secretary of the newspaper. Told him about my plans. Told him the most exciting details.

Minz said, "What's his last name?"

I pulled out Yevgeny Eduardovich's card. "Holiday," I replied. "Yevgeny Eduardovich Holiday."

Minz's eyes grew round. "Holiday? A Russian handyman named Holiday? You're joking! What do we know about his background? Where did he get a name like that?"

"You think Minz is any better? Not to mention your background…"

"It's worse," Minz agreed. "Without a doubt. But Minz is a private individual. Nobody's writing articles about Minz for Russian Efficiency Day. Minz isn't a hero. No one's writing about Minz…"

(I thought to myself: don't write yourself off!)

He added, “Personally, I have nothing against the English.”

“I should think not,” I said.

I suddenly felt nauseated. What was happening? Everything was not for publication. Everything around us was not for publication. I don’t know where Soviet journalists got story ideas!… All my projects were unrealizable. All my conversations were not for the phone. All my acquaintances were suspicious.

The executive secretary said, “Write about a Heroine Mother. Find an ordinary, modest Heroine Mother. And with a normal last name. And write two hundred and fifty lines. Material like that will always get through. A Heroine Mother is like a no-lose lottery…”

What else could I do? I was a staff journalist, after all.

I started calling my friends again. A pal said, “Our janitor has a whole horde of kids. Terrible hooligans.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

I went to the address.

The janitor’s name was Lydia Vasilyevna Brykina. No Mr Holiday there! Her living quarters were a horrible sight. A rickety table, a couple of torn mattresses, a stifling stink. Ragged, messy kids everywhere. The youngest yowled in a plywood cradle. A girl of fourteen grimly drew on the window pane with her finger.

I explained the aim of my visit. Lydia Vasilyevna grew animated. “Go ahead and write, dearie… I’ll try. I’ll tell the people everything about my dog’s life.”

I asked, “Doesn’t the state help you?”

“It does. And how! I get forty roubles a month. Well, and the medals and ribbons. There’s a jar full of them on the sill. I’d rather exchange them for tangerines, four to one.”

“What about your husband?”

“Which one? I’ve had a whole troop of them. The last one went out to buy a bottle of rotgut and never came back. Over a year ago…”

What could I do? What could I write about that woman?

I spent a little time there and left. Promised to drop by next time.

I had no one to call. I was thoroughly disgusted. I wondered if I should quit again, find work as a stevedore.

My wife said, “A cultured lady lives across the way. Walks children in the morning. She has about ten of them… Find out… I’ve forgotten her name, starts with Sh…”

“Shvarts?”

“No, no, Shapovalova… Or Shaposhnikova… You can get her name and number from the building office.”

I went to the building office. Spoke to Mikheyev. He was a friendly and kindly man. He complained, “I got twelve jokers working for me, but I got no one to send for a bottle of booze…”

When I began talking about the lady, Mikheyev grew wary .

“I don’t know, talk to her yourself. Her name is Galina Viktorovna Shaporina. Apartment twenty-three. There she is out with the kids. Only I got nothing to do with it. It’s none of my concern.”

I headed for the park. Galina Viktorovna turned out to be a good-looking, respectable woman. In Soviet movies that’s how the people’s assessors look.

I introduced myself and explained what I wanted. The lady grew tense. She began talking just like our building manager. “What’s the matter? What’s the problem? Why me?”

I was getting sick of this. I put away my pen and said, “Why are you so scared? If you don’t want to talk, I’ll leave. I’m not a hooligan.”

“It’s not hooligans I’m afraid of.” She continued, “You seem like a cultured man. I know your mother and I knew your father. I think you can be trusted. I’ll tell you what it is. I really don’t fear hooligans. I’m afraid of the police.”

“But why are you afraid of me? I’m not a policeman.”

“But you’re a journalist. In my position, drawing attention to myself would be the height of stupidity. Naturally, I’m no Heroine Mother. And the children aren’t mine. I’ve organized something like a nursery school. I teach the children music, French, read poems to them. In state day care the children get sick, and they never get sick here. And I charge moderate fees. But you can imagine what would happen if the police learnt about it. It’s a private school, basically…”

“I can imagine,” I said.

“Then forget I exist.”

“All right,” I said.

I didn’t even bother calling the office. I figured I’d tell them I had writer’s block, if they asked. My fees for December would be symbolic, anyway. Around sixteen roubles. Forget about the suit. Just so they didn’t fire me…

Nevertheless, I did get a suit from the newspaper. A severe, double-breasted suit made in East Germany, if I’m not mistaken. This is how it happened:

I was at the typing pool. The red-haired beauty Manyunya Khlopina said, “Why won’t you invite me to a restaurant? I want to go to a restaurant, but you don’t invite me!”

I offered a weak excuse, “I don’t sleep with you, either.”

“Too bad. We’d listen to the radio together.”

At that moment a mysterious stranger appeared. I had noticed him earlier that day.

He was wearing an elegant suit and tie. His moustache blended into his low sideburns. A miniature leather bag hung from his wrist.

Running ahead, I’ll tell you he was a spy. We simply had no clue. We thought he was from the Baltics. We always took elegant men for Latvians.

The stranger spoke Russian with a barely noticeable accent.

He behaved matter-of-factly and even a bit aggressively. He slapped the editor on the back twice. He talked the Party organizer into a game of chess. He leafed through the technical guidelines in Minz's office for a long time.

Here I'd like to digress. I am convinced that almost all spies behave incorrectly. For some reason they hide, lie, pretend to be ordinary Soviet citizens. The very mysteriousness of their activities is suspicious. They should behave much more simply. First of all, they should dress as flashily as possible. That instils respect. Secondly, they shouldn't hide their foreign accent. That instils sympathy. And most importantly, they should act as unceremoniously as possible.

Say a spy is interested in a new ballistic missile. He meets a famous rocketry man at the theatre. He invites him to dinner. It's stupid to offer the man money. He wouldn't have enough. It's stupid to try to work the man over ideologically. He knows all that without anyone's help.

He has to use a completely different tactic. They should drink. Then he puts his arm around the man's shoulders. Pats him on the knee and says, "So how's it going, old man? I hear you've invented something new. Why don't you scribble down a couple of formulas for me on this napkin, just for fun?…"

That's it. The missile's as good as in his pocket.

The stranger spent the whole day at the office. We got used to him, even though people gave each other meaningful looks.

His name was Arthur.

So Arthur drops by the typing pool and says, "Excuse me, I thought this is being the bathroom."

I said, "Come with me. We're headed the same way."

In the can the spy looked in horror at our editorial towel. He took out his handkerchief.

We got to talking. Decided to go down to the canteen. From there I called my wife and went to the Kavkazsky restaurant.

It turned out we both liked Faulkner, Britten and paintings of the Thirties. Arthur was a thinking and competent man. In particular, he said, “Picasso’s art is merely drama, while Magritte’s work is a catastrophic spectacle.”

I asked, “Have you been in the West?”

“Of course.”

“Did you live there long?”

“Forty-three years. Until last Tuesday, to be precise.”

“I thought you were from Latvia.”

“Close enough. I’m Swedish. I want to write a book about Russia.”

We parted late at night near the Evropeyskaya Hotel. We made a date for the next day.

In the morning I was called into the editor’s office. A stranger, a man of fifty or so, was there. He was thin, bald, with just a dull-coloured wreath of hair over the ears. I wondered if he could comb his hair without taking off his hat.

The man was in the editor’s armchair. The owner of the office sat in a hard-backed visitor’s chair. I sat on the edge of the couch.

“Let me introduce you,” the editor said. “A representative of the KGB, Major Chilyayev.”

I rose politely. The major, without a smile, nodded. Evidently he was burdened by the imperfection of the world around him.

In the editor’s behaviour I observed – simultaneously – sympathy and gloating. He seemed to be saying, Well? Now you’ve done it! You’re on your own now. I told you so, didn’t I, you fool?”

The major spoke. His harsh voice was at odds with his weary demeanour.

“Do you know Arthur Tornstrom?”

“Yes, we met yesterday.”

“Did he ask you any suspicious questions?”

“I don’t think so. He didn’t ask me any questions at all, I don’t think. I can’t remember any.”

“Not one?”

“I don’t think so.”

“How did you strike up an acquaintance? Rather, where and how did you meet?”

“I was in the typing pool. He came in and asked — ”

“Ah, he asked? Then he did ask questions? What did he ask, if it’s not a secret?”

“He asked where the toilet was.”

The major wrote it down and said, “I suggest you be more precise…”

The rest of the conversation seemed absolutely meaningless. Chilyayev was interested in everything. What did we eat? What did we drink? What artists did we talk about? He even wanted to know if the Swede went to the men’s room often.

The major insisted I recall all the details. Did the Swede abuse alcohol? Did he have an eye for the ladies? Did he appear to be a latent homosexual?

I replied thoroughly and conscientiously. I had nothing to hide.

The major paused. He rose partly out of his chair. Then he raised his voice a bit. “We are counting on your conscientiousness. Even though you are rather frivolous. The information we have on you is more than contradictory: indiscriminate personal life, drinking, dubious jokes…”

I wanted to ask where the contradiction was, but I controlled myself. Especially since the major pulled out a rather voluminous folder. My name was written large on the cover.

I stared at the file. I felt what a pig might feel in the meat section of a deli.

The major continued. “We expect total frankness from you. We are counting on your help. I hope you understand the importance of this mission?… Most importantly, remember, we know everything. We know everything ahead of time. Absolutely everything…”

I wanted to ask, then how about Misha Baryshnikov? Did they know ahead of time that Misha would stay in America?

The major asked, “What arrangements did you make with the Swede? Are you supposed to meet today?”

“We’re supposed to,” I said. “He invited the wife and me to the Kirov Theatre. I think I’ll call, apologize, say I’m sick.”

“Not on your life,” the major said, rising up in his seat. “Go. Definitely go. And remember every detail. We’ll call you tomorrow morning.”

I thought to myself: just what I need!

“I can’t,” I said. “I have good reasons.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t have a suit. You need appropriate clothes for the theatre. Foreigners go there, by the way.”

“Why don’t you have a suit?” the major demanded. “That’s ridiculous! You work for a major organization.”

“I have a small salary,” I replied.

The editor chipped in. “I’ll let you in on a small secret. As you know, the New Year festivities are approaching. We have decided to award Comrade Dovlatov a valuable present. In half an hour he can go to the accounting office, and then to the Frunze Department Store. And pick out an appropriate suit for about one hundred twenty roubles.”

“But,” I say, “I’m not a regular size.”

“Don’t worry,” the editor said. “I’ll call the store manager.”

And so I came to own an imported double-breasted suit. Made in East Germany, if I’m not mistaken. I wore it about five times. Once when I went to the theatre with the Swede. And about four times when I was sent to funerals.

My Swede was expelled from the Soviet Union for being a conservative journalist who “expressed the interests of the right wing”.

Six years he had studied Russian. Wanted to write a book. And he was expelled. I hope without my participation. What I had told the major about him seemed perfectly harmless.

Moreover, I even warned Arthur that he was being watched. Rather, I hinted that the walls had ears. The Swede didn’t understand. Anyway, I had nothing to do with that. The most amazing thing was that my dissident friend Shamkovich then accused me of helping the KGB!

An Officer’s Belt

The worst thing for a drunk is to wake up in a hospital bed. Before you’re fully awake, you mutter, “That’s it! I’m through! For ever! Not another drop ever again!”

And suddenly you find a thick gauze bandage around your head. You want to touch it, but your left arm is in a cast. And so on.

This all happened to me in the summer of ’63 in the south of the Komi Republic.

I had been drafted a year earlier. I was put in the camp guards, and attended a twenty-day course for supervisors. Even earlier I had boxed for two years. I took part in countrywide competitions. However, I can’t recall a single time that the trainer said, “OK. That’s it. I’m not worried any more.”

But I did hear it from our instructor, Toroptsev, at the prison-supervisor school, after only three weeks. And even though I was going to face recidivist criminals, not boxers.

I tried looking around. Sunspots shone yellow on the linoleum floor. The night table was covered with medicine bottles. A newspaper hung on the wall by the door – *Lenin and Health*.

There was a smell of smoke and, strangely enough, of seaweed. I was in the camp medical unit.

My tightly bandaged head hurt. I could feel a deep wound over my eyebrow. My left arm did not function.

My uniform shirt hung on the back of the bed. There should have been a few cigarettes in there. I used a jar with an inky mixture in it for an ashtray. I had to hold the matchbox in my teeth.

Now I could recall yesterday’s events.

I had been crossed off the convoy list in the morning. I went to the sergeant. “What’s happened? Am I really getting a day off?”

“Sort of,” the sergeant said. “Congratulations… An inmate went crazy in barracks fourteen. Barking, crowing… Bit Auntie Shura, the cook… So you’re taking him to the psych ward in Iosser, and then you’re free for the rest of the day. Sort of a day off.”

“When do I have to go?”

“Now, if you like.”

“Alone?”

“Who said anything about alone? Two of you, as required. Take Churilin or Gayenko…”

I found Churilin in the tool shop. He was working with a soldering iron. Something was crackling on the workbench, emanating an odour of rosin.

“I’m doing a bit of welding,” Churilin said. “Very fine work, take a look.”

I saw the brass buckle with its embossed star. The inside was filled with tin. A belt with a loaded buckle like that was an awesome weapon.

That was the style then — our enforcers all wanted leather officer’s belts. They filled the buckle with a layer of tin and went to dances. If there was a fight, the brass buckles flashed over the mêlée.

I said, “Get ready.”

“What’s up?”

“We’re taking a psycho to Iosser. Some inmate flipped out in barracks fourteen. He bit Auntie Shura.”

“Good for him,” said Churilin. “He obviously wanted some grub. That Shura sneaks butter from the kitchen. I’ve seen her.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

Churilin cooled the buckle under running water and put on the belt. “Let’s roll.”

We were issued with weapons and reported to the watch room. About two minutes later the controller brought in a fat, unshaven prisoner. He was resisting and shouting, “I want a pretty girl, an athlete! Give me an athlete! How long am I supposed to wait?”

The controller replied mildly, “A minimum of six years. And that’s if you get an early release. After all, you were charged with conspiracy.”

The prisoner paid no attention and went on shouting, “Bastards, give me an athletic broad!”

Churilin took a good look at him and poked me with his elbow. “Listen, he’s no nut! He’s perfectly normal. First he wanted to eat and now he wants a broad. An athlete… A man with taste. I wouldn’t mind one, either.”

The controller handed me the papers. We went out onto the porch. Churilin asked, “What’s your name?”

“Doremifasol,” the prisoner replied.

So I said, “If you’re really crazy, fine. If you’re pretending, that’s fine, too. I’m not a doctor. My job is to take you to Iosser. The rest doesn’t interest me. The only condition is, don’t overplay the part. If you start biting, I’ll shoot you. But you can bark and crow as much as you like…”

We had to walk about three miles. There weren’t any lumber trucks going our way. Captain Sokolovsky had taken the camp director’s car. They said he went off to take some kind of exam. We had to walk on foot.

The road went through a village towards the peat bogs, then past a grove all the way to the highway crossing. Beyond that rose the camp towers of Iosser.

Churilin slowed down near the village store. I handed him two roubles. We didn’t have to worry about military police at that hour.

The prisoner was clearly in favour of our idea. He even shared his joy. “My name is Tolik.”

Churilin brought back a bottle of Moskovskaya vodka. I stuck it in my jodhpur pocket. We had to hold back until we got to the grove.

The prisoner kept remembering that he was deranged. Then he’d get on all fours and growl. I told him not to waste his strength. Save it for the medical examination. We wouldn’t turn him in.

Churilin spread a newspaper on the grass and took a few biscuits from his pocket. We took turns drinking from the bottle. The prisoner hesitated at first. “The doctor might smell it. It would seem unnatural somehow…”

Churilin interrupted. “And barking and crowing is natural?… Have some sorrel afterwards, you’ll be fine.”

The prisoner said, “You’ve convinced me.”

The day was warm and sunny. Fluffy clouds stretched along the sky. At the highway crossing lumber trucks honked impatiently. A wasp vibrated over Churilin’s head.

The vodka was starting to take effect, and I thought, “How good it is to be free! When I get out I’ll spend hours walking along the streets. I’ll drop by the café on Marata. I’ll have a smoke near the Duma building…”

I know that freedom is a philosophical concept. That doesn’t interest me. After all, slaves aren’t interested in philosophy. To go wherever you want – now that’s freedom!

My fellow drinkers were chatting amiably. The prisoner was explaining, “My head isn’t working right. And I have gas, too… To tell the truth, people like me should be let out. Written off completely because of illness. After all, obsolete technology is written off, isn’t it?”

Churilin interrupted. “Your head isn’t working right? You had enough brains to steal, didn’t you? Your papers say group theft. What was it you stole, I’d like to know?”

The prisoner was modest. “Nothing much… A tractor.” “A whole tractor?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you steal it?”

“Easy. From a reinforced-concrete plant. I used psychology.”

“What do you mean?”

“I go in. Get in the tractor. I tie a metal barrel to the tractor and drive to the checkpoint. The barrel’s making a racket. The guard comes out. ‘Where are you taking that barrel?’ And I say, ‘It’s for personal needs.’ ‘Got documentation?’ ‘No.’ ‘Untie the fucker.’ I untie the barrel and drive off. Basically, the psychology worked… And then we took the tractor apart for spare parts.”

Churilin slapped the prisoner’s back in delight. “You’re a real artist, pal!”

The prisoner accepted it modestly. “People admired me.”

Churilin suddenly stood up. “Long live the labour reserves!”

He took a second bottle from his pocket.

By then the sun was shining on our meadow. We moved into the shade. We sat down on a fallen alder.

Churilin gave the command, “Let’s roll!”

It was hot. The prisoner’s shirt was unbuttoned. He had a gunpowder tattoo on his chest that said, “Faina! Do you remember the golden days?!” Next to the words were a skull, a bowie knife and a bottle marked “poison”.

Churilin unexpectedly got drunk. I didn’t notice it happen. He suddenly grew grim and still.

I knew that the garrison was filled with neurotics. Work as a prison guard inexorably leads to that. But Churilin of all people seemed comparatively normal to me. I remembered only one crazy act on his part. We were taking prisoners out to cut trees. We were sitting

around the stove in a wooden shed, keeping warm, talking. Naturally, we were drinking. Churilin went outside without a word, got a pail somewhere, filled it with gasoline, climbed up on the roof and poured the fuel down the chimney. The shed burst into flames. We only just got out. Three people were badly burnt.

But that was a long time ago. So now I said, “Take it easy…”

Churilin silently took out his gun, then barked, “On your feet! The two-man brigade is now under the soldier’s command. If necessary, the soldier in charge will use arms. Prisoner Kholodenko, forward march! Private First Class Dovlatov, fall in behind!”

I continued trying to calm him down. “Snap out of it. Pull yourself together. And put away the gun.”

The prisoner reacted in camp idiom. “What’s the fucking stir?”

Churilin released the safety catch. I walked towards him, repeating, “You’ve just had too much to drink.”

Churilin started backing up. I kept walking towards him, without making any sudden moves. I repeated senseless things out of fear. I remember smiling.

But the prisoner didn’t lose spirit. He cried out cheerfully, “Time to run for cover!”

I saw the fallen alder tree behind Churilin. He didn’t have far to back up. I crouched. I knew that he might shoot as he fell. And he did.

A bang and a crash of twigs and branches.

The gun fell on the ground. I kicked it aside.

Churilin got up. I wasn’t afraid of him then. I could lay him out flat from any position. And the prisoner was there to help.

I saw Churilin take off his belt. I didn’t realize what it meant. I thought he was adjusting his shirt.

Theoretically I could have shot him, or at least wounded him. We were on a detail, in a combat situation. I would have been acquitted.

Instead I moved in on him again. My manners got in the way back when I was boxing, too.

As a result Churilin whopped me on the head with his buckle.

Most importantly, I remembered everything. I didn't lose consciousness. I didn't feel the blow itself. I saw blood pouring onto my trousers. So much blood I even cupped my hands to catch it. I stood there and the blood flowed.

Thank goodness, the prisoner didn't lose his nerve. He grabbed the belt away from Churilin. Then he bandaged my head with a shirtsleeve.

Here Churilin began to realize what had happened, I guess. He grabbed his head and headed for the road, weeping.

His pistol lay in the grass, next to the empty bottles. I told the prisoner to pick it up.

And now picture this amazing sight: in front, bawling, is a guard. Behind him, a crazy prisoner with a gun. Bringing up the rear, a private with a bloody bandage on his head. And coming towards them all, a military patrol. A GAZ-61 carrying three men with sub-machine guns and a huge German shepherd.

I'm amazed they didn't shoot my prisoner. They could have shot a round into him easily. Or set the dog on him.

When I saw the car, I passed out. My voluntary reflexes gave way, and the heat took its toll. I just had time to tell them that it wasn't the prisoner's fault. Let them figure out for themselves whose fault it was.

And to top it off, I broke my arm as I fell. Actually, I didn't break it, I damaged it. They found a fracture in the upper arm. I remember thinking that this was really superfluous.

The last thing I remembered was the dog. It sat next to me and yawned nervously, opening its purple jaws.

The speaker over my head began to work – a hum followed by a slight click. I pulled the plug without waiting for the triumphant chords

of the national anthem.

I suddenly remembered a forgotten feeling from childhood. I was a schoolboy, I had a fever. I would be allowed to miss school.

I was waiting for the doctor. He would sit on my bed, look at my throat, say, “Well, young man.” Mama would look for a clean towel for him.

I was sick, happy, everyone pitied me. I didn’t have to wash with cold water.

I was waiting for the doctor. Instead, Churilin showed up. He peeked through the window, sat on the windowsill. Then he stood up and headed towards me. He looked pathetic and beseeching.

I tried to kick him in the balls. Churilin took a step back and, wringing his hands, said, “Serge, forgive me! I was wrong… I repent… Sincerely, I repent! I was in a state of effect — ”

“Affect,” I corrected.

“All the more so…”

He took a careful step towards me. “I was joking… It was just for a laugh… I have nothing against you…”

“You’d better not.”

What could I say to him? What do you say to a guard who uses aftershave only internally?

I said, “What happened to our prisoner?”

“He’s fine. Crazy again. Keeps singing ‘My Motherland’. He’s being tested tomorrow. For the moment, he’s in the isolation cell.”

“And you?”

“Me? I’m in the guardhouse, of course. That is, actually I’m here, but in theory I’m in the guardhouse. A pal of mine is on duty there… I have to talk to you.”

Churilin came another step closer and spoke fast. “Serge, I’m doomed, done for! The comrades’ court is on Thursday!”

“For whom?”

“Me. They say I’ve crippled Serge.”

“All right, I’ll say I have no charges to bring against you. That I forgive you.”

“I already told them you forgive me. They say it doesn’t matter, the cup of patience runneth over.”

“What else can I do?”

“You’re educated, think of something. Put a spin on things. Otherwise those sons of bitches will hand my papers over to the tribunal. That means three years in the disciplinary battalion. And that’s even worse than the camps. So you’ve got to help me…”

He screwed up his face, trying to weep.

“I’m an only son. My brother’s doing time, all the sisters are married.”

I said, “I don’t know what to do. There is one possibility…”

Churilin perked up. “What?”

“At the trial I’ll ask you a question. I’ll say, ‘Churilin, do you have a civilian profession?’ You’ll reply, ‘No.’ I’ll say, ‘What is he supposed to do after his discharge – steal? Where are the promised courses for chauffeurs and bulldozer drivers? Are we any worse than the regular army?’ And so on. This will create an uproar, of course. Maybe they’ll let you out on bail.”

Churilin grew more animated. He sat on my bed and said, “What a brain! Now that’s a real brain! With a brain like that there’s really no need to work.”

“Especially,” I noted, “if you whack it with a brass buckle.”

“That’s in the past,” Churilin said, “forgotten… Write down what I’m supposed to say.”

“I told you.”

“Write it down. Or I’ll get mixed up.”

Churilin handed me a pencil stub. He tore off a scrap of newspaper. “Write.”

I neatly wrote “no”.

“What does it mean, ‘no’?” he asked.

“You said: ‘Write down what I’m supposed to say.’ So I wrote: ‘No’. I’ll ask the question: ‘Do you have a civilian profession?’ You’ll say: ‘No.’ After that I’ll talk about the driving classes. And then the commotion will start.”

“So I just say one word, ‘no’?”

“Looks that way.”

“That’s not enough,” Churilin said.

“They might ask you other questions.”

“Like what?”

“That I don’t know.”

“What will I reply?”

“Depends on what they ask.”

“What will they ask? Roughly?”

“Well, maybe: ‘Do you admit your guilt, Churilin?’”

“And what will I reply?”

“You reply: ‘Yes.’”

“That’s all?”

“You could say, ‘Yes, of course, I admit it and repent deeply.’”

“That’s better. Write it down. First write the question, and then my answer. Write the questions in regular script and print the answers. So I don’t confuse them.”

Churilin and I worked on this till eleven. The paramedic wanted to chase him out, but Churilin said, “Can’t I visit my comrade in arms?”

As a result we wrote an entire drama. We anticipated dozens of questions and answers. And at Churilin's insistence I added parenthetical stage directions: "coldly", "thoughtfully", "bewildered".

Then they brought lunch: a bowl of soup, fried fish and pudding.

Churilin was astonished. "They feed you better here than at the guardhouse."

I said, "I suppose you'd prefer it the other way round?"

I had to give him the pudding and the fish.

After that Churilin left. He said, "My pal at the guardhouse goes off duty at twelve. After that some Ukrainian jerk is on. I have to get back."

Churilin went to the window. Then he returned. "I forgot. Let's trade belts. Otherwise they'll add to my sentence for the buckle."

He took my soldier's belt and hung his on the bed.

"You're in luck," he said. "Mine's real leather. And the buckle is weighted. One blow and a man's out for the count!"

"You don't say…"

Churilin went back to the window. Turned around again. "Thanks," he said. "I won't forget this."

And he climbed out the window. Even though he could easily have used the door.

It's a good thing he didn't take my cigarettes.

Three days passed. The doctor told me I got off easy: all I had was a cut on the head.

I wandered around the military base. Spent hours in the library. Tanned myself on the roof of the woodshed.

Twice I tried to visit the guardhouse. Once a Latvian doing his first year of service was on duty. He raised his sub-machine gun as I approached. I wanted to pass cigarettes through him, but he shook his head.

I dropped by again in the evening. This time, an instructor I knew was on duty.

“Go on in,” he said. “You can spend the night if you want.”

He rattled the keys. The door opened.

Churilin was playing cards with three other prisoners. A fifth was watching the game with a sandwich in his hand. Orange peels were scattered on the floor.

“Greetings,” Churilin said. “Don’t bother me. I’m going to flatten them in a minute.”

I gave him the cigarettes.

“No booze?” Churilin asked.

One could only admire his gall.

I stood around for a minute and left.

In the morning there were posters all over the place: “Open Komsomol divisional meeting. Comrades’ court. Personal case of Churilin, Vadim Tikhonovich. Attendance mandatory.”

An old-timer was walking by. “It’s about time,” he said. “They’ve gone wild… It’s terrible what’s going on in the barracks… Wine flowing from under the doors…”

About sixty people were gathered in the club. The Komsomol bureau sat on the stage. Churilin was seated to one side, next to the banner. They were waiting for Major Afanasyev.

Churilin looked absolutely thrilled. Perhaps it was his first time onstage. He gestured, waved to his friends. What’s more, he also waved to me.

Major Afanasyev came onstage.

“Comrades!”

Silence gradually came over the hall.

“Comrades! Today we are discussing the personal case of Private Churilin. Private Churilin was sent on an important mission with Private First Class Dovlatov. On the way Private Churilin got as drunk as a skunk and began acting irresponsibly. As a result, Private First Class Dovlatov was wounded, even though he’s just as much of a fuckwit, forgive my language… They should have been ashamed of themselves in front of the prisoner at least…”

While the major spoke, Churilin glowed with joy. He patted his hair, twisted in his seat, touched the banner. Clearly, he felt like a hero.

The major went on. “In this quarter alone, Churilin spent twenty-six days in the guardhouse. I’m not talking about drunken behaviour – that’s like snow in winter for Churilin. I’m talking about more serious crimes, like brawling. You’d think that for him Communism has already been built. He doesn’t like your face, he throws a punch! Soon everybody will let fly with their fists. Don’t you think *I* get the urge to clock someone in the face? The cup of patience runneth over. We must decide: does Churilin stay with us or do his papers go to the tribunal? It’s a serious case, comrades! Let’s begin. Tell us how it happened, Churilin.”

Everyone looked at Churilin. A crumpled paper appeared in his hands. He turned this way and that, looked it over, and mumbled to himself.

“Speak,” Major Afanasyev repeated.

Churilin looked at me in bewilderment. We had not foreseen this. We had left something out of the scenario.

The major raised his voice. “We’re waiting!”

“I’m in no rush,” Churilin said.

He looked grim. His face was becoming resentful and morose. At the same time the major’s voice was growing more irritated. I had to raise my hand. “Let me tell it.”

“As you were,” the major shouted. “You’re a fine one to talk!”

“Aha,” said Churilin. “Here… I want… whatchama-callit… I want to take bulldozer driving courses.”

The major turned to him: “What do courses have to do with it, damn your eyes! You got drunk, maimed your friend, and now you dream about courses!… How about going to college while you’re at it? Or the conservatory?”

Churilin looked at the paper once more and said grimly, “Why are we worse than the regular army?”

The major choked with rage. “How long will this go on? I’m trying to meet him halfway, and this is what he comes out with! I ask him to tell his story and he won’t!”

“What’s there to tell?” Churilin said, jumping up. *“You want some Forsyte Saga* or something? Tell us! Tell us! What’s to tell? What the hell are you bugging me for, you son of a bitch! I can plant one on you, too!”

The major reached for his holster. Red splotches appeared on his cheeks. He was panting. Finally he regained his self-control. “Everything is clear to the court. The meeting is adjourned!”

Two old-timers took Churilin by the arms. I reached for my cigarettes as I headed for the door.

Churilin got a year in the disciplinary battalion. A month before he got out I was discharged. I never saw the crazy prisoner again, either. That whole world disappeared for me.

Only the belt remains.

Fernand Léger's Jacket

This is the story of the prince and the pauper. In March 1941, Andrei Cherkasov was born. In September of that same year I was born.

Andryusha was the son of an outstanding man. My father stood out only for his thinness.

Nikolai Konstantinovich Cherkasov was a fantastic actor and a deputy to the Supreme Soviet. My father was an ordinary theatre director and the son of a bourgeois nationalist.

Cherkasov's talent thrilled Peter Brook, Fellini and De Sica. My father's talent elicited even his parents' doubts.

Cherkasov was known by the whole country as an actor, deputy and fighter for peace. My father was known only by the neighbours as a drinker and a neurotic.

Cherkasov had a dacha, a car, an apartment and fame. My father had asthma.

Their wives were friends. I think they graduated from the drama institute together.

My mother was an average actress, then a proofreader, and finally a pensioner. Nina Cherkasova was also an average actress. After her husband's death, she was fired from the theatre.

Naturally, the Cherkasovs had friends from the highest social circles: Shostakovich, Mravinsky, Eisenstein… My parents belonged to the Cherkasovs' everyday milieu.

All our lives we were aware of that family's care and protection. Cherkasov gave references for my father. His wife gave my mother dresses and shoes.

My parents often argued. Then they divorced. The divorce was practically the only peaceful moment of their life together, one of the

few instances when they acted in concert.

Andryusha was my first friend. We met during the evacuation. Actually, we didn't meet, but lay next to each other in baby carriages. Andryusha had a foreign carriage. Mine was locally made.

We ate equally badly, I think. There was a war on.

Then the war ended. Our families ended up in Leningrad. The Cherkasovs lived in a ministerial building on Kronverkskaya Street. We lived in a communal flat on Rubinstein Street.

Andryusha and I saw each other frequently. We went to children's matinees together. We celebrated all our birthdays together.

I went to Kronverkskaya with my mother on the tram; the chauffeur brought Andryusha to our house in a war-spoils Bugatti.

Andryusha and I were the same height, about the same age. We grew up healthy and energetic.

Andryusha, as I remember it, was bolder, fiercer, harsher. I was a bit stronger physically and, I think, had a tiny bit more common sense.

The Cherkasovs had a dacha, surrounded by firs, on the Karelian peninsula. The windows opened onto the Gulf of Finland, with seagulls soaring over it. Every summer we stayed there.

Andryusha was given a maid. The maids were changed frequently; as a rule, they were fired for theft. Who could blame them? Nina Cherkasova had foreign things lying all over the place. The shelves were packed with perfumes and cosmetics. This excited young maids. Noticing yet another loss, Nina Cherkasova would frown.

"Luba is being naughty!"

The next day Luba was replaced by Zina…

I had a nanny, Luiza Genrikhovna. As a German in the post-war period, she was subject to arrest. Luiza Genrikhovna hid out at ours. That is, she simply lived with us, and at the same time she brought me up. I don't think we paid her anything at all.

Once I was staying at the Cherkasov dacha with Luiza Genrikhovna. Then this happened: Luiza Genrikhovna had thrombophlebitis. A dairymaid she knew recommended putting excrement on her legs. A folk remedy. To the dismay of the people around her, the remedy worked. Right up to her arrest Luiza Genrikhovna exuded an unbearable odour. We put up with it, of course, but the Cherkasovs turned out to be more refined. Mama was told that the presence of Luiza Genrikhovna was not welcome.

After that Mother rented a room on the same street, in a peasant house. Nanny and I spent every summer there. Right up to her arrest.

In the mornings I went to Andryusha's house. We ran around the property, ate blueberries, played ping-pong, caught beetles. On warm days we went to the beach. If it rained, we played with clay on the veranda.

Sometimes Andryusha's parents came. His mother came almost every Sunday. His father came about four times each summer, to catch up on his sleep.

The Cherkasovs themselves treated me well, but the housekeepers weren't as nice. After all, I was extra work. Without extra pay.

So Andryusha was allowed to be naughty, but I wasn't. Rather, Andryusha's pranks seemed natural, and mine – not quite. I was told, "You're smarter. You should set a good example for Andryusha." Thus, I was turned into a small governor for the summer.

I felt the inequality. Even though people raised their voices at Andryusha more frequently, and punished him more severely, and I was always set up as an example for him.

Still, I felt hurt. Andryusha was more important. The servants feared him as the master. And I was just one of the folk. And even though the housekeeper was even folksier, she clearly didn't like me.

Theoretically it should have been different. The housekeeper should have liked me for being closer to her socially. She should

have felt sympathy for me as a classless intellectual. But in reality, servants love their hated masters much more than it seems. And of course, more than themselves.

Nina Cherkasova was a cultured, wise and well-bred woman. Naturally, she would not allow her friend's six-year-old son to be humiliated. If Andryusha took an apple, I was entitled to one just like it. If Andryusha was going to the movies, tickets were bought for both of us.

With hindsight, I now see that Nina Cherkasova had all the good qualities and all the flaws of the rich. She was courageous, decisive and focused. She was also cold, haughty and aristocratically naive. For instance, she considered money a burden.

She said to my mother, "You're so lucky, Nora! Your Seryozha is happy if you give him a caramel. But my big lug only likes chocolate…"

Of course I liked chocolate, too. But I pretended to prefer caramels.

I don't regret the poverty I lived through. If Hemingway is to be believed, poverty is an invaluable school for a writer. Poverty makes a man clear-sighted. And so on.

It's interesting that Hemingway realized this only when he became rich…

At the age of seven I assured my mother that I hated fruit. By nine I refused to try on new shoes in the store. At eleven I learnt to like reading. At sixteen I learnt to earn money.

Andrei Cherkasov and I were close until we were sixteen. He was graduating from a special English-language school, I from an ordinary school. He loved mathematics. I preferred the less exact sciences. But we were both incredibly lazy.

We saw each other often, since the English school was a five-minute walk from our house. Sometimes Andryusha would drop by after school. And sometimes I would go to his place to watch colour

TV. Andrei was infantile, distracted, full of goodwill. Even then I was mean and attentive to human weakness.

In our school years each of us made friends, each his own. Criminal types predominated among mine. Andrei was drawn to boys from good families.

That means there is something to Marxist-Leninist teaching: no doubt social instincts do live in people. All my conscious life I was drawn instinctively to damaged people — the poor, or hooligans, or budding poets. I tried making respectable friends a thousand times, always in vain. It was only in the company of savages, schizophrenics and scoundrels that I felt confident.

My respectable friends told me, “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but you create all kinds of trouble. Your neuroses are catching…”

I wasn’t hurt. Ever since I was twelve, I knew that I was irresistibly drawn to lowlifes. It’s not surprising that seven of my school friends ended up in prison.

Red-haired Boris Ivanov was sent up for stealing sheet metal. The weightlifter Kononenko knifed his mistress. Misha Khamrayev, the son of the school janitor, robbed a train dining car. The former model plane-maker Letyago raped a deaf-mute. Alik Brykin, who taught me to smoke, committed a serious military crime – he beat up an officer. Yura Golynchik wounded a militia horse. And even the class monitor, Vilya Rivkovich, managed to get a year for selling black-market medicine.

My friends made Andryusha Cherkasov nervous. They were always in trouble. And they all recognized only one form of self-affirmation – confrontation.

His friends made me insecure and melancholy. They were all honest, reasonable and well-meaning. They all preferred compromise to lone struggle.

We both married comparatively early. I, naturally, married a poor girl. Andrei married Dasha, granddaughter of the chemist Ipatyev,

thereby increasing the family fortune.

I've read about the mutual attraction of opposites; but I think there's something dubious about it. Or, at the very least, debatable. For instance, Dasha and Andrei looked alike. Both were tall, good-looking, well-meaning and practical. Both valued peace and quiet above all. Both lived with taste and without problems.

Lena and I were also similar. We were both chronic failures, both at odds with reality. Even in the West we manage to live contrary to the prevailing rules…

Once Andryusha and Dasha invited us to their home. We went to Kronverkskaya Street. A policeman sat in the lobby. He picked up the phone.

"Andrei Nikolayevich, you have guests!"

And then, making a slightly more severe face, he said, " Go on…"

We took the elevator. Went in.

Dasha whispered in the foyer, "Please excuse us, the nurse is here."

I didn't understand at first. I thought one of Andrei's parents was ill. I even thought they wanted us to leave.

They explained to us, "Gena Lavrentyev brought a nurse with him. It's horrible. A girl in a Soviet Persian lamb coat. She's already asked four times when the dancing starts. She just drank a whole bottle of cold beer… Please, don't be angry…"

"It's all right," I said, "we're used to it."

I had once worked for a factory newsletter. My wife had been a hairdresser. There was very little that could still shock us.

Later I took a good look at the nurse. She had pretty hands, thin ankles, green eyes and a shiny forehead. I liked her. She ate a lot and bounced around in a dance rhythm even at the table.

Her date, Lavrentyev, looked a lot worse. He had bushy hair and small features – a vile combination. Besides which, I was sick and

tired of him. He talked too long about his trip to Romania. I think I told him that I hated Romania…

The years passed. Andrei and I saw each other pretty rarely. More rarely each year. We did not have a fight. We did not suffer mutual disappointment. We simply went our own ways. By this time I was writing. Andrei was finishing up his Ph.D. dissertation.

He was surrounded by merry, smart and good-natured physicists. I was surrounded by crazy, dirty and pretentious poets. His friends occasionally drank cognac and champagne. Mine systematically put away cheap rotgut. In company, his friends recited the poetry of Nikolai Gumilyov and Joseph Brodsky. Mine read only their own works.

Soon Nikolai Konstantinovich Cherkasov died. A memorial meeting was held near the Pushkin Theatre. So many people came they had to divert traffic.

Cherkasov had been a People's Artist. And not in name only. He was beloved by professors and peasants, generals and criminals. Yesenin, Zoshchenko and Vysotsky had the same kind of fame.

A year later Nina Cherkasova was fired from the theatre. Then they took away her husband's prizes. They made her return the international awards Cherkasov had received in Europe, among them some valuable gold items. The authorities made the widow turn them over to the theatre museum.

The widow, of course, was not in financial trouble. She had a dacha, a car and an apartment. Besides which, she had savings. Dasha and Andrei had jobs.

My mother sometimes visited the widow. She spent hours on the phone with her. The widow complained about her son. She said that he was inconsiderate and egotistical.

My mother would sigh, "At least yours doesn't drink…"

In short, our mothers turned into similarly sad and touching old women, and we into similarly hard-hearted and inconsiderate sons.

Even though Andryusha was a successful physicist and I a pseudo-dissident poet.

Our mothers came to resemble each other. But not completely. Mine almost never left the house. Nina Cherkasova attended all the premieres. Besides which, she was planning a trip to Paris.

She had travelled abroad before. And now she wanted to see her old friends.

Something strange was happening. While Cherkasov was alive, they had guests every day. Famous, talented people – Mravinsky, Raykin, Shostakovich. They had seemed to be family friends. After Nikolai Konstantinovich's death, it turned out that they had been his *personal* friends.

For the most part, the Soviet celebrities disappeared. That left the foreign ones – Sartre, Yves Montand, the widow of the artist Léger. And Nina Cherkasova decided to visit France again.

A week before her departure I ran into her. I was in the library of the House of Journalists, editing the memoirs of some conqueror of the tundra. Nine out of fourteen chapters began the same way: "False modesty aside…" Besides which, I was supposed to verify the Lenin quotes.

And suddenly Nina Cherkasova came in. I hadn't known we used the same library.

She had aged. She was dressed, as usual, with understated elegance and luxury.

We greeted each other. She asked, "They say you've become a writer?"

I was bewildered. I wasn't prepared for the question to be put that way. Had she asked, "Are you a genius?" I would have answered calmly and affirmatively. All my friends bore the burden of genius. They called themselves geniuses. But calling yourself a writer was much harder.

I said, "I write a bit to amuse myself…"

There were two people in the reading room. Both were looking our way. Not because they recognized Cherkasov's widow — they could probably smell French perfume.

She said, "You know, I've been wanting to write about Kolya. Something like a memoir."

"You should."

"I'm afraid I don't have the talent. Though all my friends like my letters."

"So write a long letter."

"The hardest part is starting. Where did it begin? Was it on the day we met? Or much earlier?"

"That's how you should start."

"How?"

"'The hardest part is starting. Where did it begin…'"

"You have to understand, Kolya was my whole life. He was my friend. He was my teacher. Do you think it's a sin to love your husband more than your son?"

"I don't know. I don't think love has sizes. It either is or isn't."

"You've grown smarter with age," she said.

Then we talked about literature. I thought I could guess her idols without asking – Proust, Galsworthy, Feuchtwanger… But it turned out that she loved Pasternak and Tsvetayeva.

Then I said that Pasternak lacked sufficient good taste. And that Tsvetayeva for all her genius was a clinical idiot…

So we moved on to art. I was convinced that she adored the Impressionists. And I was right.

Then I said that the Impressionists had preferred the moment to the eternal. That only in Monet did generic tendencies predominate over the specific…

Cherkasova sighed softly, “I thought you had got smarter.”

We spoke for over an hour. Then she said goodbye and left. I no longer wanted to edit the memoirs of the conqueror of the tundra. I thought about poverty and wealth. About the pathetic and vulnerable human soul…

When I was a guard, some of the prisoners in the camp were important members of the nomenklatura. They kept up their leadership manner for the first few days. Then they dissolved organically into the general mass.

Once I watched a documentary about Paris during the Occupation. Crowds of refugees streamed down the streets. I saw that enslaved countries looked the same. All ruined peoples are twins…

The shell of peace and wealth can fall from a person in an instant, immediately revealing his wounded, orphaned soul…

About three weeks passed. The phone rang. Cherkasova was back from Paris. She said she would drop by.

We bought some halva and biscuits.

She looked younger and slightly mysterious. French celebrities turned out to be much more decent than ours. They received her well.

Mother asked, “How are they dressed in Paris?”

Nina Cherkasova replied, “As they see fit.”

Then she told us about Sartre and his incredible outbursts. About rehearsals at the Théâtre du Soleil. About Yves Montand’s family problems.

She gave us presents. Mother got a delicate evening bag. Lena a make-up kit. I got an old corduroy jacket.

To tell you the truth, I was taken aback. The jacket clearly needed cleaning and repair. The elbows were shiny. It was missing buttons. I saw traces of oil paint on the lapel and sleeve.

I even thought, I wish she had brought me a fountain pen. But I said, “Thank you. You shouldn’t have bothered.”

I couldn’t very well shout: “Where did you manage to pick up this rag?”

The jacket really was old. If Soviet posters are to be believed, the unemployed in America wear jackets like that.

Cherkasova looked at me strangely and said, “That jacket belonged to Fernand Léger. He was about your size.”

I repeated in amazement, “Léger? *The* Léger?”

“Once we were very close. Then I was friends with his widow. I told her about you. Nadya went into the closet, took out that jacket and handed it to me. She said that Fernand asked her to befriend all kinds of riff-raff.”

I put on the jacket. It fitted. I could wear it over a warm sweater. It was like a short fall coat.

Nina Cherkasova stayed till eleven. Then she called a taxi.

I spent a long time staring at the splotches of paint. Now I was sorry that there were so few. Only two — on the sleeve and by the lapel.

I started remembering what I knew about Fernand Léger.

He was a tall, powerful man, from Normandy, a peasant. In 1915 he went off to the front. There he had occasion to cut bread with a bloody bayonet. Léger’s frontline pictures are filled with horror.

Later, like Mayakovsky, he struggled with art. But Mayakovsky shot himself, while Léger survived and won.

He dreamt of painting on the walls of buildings and train cars. A half-century later New York hooligans fulfilled his dreams.

He thought that line was more important than colour. That art, from Shakespeare to Edith Piaf, lived in contrasts.

His favourite words were, “Renoir depicted what he saw. I depict what I have understood.”

Léger died a Communist, having fallen once and for all for the greatest charlatanism of all time. It may be that, like many artists, he was stupid.

I wore the jacket for about eight years. I put it on only on special occasions. Even though the corduroy wore out so much that the oil paint disappeared.

Not many people knew that the jacket had been Fernand Léger’s. I hardly told anyone. I liked keeping that pathetic secret.

Time passed. We ended up in America. Nina Cherkasova died, leaving my mother fifteen hundred roubles. That’s a lot of money in the Soviet Union.

It was hard getting it to New York. It would have involved incredible effort and created hassles.

We decided to do it differently. We gave power of attorney to my older brother. But that was complicated, too. I spent two months on the paperwork. One of the documents was signed personally by Mr Schultz.

In August my brother informed me that he had received the money. No expressions of gratitude followed. Maybe money isn’t worth it.

My brother sometimes calls me early in the morning. That is, late at night, Leningrad time. His voice over the phone is suspiciously husky. Besides which, I hear female exclamations: “Ask about make-up!” Or: “Tell the jerk that fake mink coats sell best…”

Instead my brother asks, “Well, how are things in America? They say that vodka is sold round the clock?”

“I doubt it. But the bars are open, of course.”

“What about beer?”

“As much beer as you want in the all-night stores.”

A respectful pause follows. And then, “Good for the capitalists! They know what they’re doing!”

I ask, “How are you?”

“Starts with *‘S’,”* he says, “for swell.”

But we’ve digressed. Everything’s swell for Andrei Cherkasov, too. This winter he will become a doctor of physics. Or mathematics… What’s the difference?

A Poplin Shirt

My wife says, "It's madness, living with a man who sticks around simply because he's too lazy…"

My wife always exaggerates. Although it's true, I do try to avoid unnecessary trouble. I eat whatever's within reach. Get my hair cut when my appearance becomes less than human. But when I do, I have it shaved. Then I don't have to get another cut for three months.

In short, I'm reluctant to leave the house. I want to be left alone.

When I was a child, my nanny, Luiza Genrikhovna, did everything distractedly, living in fear of arrest. Once she dressed me in shorts and shoved both legs into one opening. I walked around like that all day. I was four, but I remember that day well. I knew that I had been dressed wrong, but I kept quiet. I didn't want to change. I still don't.

I remember many stories like that. Even as a child I was prepared to put up with all sorts of things in order to avoid hassles.

I used to drink a fair amount; consequently, I hung out in some strange places. That made many people think that I was sociable, whereas all you had to do was sober me up to see my sociability vanish.

For all that, I cannot live alone. I don't remember where the electric bill is. I don't know how to iron or do laundry. And above all, I don't earn a lot. Ideally, I'd love to live alone, but with someone nearby.

My wife always exaggerates. "I know why you're still living with me. Shall I tell you why?"

"Well, then, why?"

"You're just too lazy to buy a folding bed."

I could answer, “How about you? Why didn’t you buy the bed? Why didn’t you abandon me in our most difficult years? You, who can mend, wash, put up with people you barely know, and most importantly, earn money!”

We met twenty years ago in Leningrad. I even remember that it was a Sunday. February 18. Election day.

Block captains were going from house to house, urging residents to vote as early as possible. I was in no hurry. I’d skipped voting about three times already. And not out of dissident considerations, either, but rather out of an abhorrence for meaningless acts.

Then the bell rang. On the doorstep stood a young woman in a fall jacket. She looked like a schoolteacher, meaning a bit of an old maid. True, she didn’t have glasses on, but she was holding a notebook in her hand. She looked into the notebook and said my surname.

I said, “Come in, warm up. Have some tea.” I was mortified by my legs sticking out from beneath my robe. Legs are the least expressive part of the body in our family. And my robe was stained, too.

“Elena Borisovna,” the girl said, introducing herself, “your canvasser. You haven’t voted yet.” It was less a question than a restrained rebuke.

I repeated, “Would you like some tea?” I added, for propriety’s sake, “My mother’s inside.”

Mother had a headache, which didn’t keep her from shouting out, “Just you try eating my halva!”

I said, “We’ll have plenty of time to vote.”

And here Elena Borisovna made a completely unexpected speech: “I know that these elections are pure obscenity, but what can I do? I have to bring you to the polls. Otherwise, I won’t be allowed to go home.”

“I see,” I said. “But you should be more careful. You won’t get a pat on the head for talk like that.”

“You can be trusted. I understood that immediately, as soon as I saw Solzhenitsyn’s portrait.”

“That’s Dostoevsky. But I respect Solzhenitsyn, too.”

Afterwards we had a modest breakfast. Mother cut us a piece of halva after all.

Talk naturally turned to literature. If Lena mentioned Gladilin, I asked, “Tolya Gladilin?”

If Shukshin came up, I checked, “Vasya Shukshin?”

When we started talking about Akhmadulina, I exclaimed softly, “Bellochka!”

Then we went outside. The houses were decorated with bunting. Candy wrappers lay in the snow. Our janitor, Grisha, was showing off his ratine coat.

I didn’t feel like voting – not because I was lazy. The fact was, I liked Elena Borisovna, and as soon as we had all voted, they’d let her go home.

We went to the movies to see *Ivan’s Childhood*. The film was good enough for me to treat it with condescension. In that period I only approved of detective movies, because they let me relax. But Tarkovsky’s movies I praised, condescendingly – and with a hint that Tarkovsky had been waiting for almost six years for a screenplay from me.

After the movie I took Elena to the House of Writers. I was sure I’d run into somebody famous. I could count on friendly greetings from Goryshin, a drunken bear hug from Wolf, a quick chat with Yefimov or Konetsky. After all, I was a so-called Young Writer. Even Daniil Granin knew my face.

Once there were many literary celebrities in Leningrad, such as Kornei Chukovsky, Nikolai Oleynikov, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Daniil Kharms, and so on. After the war their number decreased sharply.

Some were shot for one reason or another, others moved to Moscow…

We went upstairs to the restaurant; we ordered wine, sandwiches and pastries. I'd planned to order an omelette but changed my mind. My big brother always told me, "You don't know how to eat coloured food." I counted my money without taking my hand from my pocket.

The room was empty. Reshetov sat by the door, wearing his medals and reading a book. He was so deeply engrossed that it had to be one of his own opuses. I was willing to bet its title was *I'm Coming to You, the People!*

We drank. I recounted three stories about Yevgeny Yevtushenko, which I'd seen with my very own eyes.

But no celebrities showed up, although there was a steady increase in customers. The belletrist Goryansky headed for the window, his artificial leg creaking. The poets Dmitry Chikin and Boris Steinberg were at the bar. Chikin was saying, "You're great at philosophical digressions, Borya."

"And you, Dima, are great at interior monologues," Steinberg replied.

Neither Chikin nor Steinberg could be classified as a celebrity. Goryansky was famous for strangling a guard in a German concentration camp.

A fairly well-known critic, Khalupovich, walked by. He stared at me a long time and then said, "Excuse me, I thought you were Lev Melinder…"

We ordered a couple of brandies. I was running out of money, and still there were no celebrities. At this rate, Elena Borisovna would never learn that I was a promising young writer.

And then Danchkovsky poked his head into the restaurant. In a pinch, he could be called famous.

Once upon a time, two brothers came from Shklov to Leningrad. Savely and Leonid Danchikovsky tried their wings in literature – they

wrote songs, jingles, skits. First they wrote together, then each one separately. A year later their paths diverged even more sharply: Leonid shortened his name to Danch, but he remained a Jew.

Savely shortened his name only by a letter – to Danchkovsky — and turned into a Russian Pole. Gradually a nationality gap developed between them.

“Werewolf!” Leonid would shout. “Drunken goy!”

“Shut up, kike face!” Savely would respond.

A while after that, the campaign against “cosmopolites” began. Leonid went to prison; by then Savely had graduated from the Institute of Marxist-Leninism. He published articles in the major journals, then his first book came out. The critics began talking about him. In time he began to produce Leninorrhoea.

First he wrote a book called *Volodya’s Childhood*, then a novella called *A Boy from Simbirsk*, then a two-volume set, *Fiery Youth*, and finally the trilogy *Arise, Ye Pris’ners of Starvation!* When he’d exhausted Lenin’s biography, Danchkovsky started on related themes: *Lenin and Children*, *Lenin and Music*, *Lenin and Art*, and *Lenin and Agriculture*. All the books were translated into many languages. Danchkovsky grew rich; he was awarded a medal of honour. His brother was awarded a posthumous rehabilitation.

Danchkovsky knew me well, since he had been head of our Writer’s Union chapter for the past year. And here he was in the restaurant.

I lowered my voice and whispered to Elena Borisovna, “Look – Danchkovsky himself! Wild success… sure to get the Lenin Prize.”

Danchkovsky headed for the corner farthest from the jukebox. As he passed us, he slowed down. I raised my glass familiarly.

Danchkovsky, without a greeting, said clearly, “I read your humour piece in *Aurora*. It’s crap.”

We stayed in the restaurant till eleven. The polling station had closed. Then the restaurant closed. My mother was home with her

headache; we went for a stroll along the Fontanka embankment.

Elena Borisovna astonished me by her docility. Or not docility, exactly – more a kind of indifference to the realities of life, as if everything that happened were no more than a flicker on a screen.

She forgot about the polls, neglected her duties. As it turned out, she never even got around to voting herself. And for what? For the sake of an unclear relationship with a man who wrote unsuccessful humour pieces.

I didn't vote, either, of course; I also neglected my civic duty. But I'm a special case. Are we alike, then?

We have twenty years of marriage behind us – twenty years of mutual isolation and indifference to real life. I at least have a stimulus, a goal, an illusion, a hope. What does she have? Only our daughter and indifference.

I don't remember Lena ever arguing or disagreeing. I doubt if she ever once said a confident, resounding "Yes" or a firm, severe "No".

Changes of scene, faces, voices, good and evil hurried by as if on TV, while my beloved, with an occasional glance towards the screen, had her mind on more important things.

Deciding that Mother was asleep by now, I turned home. I didn't even say, "Come with me," to Elena Borisovna. I didn't even take her by the hand. We simply found ourselves at home. That was twenty years ago.

In those twenty years, our friends fell in love, married and divorced. They wrote poems and novels about it all. They moved from one republic to another; they changed jobs, convictions, habits, became dissidents and alcoholics, tried to kill others or themselves. Marvellous, mysterious worlds arose and collapsed with a roar all around us. Like taut strings, human relations snapped. Our friends were reborn and died in the search for happiness.

And us? We faced all the temptations and horrors of life with our only gift — indifference. What is more solid than a castle built on sand? What is more durable and dependable in family life than a

mutual lack of principles? What could be more stable than two hostile states each incapable of defending itself?

I worked at a large newspaper. My salary was around a hundred roubles a month, plus a few negligible extras. I also remember an increase of four roubles a month “for mastering more modern methods of management”.

Like most journalists, I dreamt of writing a novel. And, unlike most journalists, I actually worked at it. But my manuscripts were rejected by the most progressive periodicals.

Now I can only be glad. Thanks to the censors, my apprenticeship continued for seventeen years. The stories I had wanted to publish in those years seem absolutely hopeless now. It’s bad enough that one was called ‘Faina’s Fate’.

Lena didn’t read my stories. I didn’t show them to her, and she didn’t want to take the initiative.

A woman can do three things for a Russian writer: she can feed him, she can sincerely believe in his genius and she can leave him alone. By the way, the third does not preclude the second and first.

Lena was not interested in my stories. I’m not even sure she had a clear idea of where I worked. She did know that I wrote.

I knew roughly as much about her.

At first my wife worked in a beauty shop. After the business with the elections, she was fired. Then she became a proofreader. Then, to my surprise, she graduated from a publishing institute. She began working for some sports publication, if I’m not mistaken. She made twice my salary.

It’s hard to understand what kept us together. Our conversations were mostly on household business. We each had our own set of friends. We even read different books. My wife would just pick up the nearest book and read from wherever it opened. That used to anger me. Then I realized that she always ended up reading good books, whereas if I open a book at random it’s sure to be *Virgin Soil Upturned*.

What bound us together? How are human ties formed, anyway? It's not a simple question. For instance, I have three cousins. All three are drunkards and hooligans. I love one, can take or leave the second, and barely know the third…

And so we lived, side by side, but separate. On rare occasions we exchanged presents. Sometimes I'd say, "I ought to give you flowers, just for a laugh." Lena would reply, "I have everything I need."

I didn't expect gifts, either. It suited me fine. I knew one family: the husband worked from morning till night; the wife watched TV and shopped, and would say things like, "I bought Marik some gorgeous velvet curtains for his birthday!"

We lived like this for four years. Then our daughter, Katya, was born. There was unexpected seriousness about it and a sense of the miraculous. We had been two, and suddenly there was another person – cranky, noisy, demanding care.

We didn't raise our daughter, we merely loved her. Especially since she was sickly from the age of five months. After our daughter's birth it became clear that we were married. Katya acted as our marriage certificate.

I remember being at the *Aurora* editorial offices one day with the baby in her carriage. I was picking up a small fee. The clerk opened a file and said, "Sign here." She added, "We deducted sixteen roubles for childlessness."

"But I have a daughter," I said.

"You have to bring the appropriate document."

"Here." I took a pink package out of the carriage and set it carefully on the chief accountant's desk. And saved sixteen roubles that way.

My relationship with my wife didn't change – *almost* didn't change. Now we had a common concern along with our common indifference.

***

Once Lena was at work while I was held up at home. I was looking for some necessary papers, as usual – a copy of an editorial contract, if I'm not mistaken. I dug around in the chests. Yanked drawers out of the desk. I even looked in the night table.

Then, under a pile of books, magazines and old letters, I found an album. A small, almost pocket-sized photograph album – about fifteen sheets of thick cardboard with a dove embossed on the cover.

I opened it. The early photographs were yellowed and cracked. Some were missing corners. In one, a round-faced little girl cautiously petted a shaggy dog with its ears back. In another, a girl of about six hugged a homemade doll. Both looked sad and lost.

Next was a family photo — mother, father and daughter. The father was wearing a long raincoat and a straw hat. Just the tips of his fingers showed below the sleeves. His wife wore a heavy sweater with puffed sleeves, and she had curls tucked into a sheer kerchief. The girl had turned sharply, making her short fall coat fly open. Something had caught her attention outside the frame – maybe a stray dog. Behind them, through the trees, was the façade of Pushkin's *lycée* in Tsarskoye Selo.

Later came relatives with tense, artificial smiles: an elderly, mustachioed railroad man in uniform, a lady beside a bust of Lenin, a youth on a motorcycle. Then came a sailor, or a cadet. Even in the picture you could see how carefully he had shaved. A girl holding a bouquet of lilies of the valley was peering into his face.

One whole page was taken up by a glossy school photo, four rows of frightened, tense, frozen faces. Not a single cheerful child. In the centre was a group of teachers, two with medals – veterans, probably – and the class matron. She was easy to spot. The old woman was embracing two schoolgirls who had forced smiles. On the left in the third row was my wife – the only one not looking at the camera.

I recognized her in every photograph. In a small picture with a fixed group of skiers. In a tiny photo taken in front of a kolkhoz

library. And even in an over-exposed snapshot of a crowd, among barely discernible members of a youth choir.

I recognized the grim girl with worn shoes. The embarrassed young lady in a cheap bathing suit under a florid sign saying “City of Yevpatoriya”. The student in a scarf near the library. And everywhere my wife seemed the most unhappy.

I turned a few more pages. I saw a young man in a worker’s cap, an old woman shielding her face, an unknown ballerina.

I came across a picture of the actor Yakovlev, a postcard. At the bottom, in a calligraphic hand, a fellow named Rafik Abdulayev had written, “Lena! Art demands the whole man, with nothing to spare.”

I turned to the last page, and I caught my breath. I don’t know why I was so surprised. I felt my cheeks turn red.

I saw a square photograph a bit larger than a postage stamp: a narrow forehead, unshaven cheeks, the face of a seedy matador. It was a picture of me. From last year’s ID card, I think – I could make out traces of the seal on the white edge.

I sat without moving for about three minutes. The clock ticked in the foyer. A compressor clacked outside. I heard the elevator creaking. And I just sat.

Yet if you think about it, what had actually happened? Nothing much: a wife had put a picture of her husband in a photo album. That’s normal.

But I was morbidly agitated. It was hard for me to concentrate, to understand the reason. I suddenly realized the seriousness of everything. If I was only now feeling this for the first time, then how much love had been lost over the long years?

I didn’t have the strength to think it through. I never knew that love could be so strong and so sharp. I thought, “If my hands are shaking now, how will I feel in the future?”

And so I got my coat and went to work.

About six years passed and emigration began. Jews began talking about their historic homeland. Before, all a real man needed was a sheepskin jacket and a Ph.D. Now you had to have an Israeli visa, too. Every intellectual dreamt of one, even if he had no intention of emigrating. Just to have one, just in case.

First, real Jews left. They were followed by citizens of less certain extraction. A year after that, Russians were let out. A friend of ours, an Orthodox priest, left with Israeli papers.

And then my wife decided to emigrate. While I decided to stay.

It's hard to say why I did. Apparently I hadn't reached the breaking point, or there were still some vague possibilities I wanted to explore. Or maybe I had unconscious yearnings for repression. That happens: no Russian intellectual who hasn't been in prison is worth a damn.

I was astonished by Lena's determination. She had seemed dependent and docile, and suddenly she made such a serious, definite decision.

She acquired foreign documents with red seals. She was visited by stern, bearded refuseniks who left instructions on cigarette paper and looked at me suspiciously. I didn't believe it until the last minute. It was all too incredible, like a trip to Mars.

I swear I didn't believe it until the last minute. I knew but didn't believe. That's the way things usually are.

And that damned minute came. The documents were in order, the visa had been obtained. Katya gave away her collections of candy wrappers and stamps to her girlfriends. All that remained was to buy the plane tickets.

My mother wept. Lena was overwhelmed by worries. I kept to the background. I hadn't exactly blocked her view of the horizon before, but now she had no time for me at all.

And Lena went for the tickets. She came back with a box. She walked up to me and said, “I had some money left over. This is for you.”

Inside the box was an imported poplin shirt. Made in Romania, if I’m not mistaken.

“Well,” I said, “thanks.” It was a decent shirt – simple, good quality. Long live Comrade Ceauşescu!

But where would I go in it? Really, where would I go?

The Winter Hat

Frost set in right after the November holidays in Leningrad. Getting ready to go to the newspaper office, I pulled on an ugly ski cap, which had been left behind by one of the guests. It'll do, I thought, particularly since I hadn't looked in a mirror for about fifteen years.

I got to the office. As usual, I was about forty minutes late. Commensurately, I took on an insolent and determined air.

The atmosphere in the editorial office was grim. Vorobyov was smoking dramatically. Molokhovsky was staring into space. Delyukin was whispering into the telephone. Mila Doroshenko had teary eyes.

"Cheers!" I said. "Why so glum, troubadours of the regime?"

Silence. Only Molokhovsky responded gruffly. "Your cynicism, Dovlatov, knows no bounds."

Clearly, something had happened. Maybe we'd all been denied our bonuses?

"Why the long faces?" I asked. "Where's the corpse?"

"At the Kuybyshev Morgue," Molokhovsky replied. "The funeral's tomorrow."

That didn't help matters. Finally, Delyukin got off the phone and explained to me in the same whisper: "Raisa committed suicide. Took three packs of Nembutal."

"So," I said. "I see. They finally drove her to it!"

Raisa was our typist – and, incidentally, a highly qualified one. She was a touch-typist and worked fast – which did not keep her from catching countless mistakes.

Of course, Raisa caught them only on paper. In real life, she made mistakes constantly. As a result, she never did get her degree. And,

even worse, at twenty-five she became a single parent. And finally, Raisa ended up in an industrial newspaper with time-honoured, anti-Semitic traditions.

As a Jew, she never got used to it. She talked back to the editor, drank and used too much make-up. In other words, she did not stop at her Jewish background, but went even further in her vices.

They would probably have tolerated Raisa, as they did all the other Jews, but she would have had to behave more sensibly. That is – wisely, modestly and with a touch of guilt. Instead, she kept demonstrating typically Christian weaknesses.

Back in October they began badgering Raisa. In order to fire her officially, they needed formal justification. That required three or four reprimands.

Bogomolov, the editor, went into action. He provoked Raisa into being insubordinate. In the mornings he waited for her with a stopwatch. He dreamt of catching her being lax in her duties, or at least of seeing her drunk at the office.

Everyone else in the office watched in silence, even though nearly all the men were courting Raisa. She was the only unattached woman in the place.

And so Raisa poisoned herself. All day long everyone looked gloomy and serious. They spoke in quiet and solemn voices. Vorobyov, from the science desk, said to me: “I’m horrified, old man! Just horrified! We had such a complex and complicated relationship. A thousand and one nights, and all that… You know, I’m married, and Raisa was a woman with character. That led to all kinds of hangups… I trust you understand what I’m saying?…”

Delyukin joined me in the canteen. His chin was smeared with egg yolk. He said: “What about Raisa, eh? Just think! A healthy young gal!”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s horrible.”

“Horrible… After all, Raisa and I weren’t just friends. I trust you get my drift? We had a strange and tormented relationship. I’m a

positivist, a romantic, a life-lover in some sense. While Raisa had all sorts of hangups. In a way, she and I spoke different languages…"

Even Molokhovsky, our lampoonist, pulled me aside. "Understand, I'm not religious, but still, suicide is a sin! Who are we to do as we please with our lives? Raisa should not have done it! Did she give any thought to the shadow she was casting on the newspaper?"

"I'm not sure. And really, what does the newspaper have to do with it?"

"No matter how funny it might seem to you, I have my professional pride!"

"So do I. But I have a different profession."

"You don't have to be rude. I was planning to talk about Raisa."

"You had a complex and complicated relationship?"

"How did you know?"

"I guessed."

"Her deed is an insult to me. You, of course, will say that I'm being overemotional. Well, I *am* emotional. Maybe even overemotional. But I had iron principles. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Not quite."

"I mean to say that I have principles…"

And I got sick. So sick that my head began aching. I decided to quit – actually, not even to come back from lunch to collect my things. Just get up and go without a word. Just walk out through the courtyard and get onto the bus… And then what? What happened then did not matter, just so long as I left the office with its iron principles, false enthusiasms and frustrated dreams of creativity.

I called my older brother. We met near the deli on Tavricheskaya Street. We got all the necessities.

Borya said, "Let's go to the Sovietskaya Hotel. My friends from Lvov are staying there."

The “friends” turned out to be three relatively young women named Sofa, Rita and Galina Pavlovna. They were shooting a documentary called *The Mighty Chord*. It was about mixed feed for swine.

The Sovietskaya Hotel had been built six years before. At first only foreigners stayed there. Then the foreigners were abruptly moved out. It seems that from the top floors it was possible to take pictures of the Admiralteyets Shipyard. Some wags changed the hotel’s name from the Sovietskaya to the Antisovietskaya.

I liked the women from the film group. They acted quickly and decisively. They brought chairs, got out plates and glasses, cut up sausage – that is, they showed a total readiness to relax and frolic during the day. Sofa even opened up some canned goods with her manicure scissors.

My brother said, “Let’s start!”

He drank, grew flushed and took off his jacket. I wanted to take mine off, too, but Rita stopped me.

“Go down for some lemonade.”

I went to the hotel buffet. I was back in three minutes. During that time the women had managed to fall in love with my brother. All three of them. And their love was insulting to me in nature. If I reached for the sprats, Sofa would exclaim, “Why don’t you have the sardines? Borya prefers the sprats.”

If I poured myself some vodka, Rita would worry: “Drink the Moskovskaya. Borya says the Stolichnaya is better.”

Even the restrained Galina Pavlovna got into the act: “Smoke the Auroras. Borya likes the imported cigarettes.”

“So do I,” I said. “I like the imported cigarettes.”

“Typical snobbery,” Galina exclaimed.

All my brother had to do was say something inane for all the women to fall down in peals of laughter. For instance, he said,

munching on a squash spread, “It looks like something that’s been eaten already.”

And they all laughed.

But when I began telling them that our typist had killed herself, they all cried, “Stop it!”

About two hours passed this way. I kept waiting for the women to get into a fight over my brother. It did not happen. On the contrary, they became friendlier and friendlier, like the wives of an elderly Muslim.

Borya told them gossip about movie stars. Sang prison songs. Drunk, he unbuttoned Galina Pavlovna’s blouse. I was so down by then that I opened yesterday’s paper.

Then Rita said, “I’m going to the airport. I have to meet our director. Sergei, escort me.”

A fine thing, I thought. Borya eats the sprats. Borya smokes the Jebels. Borya drinks the Stolichnaya. And I’m the one who has to accompany that old bag?

My brother said, “Go on. You’re just reading the paper anyway.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go. If I’m going to be humiliated, it might as well be all the way.”

I pulled on my ski cap and Rita donned a sheepskin jacket. We went down in the elevator and over to the taxi stand. It was getting dark. The snow had a blue tinge. Neon lights melted in the twilight.

We were first in the taxi line. Rita had said nothing during the entire walk, except for one sentence: “You dress like a tramp!”

I replied, “Nothing to worry about. Just imagine that I’m a plumber or mechanic. An aristocratic lady hurrying home escorted by an electrician. All as it should be.”

A taxi came. I reached for the door handle. Two big guys appeared out of nowhere. One said, “We’re in a rush, fuzz face!” and tried to push me aside. The other squeezed into the backseat.

That was too much. I'd had nothing but negative feedback all day, and this was out-and-out street obnoxiousness. All my suppressed anger erupted. I took out my humiliation on these men. It all came out – Raisa, the newspaper scum, the ugly ski cap, even my brother's amorous success.

I took a swing, remembering the lessons of Sharafutdinov, the heavyweight champ. I took a swing and fell on my back.

I don't remember what happened. Either it was slippery or my centre of gravity was too high… In any case, I fell. I saw the sky, enormous, pale and mysterious. So far away from my problems and disappointments. So pure.

I gazed at it in admiration until a shoe kicked me in the eye. And everything went dark…

I regained consciousness to the sound of police whistles. I was sitting up, leaning against a garbage can. To my right was a crowd of people. The left side of reality was covered in darkness.

Rita was explaining something to a police sergeant. She could have been taken for the wife of an executive. And I – for her personal chauffeur. So the policeman listened attentively.

I pushed my fists into the snow. Floundering, I tried to stand up. I swayed. Luckily, Rita ran over to me.

Then we were back in the elevator. My clothes were muddy. The ski cap was missing. My cheek was bleeding.

Rita had her arm around my waist. I tried to move away: this time I really was compromising her. But Rita held on to me and whispered, "Damn, you're a handsome devil!"

The elevator, with a quiet groan, stopped at the top floor. We were back in the same room. My brother was kissing Galina Pavlovna. Sofa was tugging at his shirt, repeating, "Silly, she's old enough to be your mother…"

Seeing me, my brother raised a terrible hue and cry. He even wanted to rush off and do something somewhere, but changed his

mind and stayed. I was surrounded by the women.

Something strange was happening. When I was a normal man, they disdained me. Now, when I was practically an invalid, the women smothered me with their attentions. They were literally fighting for the right to treat my eye.

Rita was wiping my face with a wet cloth. Galina Pavlovna was untying my shoelaces. Sofa went further than the rest – she was unbuttoning my trousers.

My brother was trying to say something, to give advice, but they shut him up. Whenever he made a suggestion, the women reacted stormily.

"Shut up! Drink your stupid vodka! Eat your crummy canned food! We'll manage without you!"

I waited for a pause, and finally got to tell about our typist's suicide. This time I was heard with great interest. And Galina Pavlovna practically burst into tears.

"Look at that! Seryozha only has one eye! But with that one eye he sees so much more than other people do with two!"

After which Rita said, "I won't go to the airport. We're going to the emergency room. Borya will go meet our director."

"I don't know him," my brother said.

"It doesn't matter. Have him paged."

"But I'm drunk."

"What do you think, he's going to arrive sober?" Rita and I went off to the emergency room on Gogol Street. The waiting room was filled with people with smashed-in faces. Some were groaning.

Rita, not waiting her turn, went to see the doctor. Her luxurious sheepskin jacket had the desired effect here, too. I heard her ask loudly, "Who do I see if my lover boy's got his face punched in?"

They waved me in immediately.

I spent twenty minutes with the doctor. The doctor said I got off easy – there was no concussion, the eye was intact, and the bruise would go away in a week. Then he asked, “What did they hit you with – a brick?”

“A shoe,” I said.

“A real clodhopper, I’ll bet,” the doctor commented. And added, “When will we learn to manufacture elegant shoes in the Soviet Union?”

So basically it wasn’t too bad. The only loss was my ski cap.

I got home at around one in the morning. Lena said drily, “Congratulations.”

I told her about my day. Her response was, “Fantastic things always happen to you…”

Early the next morning my brother called. I was in a lousy mood. I didn’t feel like going to the office. I didn’t have any money. My future was murky.

And besides, there was something heraldic about my face. The left side was dark. The bruise shimmered with all the colours of the rainbow. The thought of going out into the street was horrible.

But my brother said, “I have something important I need you for. We have to perform a financial transaction. I’m buying a colour TV on credit, then selling it for cash to this guy. I’m losing about fifty roubles on the deal, but I’m getting over three hundred to pay back in instalments over a year’s time. Got it?”

“Not quite.”

“It’s all very simple. I get the three hundred like a loan. I pay off my minor creditors. Get out of my financial dead end. Get my second wind. And the debt for the television I pay off slowly and steadily over the year. See? Speaking philosophically, one big debt is better than a hundred small ones. Borrowing for a year is more respectable than begging with a promise to pay it back the day after tomorrow. And

besides, it's more noble to be in debt to the state than to borrow from friends."

"You've convinced me," I said. "But what do I have to do with it?"

"You have to come with me."

"That's all I need!"

"I need you. You have a more practical mind. You'll make sure I don't blow the money."

"But my face is all bashed in."

"Big deal! Who cares about that? I'll bring you a pair of sunglasses."

"It's February."

"Doesn't matter. You could have flown in from Abyssinia. And anyway, people don't know why your face is bashed in. What if you were defending a lady's honour?"

"That's what happened, more or less."

"All the more reason…"

I got ready to go out. I told my wife that I was going to the clinic. Lena said, "Here's a rouble, buy a bottle of sunflower oil."

I met my brother on Konyushennaya Square. He was wearing a worn sealskin hat. He took a pair of sunglasses from his pocket. I said, "The glasses won't help. Give me the hat instead."

"But the hat's supposed to help?"

"At least my ears won't freeze."

"That's true. We'll take turns wearing it."

We went to the trolleybus stop. My brother said, "Let's take a taxi. If we arrive by trolley, it'll be unnatural. Our pockets are bursting with money now, so to speak. Do you have a rouble?"

"I do. But I have to buy a bottle of sunflower oil."

“I’m telling you, we’ll have money. If you want, I’ll buy you a *bucket* of sunflower oil.”

“A bucket’s too much. But if you would return the rouble.”

“Consider that lousy rouble already in your pocket…”

My brother flagged down a car. We went to Gostiny Dvor, into the audio department. Borya disappeared behind the counter, looking for some guy named Mishan. As he left, he handed me the hat.

“It’s your turn. Put it on.”

I waited around twenty minutes for him, examining radios and television sets. I held the hat in my hand. I had the feeling that everyone was interested in my left eye. If a pretty woman appeared, I turned my right side to her.

My brother, agitated and joyous, appeared for a second. He said, “Everything’s going fine. I’ve signed the credit papers. The buyer just showed up. They’ll give him the TV in a minute. Wait here…”

I waited. I moved from the audio department to the children’s section. I recognized the salesman as my former classmate Lyova Girshovich. Lyova began examining my eye.

“What’d they hit you with?”

I thought, “Everybody’s interested in what they hit me with.” I wished just one person would want to know why.

“A shoe,” I said.

“Were you sleeping on the pavement or something?”

“And why not?”

Lyova told me a wild tale. They’d discovered major embezzlement at a toy factory. Wind-up bears, tanks and walking excavators were disappearing in enormous quantities. The police worked on the case for a year, without any success.

Quite recently the crime was solved. Two workmen at the factory had dug a short tunnel, leading from the plant to Kotovsky Street.

The workers took the toys, wound them up, and set them down. And then the bears, tanks and excavators went off on their own. In an endless flow, they left the factory.

At that moment I saw my brother through the glass partition. I went over to him.

Borya had changed visibly. There was something aristocratic in his manner now, a satiety and an indolent lordliness. In a wan, capricious voice he said, “Where did you disappear to?”

I thought, “So that’s how money changes us. Even if it’s someone else’s.”

We went out on the street. My brother slapped his pocket.

“Let’s go out and eat!”

“You said you had to pay off your debts.”

“Yes, I said I had to pay off my debts. But I didn’t say we had to starve. We have three hundred twenty roubles and sixty-four copecks. If we don’t eat, it will be unnatural. Drinking isn’t obligatory. We won’t drink.” Then he added, “Have you warmed up? Give me my hat.”

Along the way, my brother began daydreaming.

“We’ll order something crunchy. Have you noticed how I like crunchy things?”

“Yes,” I said. “Like Stolichnaya vodka.”

Borya chided me. “Don’t be a cynic. Vodka is sacred.” Sorrowfully he added, “You have to treat things like that seriously…”

We crossed the street and found ourselves in a shashlik place. I had wanted to go to a milk bar, but my brother said, “A shashlik joint is the only place where a smashed face goes unnoticed.”

There weren’t many customers. Winter coats hung darkly on the coat rack. Pretty girls in lacy aprons ran around the room. The jukebox was blaring.

Rows of bottles glimmered by the bar at the entrance. Beyond that, on a platform, were the tables.

My brother immediately took an interest in the spirits.

I tried to stop him. “Remember what you said.”

“What did I say? I said we wouldn’t drink. In the sense of getting drunk. We don’t have to drink by the glassful. We’re cultured people. We’ll have a shot glass each just for the mood. If we don’t drink at all, it’ll be unnatural.”

And my brother ordered half a litre of Armenian cognac.

I said, “Give me my rouble. I’ll buy a bottle of sunflower oil.”

He grew angry.

“You’re so petty! I don’t have a rouble, it’s all tens. When I break a ten I’ll buy you a cistern of sunflower oil.”

As we took off our coats, my brother handed me the hat.

“It’s your turn, take it.”

We sat down at a corner table. I turned my right side to the room.

Everything that followed went by in a flash. From the shashlik place we went to the Astoria Hotel. From there, to see friends from the ice ballet. From their place, to the bar at the Journalists’ Union Club.

And everywhere my brother said, “If we stop now, it’ll be unnatural. We used to drink when we didn’t have money. It’d be stupid not to drink now, when we have it.”

Whenever we walked into a restaurant, Borya handed me his hat. When we went back out on the street, I would return the hat to him with thanks.

Then we went into the theatrical store on Ryleyev Street. He bought a rather ugly Pinocchio mask. I had spent an hour in that mask at the Yunost bar. By that time my eye had turned purple.

By evening my brother had developed an obsession. He wanted to fight. Rather, he wanted to find the bullies who had beaten me up the night before. Borya thought he could recognize them in a crowd.

“You haven’t even seen them,” I said.

“What do you think intuition is for then?”

He began pestering strangers. Luckily, everyone was afraid of him – until he picked on a Hercules near a clothing store. That one wasn’t frightened. He said, “I’ve never seen an alcoholic Jew before!”

My brother grew incredibly animated, as if he had been waiting all his life for someone to insult his national dignity. Especially since he wasn’t a Jew at all. It was I who was Jewish, to some degree. That’s how it was. A complicated family history. Too long to go into…

Incidentally, Borya’s wife, whose maiden name was Feinzimmer, liked to say, “Borya has drunk so much of my blood, he’s half Jewish now!”

I had never noticed any Caucasian patriotism in Borya before. But now he was even talking with a Georgian accent.

“I – a Jew? You mean, you think I’m a Jew?! You’re insulting me, my friend!”

They headed for an alleyway. I said, “Stop it. Leave the man alone. Let’s get out of here.”

But my brother was already turning the corner, shouting, “Don’t leave. If the police show up, give a whistle.”

I don’t know what happened in that alley. I only saw passers-by recoil.

My brother returned in a few moments. His lower lip was split. He held a brand-new sealskin hat in his hand. We quickly strode towards Vladimirskaya Square.

Borya caught his breath and said, “I punched him in the face. And he punched me in the face. His hat fell off. And my hat fell off. I looked and saw his hat was newer. I bent over and picked it up. And

naturally, he picked up mine. I cursed him out. And he cursed me. And we went our separate ways. And I'm giving this hat to you. Take it."

I said, "I'd rather you bought me a bottle of sunflower oil."

"Naturally," my brother said. "But first let's have a drink. It's necessary, as disinfection."

And he stuck out his lower lip as proof.

I got home late that night. Lena didn't even ask where I had been. She did ask, "Where's the sunflower oil?"

I mumbled something unintelligible.

Her answer was, "Your friends are always drinking at your expense!"

"But at least," I said, "I have a new sealskin hat."

What else could I say?

From the bathroom, I heard her repeating, "My God, how will all this end? How will it all end?"

The Driving Gloves

I first met Yura Schlippenbach in Tauride Palace in Leningrad, at a conference of newspaper editors. I represented *Turbobuilder*, and Schlippenbach was there from a film-industry magazine called *Close-Up.*

Second Secretary of the Regional Party Committee Bolotnikov had the floor. At the end of his speech, he said, “We have model newspapers like *Banner of Progress*. We have average ones, like *Admiralty*, and bad ones, like *Turbobuilder*. And then we have *Close-Up*, which is in a class of its own – it is spectacular in its mediocrity and tedium…”

I hunched down a bit in my seat. Schlippenbach, on the contrary, proudly straightened up – apparently he felt like a persecuted dissident. Then he called out, “Lenin said that any criticism has to be substantiated!”

“Your paper, Yura, is beneath all criticism,” the secretary replied.

In the intermission, Schlippenbach stopped me and asked, “Excuse me, how tall are you?”

I wasn’t surprised; I was used to it. I knew I should expect the usual stupid exchange: “How tall are you?” “Six four.” “Too bad you don’t play basketball.” “I do play.” “That’s what I thought.”

“How tall are you?” Schlippenbach asked.

“Six four. Why?”

“You see, I’m doing an underground film. I want you to play the lead.”

“I can’t act.”

"That's not important. You have the right look."

We agreed to meet the next day.

I had known Schlippenbach from seeing him around the central newspaper offices. We had never met personally. He was a thin, edgy man with long, dirty hair.

He claimed that his Swedish ancestors are mentioned in historical documents. In addition, he carried a single volume of Pushkin verses in his carryall. 'Poltava' was bookmarked with a candy wrapper.

"Read," Schlippenbach would say nervously. And without waiting for a reaction, he'd bark out:

"And soon the foe begins to yield.
The cannons roar: platoons are shaken,
Mingled, dismembered, crushed in mud:
The fiery Schlippenbach is taken,
And Rosen leaves the field of blood."

People were wary of him at the news headquarters. He was very bold. Perhaps the ardour inherited from the Swedish general was coming through. Schlippenbach refused to give up or give in. Once, when the old journalist Maryushin died, someone took up a collection for the funeral and approached Schlippenbach. He exclaimed, "I wouldn't give a rouble for Maryushin alive. I certainly wouldn't give a copeck for him dead. Let the KGB bury its informers."

Meanwhile, Schlippenbach was constantly borrowing money from his co-workers, and he was reluctant about returning it. The list of creditors took pages in his notebook. When he was reminded of a debt, he would threaten, "You keep nagging me and I'll cross you off my list!"

That evening after the meeting he called me twice, for no real reason. His offhand tone bespoke our closer relationship: you can call a friend for no reason. "I'm bored," he complained. "And there's nothing to drink. I'm lying here on the couch all alone, with my

wife…" At the end of the conversation, he reminded me, "We'll discuss everything tomorrow."

We spent the morning in the newspaper offices. I was going over proofs, and Schlippenbach was laying out his issue. He kept shouting things like, "Where's the scissors? … Who took my ruler?… How do you write South African Republic – with or without a hyphen?"

Then we went to lunch.

Back in the Sixties, the canteen of the Press Centre was a closed club with access to hard-to-find foods: it sold veal hot dogs, canned goods, caviar, marmalade, tongue and smoked sturgeon. Theoretically, the canteen served only people who worked at the Press Centre, including writers from the industry papers; in practice, you would find people off the street in there – freelancers, for instance. That is, it gradually became less and less exclusive. And that meant fewer and fewer hard-to-get things. By this time, all that was left of its former glory was the Zhiguli beer.

The canteen took up the northern part of the sixth floor. The windows opened onto the Fontanka River. The three rooms could hold over a hundred people. Schlippenbach dragged me into an alcove, to a table for two. Apparently we were going to have a highly confidential conversation.

We got beer and sandwiches. Schlippenbach lowered his voice a bit and began.

"I turned to you because I value cultured people. I'm a cultured person. There aren't many of us. To tell the truth, I'm surprised there are as many as there are – aristocrats are a dying breed, like prehistoric animals. But let's talk business. I've decided to do an underground film on my own. I'm tired of giving the best years of my life to run-of-the-mill journalism – I want to do real creative work. Anyhow, I start shooting tomorrow. It will be a ten-minute film, a satire. Here's the plot: a mysterious stranger appears in Leningrad.

We see right off that he's Tsar Peter the Great, the man who founded this city two hundred and sixty years ago. Now the great sovereign finds himself smack in the middle of vulgar Soviet reality. A policeman threatens to run him in. Two winos ask him to chip in for a bottle. Whores take him for a rich foreigner. KGB agents think he's a spy, and so on. In short, it's a drunken whorehouse of a city. The Tsar cries, 'What have I done?… Why did I ever build this whorish city?'"

Schlippenbach laughed so hard that the paper napkins flew up in the air. Then he added, "The film will be politically touchy, to put it mildly. It will have to be shown in private apartments. I'm hoping Western journalists will see it – that will guarantee worldwide resonance. The consequences may be most unexpected. So, you think it over, weigh the facts. Do you accept?"

"You said to think it over…"

"How long can you think? Just agree!"

"Where will you get equipment?"

"No need to worry about that. Don't forget, I work at Lenfilm studios. Everyone there is a friend, from the top directors down to the lighting crew. The equipment is mine to use. I've been running a camera since I was a child. So think about it and decide. You suit me. This is a role I can trust only to a like-minded individual. We'll go to the studios tomorrow, get the necessary props, talk to make-up. And we'll start."

I said, "I have to think about it…"

"I'll call you."

We paid and went back to the office.

I really didn't have any acting talent, even though my parents were theatre people – my father was a director and my mother an actress. Although my parents didn't leave any deep mark on theatre, which may be a good thing.

As for me, I had been on the stage twice. The first time, back in school, we put on a stage version of the story *Chuk and Gek*. As the tallest, I got to play the polar-explorer father. I had to come out of the tundra on skis and then give the final monologue. The tundra was played backstage by a straight “F” student Prokopovich. He cawed, howled, and roared like a bear. I appeared onstage shuffling my feet and waving my arms – my impression of a man on skis. That was my own idea, my contribution to stage conventions.

Unfortunately, the spectators did not appreciate my formalist invention. Hearing Prokopovich’s howls and seeing my mysterious movements, they decided I was supposed to be a hooligan. There were plenty of hooligans in the post-war schools.

The girls were outraged and the boys applauded. The school principal ran onstage and dragged me off. The literature teacher had to give the final monologue.

The second time I acted was four years ago. I was working on the regional Party newspaper and was assigned to play Grandfather Frost. I was promised three days off and fifteen roubles. The editorial staff was giving a New Year’s show for an affiliated state school. Once again I was the tallest. They glued on a beard, gave me a white hat and jacket and a basket of gifts, and let me out on the stage.

The jacket was tight. The hat smelt of fish. I almost burnt the beard lighting a cigarette. I waited for silence and said, “Hello, kids! Do you know who I am?”

“Lenin! Lenin!” they cried from the first rows. I laughed, and my beard came unglued…

And now Schlippenbach was offering me a leading role.

Of course, I could have refused. But for some reason I accepted. I always responded to the wildest proposals; no wonder my wife says, “You’re interested in everything except conjugal obligations.” By “conjugal obligations” my wife means sobriety, first and foremost.

So, we went down to Lenfilm. Schlippenbach called some guy named Chipa, in the props department, and got a pass.

The room we came to was jammed with cupboards and crates. I smelt mildew and mothballs. Fluorescent lights blinked and crackled overhead. A stuffed bear reared up in the corner. A cat strolled down the long table.

Chipa came out from behind a curtain. He was a middle-aged man in a striped T-shirt and top hat. He stared at me a long time and then asked, “Did you use to serve in the guards?”

“Why?”

“Remember the isolation cell in Ropcha?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember the convict who strung himself up on his belt?”

“Vaguely.”

“That was me. They pumped me for two hours, the bastards.”

Chipa treated us to some watered grain alcohol and was generally complaisant. He said, “Here you go, Chief!” and laid out a pile of junk on the table: tall black boots, a brocade waistcoat, a frock coat, a broad-brimmed hat and a sword. Then he got out a pair of gauntlets, like the ones early car enthusiasts used to wear.

“What about trousers?” Schlippenbach reminded him.

Chipa opened a crate and lifted out a pair of velvet breeches with gold braid. I pulled them on with great difficulty. They wouldn’t fasten. “They’ll do,” Chipa said. “Use twine.”

As we were leaving, he suddenly said, “When I was inside, I wanted out. But now, if I have a few drinks, I start missing the camp. What people! Lefty, One-Eye, Diesel!”

We put the stuff in a suitcase and took the elevator down to make-up.

By the way, this was my first visit to Lenfilm. I thought I'd see lots of interesting things – creative bustle, famous actors, maybe Chursina trying on a French bikini and Tenyakova standing next to her, dying of envy. In reality, Lenfilm was like a gigantic government office: plain women carrying papers through the corridors, the rattle of typewriters from everywhere. We never did run into any colourful individuals, except maybe Chipa with his striped T-shirt and top hat.

The make-up woman, Lyudmila Alexandrovna, sat me down at a mirror and gazed into it from over my shoulder for a while.

"Well?" Schlippenbach demanded.

"The head's not great – C-plus – but the overall look is fantastic."

Lyudmila Alexandrovna touched my lip, pulled at my nose, brushed her fingers over my ear. Then she put a black wig on me. She glued on a moustache. With light strokes of a pencil, she rounded my cheeks.

"Amazing!" Schlippenbach was delighted. "A typical tsar!"

Then I suited up and we called for a taxi. I walked through the studios dressed as the great emperor. A couple of people turned to look – not many.

Schlippenbach dropped by to see one other pal. This one gave us two black boxes of equipment – for money this time.

"How much?" Schlippenbach asked.

"Four roubles and twelve copecks," was the answer. The price of a bottle.

"I heard you switched to white wine."

"And you believed that?"

In the taxi Schlippenbach explained: "You don't need to read the script – everything will be built on improvisation, like in Antonioni. Tsar Peter finds himself in modern Leningrad. Everything is disgusting and alien. He goes into a grocery store. He starts shouting, 'Where's the smoked venison, the mead, the anise vodka?

Who bankrupted my domain, the barbarians?' That kind of thing. We're going to Vasilyevsky Island now. Galina is waiting for us with the van."

"Who's Galina?"

"From supplies at Lenfilm. She has a company van. Said she'd meet us after work. Incredibly cultured woman. We wrote the screenplay together. At a friend's apartment. Anyway, let's go to Vasilyevsky. Do the first shots. The Tsar heads from the Rostral Column towards Nevsky Prospekt. He's in shock. He keeps slowing down and looking around. Get it? You know – be scared of cars, look puzzled at signs, shy away from phone booths… If someone bumps into you, draw your sword. Go with it – be creative." My sword lay on my lap. The blade was filed off, inside the scabbard: I could draw about three inches of it.

Schlippenbach waved his arms with inspiration. But the driver was unmoved. As he dropped us off, he asked in a friendly way, "So, what zoo did you escape from, pal?"

"Terrific!" Schlippenbach cried. "We can use that line! Ready art!"

We got out of the taxi with the boxes. A minivan stood across the street. A young woman in jeans was pacing near it. My appearance did not interest her.

"Galina, you're a marvel," Schlippenbach said. "We start in ten minutes."

"You are the bane of my existence," she replied.

They puttered with the equipment for about twenty minutes. I walked up and down in the slush in front of the Kunstkamera. Passers-by examined me with interest. A cold wind blew from the Neva River. The sun kept ducking behind clouds.

At last Schlippenbach said we were ready. Galina poured some coffee for herself from a thermos. The cover squeaked revoltingly.

"Go way over there," Schlippenbach told me, "around the corner. When I wave my arm, start walking along the wall."

I crossed the street and stood behind the corner. By then my boots were soaked. Schlippenbach kept delaying: I noticed Galina hand him a glass of coffee. Meanwhile, I was wandering around in wet boots.

At last Schlippenbach waved. He held the camera like a halberd beside him. Then he stooped behind it.

I put out my cigarette, came around the corner and headed for the bridge. It turns out that when you're being filmed it's hard to walk. I did my best not to trip. When the wind gusted, I had to hold on to my hat. Suddenly Schlippenbach yelled something. I couldn't hear what he said because of the wind, so I stopped and crossed the street to him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I couldn't hear you."

"What didn't you hear?"

"What did you shout?"

"I shouted, 'Brilliant!' That's all. Go on back, do it again."

"Want some coffee?" Galina finally asked me.

"Not now," Schlippenbach said. "After the third take."

I came out from around the corner again. Headed for the bridge again. And once more Schlippenbach yelled something. This time I paid no attention.

I walked all the way to the parapet. I looked back; Schlippenbach and his girlfriend were inside the van. I hurried over.

"Just one comment," Schlippenbach said. "More expression. You should be absolutely amazed by everything you see. Look at the posters and signs in astonishment."

"There aren't any signs along there."

"Doesn't matter. I'll edit them in later. Just look amazed. Every three yards, stop and throw your hands in the air."

Schlippenbach made me do it seven times. I was exhausted. My breeches kept slipping down under the waistcoat. It was hard to smoke with the gloves on.

But finally my suffering ended. Galina handed me the thermos, and we drove to Tavricheskaya Street.

“There’s a beer stall there,” Schlippenbach said. “More than one, I think. Winos all over the place. It’ll be terrific – the monarch among the scum.”

I knew the place – two beer stands and a vodka window, not far from the Theatre Institute. It really was loaded with drunks.

We parked the van in a courtyard and set up there.

Schlippenbach whispered excitedly, “The scene is simple – you approach the counter. You look indignantly at all these people standing in line for a drink. Then you make an address.”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Whatever you want. The words don’t matter. The important thing is your expression, your gestures.”

“They’ll think I’m an idiot.”

“That’s great, say whatever you want. Ask about the prices.”

“They’ll really think I’m an idiot then… Who doesn’t know the price of beer?” “Then ask who’s last in line. Just so your lips move. We’ll record the soundtrack later and dub it to match. Go to it.”

“Here, have a drink for courage,” Galina said. She got out a bottle of vodka and poured it into my coffee glass.

My courage did not increase. However, I got out of the van. The show must go on.

The beer stall, painted green, was on the corner of Rakov and Mokhovaya. The line stretched back across the lawn to the Central Food Council building. People were jammed up near the counter; the crowd thinned out farther away. At the end it was just a dozen grim and grumpy people.

The men wore grey jackets and vests. They were aloof and apathetic, as if at a stranger's grave. Some had brought jars and teapots for their beer. There were only a few women, five or six. They were noisier and more impatient. One of them kept nagging, "Let me go ahead of you, out of respect for an old woman and mother!"

When they got their mug in hand, people would move aside in anticipation of bliss. Grey foam flecked the ground. Everyone had a small personal fire inside; once it was extinguished, people grew animated, lit up cigarettes, looked for a conversation. The ones still in line asked, "How's the beer, OK?" "Seems OK," the others answered.

I wondered how many beer counters like this there were all over Russia. How many people died and came to life again like this every day?

As I approached the crowd, I felt afraid: why had I ever agreed to this? What was I going to say to these people – exhausted, grim, half-mad? Who needed this ridiculous masquerade?

I joined the end of the line. Two or three men glanced at me without the slightest curiosity. The rest simply paid no attention at all.

In front of me was a Georgian or an Armenian in a railroad-uniform shirt. To my left stood a bum in canvas shoes with the laces untied. Two steps ahead, an intellectual was breaking matches trying to light his cigarette. He gripped his skinny briefcase between his knees.

My situation was getting more and more ridiculous. No one said a word to me, no one was the least bit curious, no one asked me any questions – what could they ask? Their only concern here was getting the hair of the dog. And what could I say to them – ask them who's last in line? *I* was.

I realized I had no money on me – I had left it in my regular, pedestrian trousers.

I saw Schlippenbach waving his fists from the courtyard, directing me. I could see that he wanted me to follow the plan – he was

hoping it would make someone hit me over the head with a mug.

I just stood in line, and quietly moved along to the counter. I heard the railroad man explain to someone, “I’m behind the bald guy. The Tsar’s behind me. And you come after the Tsar.”

The intellectual spoke to me. “Excuse me, do you know Sherdakov?”

“Sherdakov?”

“Aren’t you Dolmatov?”

“More or less.”

“Glad to see you. I still owe you a rouble. Remember, we were leaving the Sherdakov’s house together on Cosmonaut Day? And I asked you for a rouble for a taxi? Here.”

I had no pockets; I stuck the crumpled rouble note into my glove.

I actually did know Sherdakov – a specialist in Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, an assistant professor at the Theatre Institute. A habitué of the vodka bar. “Give him my best,” I said.

I saw Schlippenbach approaching. Galina followed, sighing.

By now I was almost at the counter. The crowd grew denser. I was squeezed in between the bum and the railroad man. The end of my scabbard was pushed against the intellectual’s hip.

Schlippenbach shouted, “I don’t see the scenario! Where’s the conflict? You’re supposed to antagonize the masses!”

The line grew wary: here was some busybody with a camera trying to get people riled up.

“Excuse me,” said the railroad man to Schlippenbach. “You’re jumping the line.”

“I’m on duty,” Schlippenbach replied, thinking fast.

“We all are,” mumbled someone in the crowd.

The dissatisfaction grew, the voices got more aggressive. “There’s all kinds of wise guys and jokers around here.” “They take your picture and then they use you as a bad example, like ‘Another Troublemaker’.” “We’re just getting a drink in a perfectly civilized way, and he comes here stirring shit.” “A bum like that should be locked away.”

The crowd’s energy was close to the bursting point. But Schlippenbach was angry himself.

“You’ve boozed Russia away, you vipers! You’ve lost the last remnants of your conscience! Up to your eyeballs in vodka from morning till night!”

“Yura, enough! Yura, don’t be an idiot, let’s go!” Galina tried to pull Schlippenbach away.

But he resisted. And then came my turn at the counter. I took the crumpled rouble out of my glove and asked, “How much should I get?”

Schlippenbach calmed down immediately. “Get me a large one, warmed up. And a small for Galina.”

Galina said, “I do not indulge in beer. But I’ll drink it with pleasure.”

There was little logic in her words.

Someone complained, but the bum explained to the disgruntled one, “No, the Tsar was in the queue, I saw him. And that fag with the camera is with him, so it’s OK, it’s legal!” The winos grumbled a bit more and quieted down.

Schlippenbach put the camera in his left hand and picked up his mug. “Let’s drink to the success of our film! True talent will always make its way.”

“My fool,” said Galina.

When we were backing out of the courtyard, Schlippenbach said: “Those people! Those are some people! I was even scared. It was just like — ”

“The battle of Poltava,” I finished for him.

It was hard changing in the van, so they brought me home, still in the emperor costume…

***

The next day, I ran into Schlippenbach at the cashier’s desk. He told me he wanted to get involved in human rights. So the film-making was over. The tsar costume lay around my house for two years. A neighbour’s boy took the sword. We polished the floor with the hat. Our extravagant friend Regina wore the waistcoat as a spring jacket. My wife made a skirt out of the velvet breeches. I brought the driving gauntlets along when I emigrated; I was sure I’d buy a car first thing.

I never did get round to it. Didn’t want to. I have to stand out somehow! Let all Forest Hills know me as “that crazy Dovlatov, the guy who has no car!”

Instead of an Afterword

The suitcase is on the kitchen talbe: a rectangular plywood box, covered with green fabric, with rusted reinforcements on the corners.

My Soviet rags lie around it. The old-fashioned double-breasted suit with wide trouser cuffs. A poplin shirt the colour of a faded nasturtium. Low shoes shaped like a boat. A corduroy jacket still redolent of someone else's tobacco. A winter hat of sealskin. Crêpe socks with an electric sheen. Gloves that are good if you need to cut a hungry Newfoundland hound's hair. A belt with a heavy buckle, slightly bigger than the scar on my forehead…

So what had I acquired in all those years in my homeland? What had I earned? This pile of rubbish? A suitcase of memories?…

I've been living in America for ten years. I have jeans, sneakers, moccasins, camouflage T-shirts from the Banana Republic. Enough clothing.

But the voyage isn't over. And at the end of my allotted time I will appear at another gate. And I will have a cheap American suitcase in my hand. And I will hear: "What have you brought with you?"

"Here," I'll say. "Take a look."

And I'll also say, "There's a reason that every book, even one that isn't very serious, is shaped like a suitcase."

Notes

Alexander Blok, *But even like this… precious to me*: From a 1914 poem '*Greshit' besstydno, neprobudno*' ('To sin shamelessly, ceaselessly') by Alexander Alexandrovich Blok (1880 – 1921), a leading figure of the Symbolist movement.

OVIR: The Russian Office of Visas and Registrations, which issued legal documents for those wishing either to enter or leave the Soviet Union.

Rocky Marciano, Louis Armstrong, Joseph Brodsky, Gina Lollobrigida: Rocky Marciano (1923 – 69), Italian-American undefeated champion heavyweight boxer; Louis Armstrong (1901 – 71), famous American jazz musician; Joseph Alexandrovich Brodsky (1940 – 96), Russian Nobel Prize-winning poet and close friend of Dovlatov; Gina Lollobrigida (*b.*1927), Italian actress mostly active in the 1950s and 60s.

Karjalainen, perhaps: An unclear reference since Karjalainen is a common Finnish surname. One possibility is the children's author Elina Karjalainen (1927 – 2006), who wrote a series of books about a teddy bear called Uppo-Nalle.

the historian Nikolai Karamzin: Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin (1766 – 1826), prominent conservative Russian historian and writer.

Paul Robeson: Paul Robeson (1898 – 1976) was an African-American civil-rights activist, singer and actor who received the International Stalin Prize in 1952. His political leanings and outspokenness caused him tremendous problems in America.

the famous artist Shemyakin: Mikhail Mikhailovich Shemyakin (*b.*1943), a painter who studied at the Repin Academy in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) and, after frequent clashes with the KGB, left the Soviet Union in 1971.

Yuri Gagarin, Mayakovsky, Fidel Castro: Yuri Alexeyevich Gagarin (1934 – 68), Soviet cosmonaut and the first man in space, who received the most prestigious award in the USSR, “Hero of the Soviet Union”; Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (1893 – 1930), Russian Futurist poet and Soviet propagandist, often seen as the exemplar of Soviet art; Fidel Castro (*b.*1926), leader of the Cuban revolution and subsequently First Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba.

Lomonosov: Mikhail Vasilyevich (1711 – 65), pioneering Russian grammarian, poet, scientist and founder of Moscow State University.

Pushkin Hills: An area in the Pskov Oblast named after Russia’s most celebrated poet, Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799 – 1837), who spent a period of exile and wrote some of his best-known works in the region.

Léger: Fernand Léger (1881 – 1955), French painter and sculptor, who joined the Communist Party in 1945.

Komsomol: The Communist Party’s youth wing.

pelmeni: Meat dumplings, a traditional Russian dish.

Mikhail Rodzyanko… Trotsky, Lazar Kaganovich and Andrei Andreyev: Rodzyanko (1859 – 1924) was a key politician in pre-Communist Russia. Trotsky (1879 – 1940) was second to Lenin in the early days of the Revolution; Kaganovich (1893 – 1991) and Andreyev (1895 – 1971) were fervent supporters of Stalin.

Heroine Mother: A title and the name of a medal awarded to mothers of ten or more children.

people’s assessors: In the Soviet legal system, a people’s assessor had a role similar to that of a magistrate. Particularly in Soviet films, people’s assessors would have towed the party line in their verdicts.

Misha Baryshnikov: Mikhail Nikolayevich Baryshnikov (*b.*1948), widely regarded as one of the greatest ballet dancers of the twentieth century. He defected from the Soviet Union in 1974 whilst touring in Canada.

Peter Brook, Fellini and De Sica: All luminaries of the film or theatre worlds: Peter Brook (*b.*1925), English theatre and film director; Federico Fellini (1920 – 93), Italian film director; Vittorio De Sica (1901 – 74), Italian film director and actor.

Shostakovich, Mravinsky, Eisenstein: Again, all extremely influential Soviet cultural figures: Dmitry Dmitryevich Shostakovich (1906 – 75), Russian composer; Yevgeny Alexandrovich Mravinsky (1903 – 88), Soviet conductor; Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein (1898 – 1948), ground-breaking Soviet film director.

Nikolai Gumilyov: Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilyov (1886 – 1921), Russian Acmeist poet.

Yesenin, Zoshchenko and Vysotsky: Sergei Alexandrovich Yesenin (1895 – 1925), one of Russia's best-known lyrical poets, committed suicide at thirty. Mikhail Mikhailovich Zoshchenko (1895 – 1958) was one of the foremost figures of Soviet satire, and was persecuted by the authorities towards the end of his life. Vladimir Semyonovich Vysotsky (1938 – 80), known as a bard in Russia, was one of the most popular and respected singer-songwriters of his country.

Raykin: Arkady Isaakovich Raykin (1911 – 87), well-known Soviet humorist.

Sartre, Yves Montand: Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980), French existentialist philosopher; Yves Montand (1921 – 91), Italian-born French actor and singer.

Proust, Galsworthy, Feuchtwanger… she loved Pasternak and Tsvetayeva: The first three are all "foreign" authors: Marcel Proust (1871 – 1922), French author of *In Search of Lost Time*; John Galsworthy (1867 – 1933), English novelist and author of *The Forsyte Saga*; Lion Feuchtwanger (1884 – 1958), German-Jewish novelist and playwright. Boris Leonidovich Pasternak (1890 – 1960) and Marina Ivanovna Tsvetayeva (1892 – 1941) were both celebrated Russian writers.

Solzhenitsyn's portrait: Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (1918 – 2008), Russian writer and notable dissident.

Tolya Gladilin… Vasya Shukshin… Bellochka: Here Dovlatov uses the diminutive versions of the writers' first names to emphasize his connection with them. All were prominent writers born in the late 1920s or 1930s.

Tarkovsky's movies: Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky (1932 – 86), acclaimed Russian film director whose work was highly lyrical and often spiritual. *Ivan's Childhood* was Tarkovsky's first feature film and won him widespread acclaim.

friendly greetings from Goryshin, a drunken bear hug from Wolf, a quick chat with Yefimov or Konetsky… Even Daniil Granin knew my face: Gleb Alexandrovich Goryshin (1931 – 98), editor for the literary journal *Aurora*; Sergei Evgenyevich Wolf (1935 – 2005), a poet and prose writer from St Petersburg; Igor Markovich Yefimov (*b.*1937), novelist and author of a number of *samizdat* publications; Viktor Viktorovich Konetsky (1929 – 2002), writer and screenwriter; Daniil Alexandrovich Granin (*b.*1919), award-winning novelist and documentary writer.

Kornei Chukovsky, Nikolai Oleynikov… Daniil Kharms, and so on: Chukovsky (1882 – 1969) was an influential children's poet, critic and translator. Oleynikov (1898 – 1937) and Kharms (1905 – 42) both belonged to the absurdist OBERIU group in the 1920s, which was later seen to conflict with Soviet aesthetics. The former was shot at the height of Stalin's purges; the latter died in a psychiatric ward in Leningrad after being arrested for treason.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko: (*b.*1933) Hugely popular Russian poet and critic of Stalinism.

Virgin Soil Upturned: A reference to a Soviet classic by Mikhail Sholokhov (1905 – 84), commonly thought of as rather dreary, and required reading in schools.

a picture of the actor Yakovlev: Yury Vasilyevich Yakovlev (*b.*1928), a well-known film and theatre actor.

Ceauşescu: Nicolae Ceauşescu (1918 – 89), General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party.

Gostiny Dvor: The largest and most famous department store in St Petersburg.

And soon the foe… field of blood: From Pushkin's 'Poltava', English translation by John Coutts.

Chuk and Gek: a children's story written by Arkady Petrovich Gaidar (1904 – 41), about two young brothers who leave Moscow to visit their father, who is on a remote expedition.

Chursina… Tenyakova: Lyudmila Alexeyevna Chursina (*b.*1941) and Natalya Maximovna Tenyakova (*b.*1944) both famous, award-winning Russian actresses.