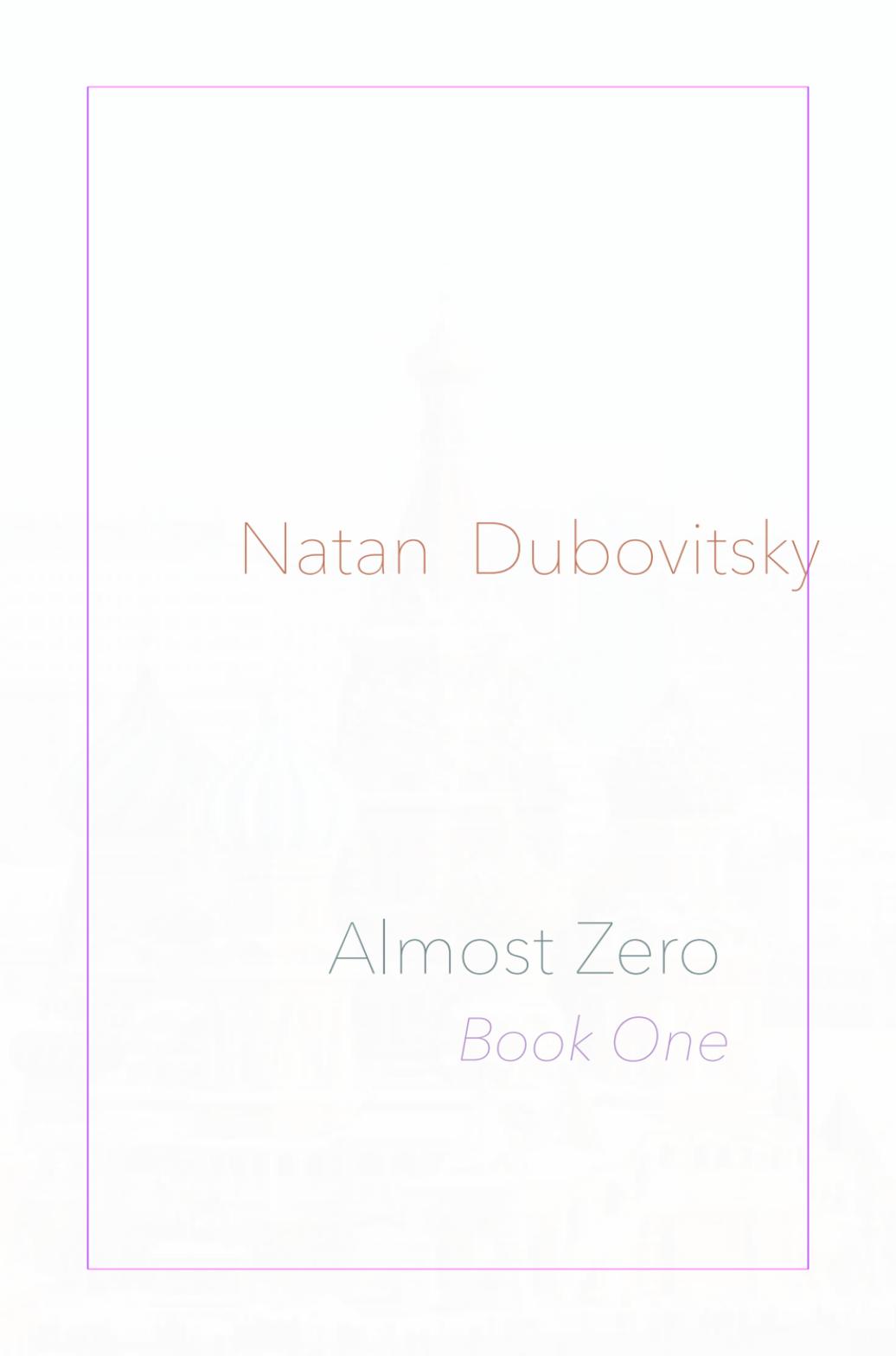


натан дубовицкий

ОКОЛОНОЛЯ

*translated by Nino Goji & Nastya Valentine
edited by M.E. Anzuoni and Daniel Schwartz*



Natan Dubovitsky

Almost Zero
Book One

“Is it long?”

“Not really.”

“Then read it to me.”

“Okay. It has a title: ‘The Career.’ Ahem:

Viktor O. came from some backwater Holmogory countryside to Moscow because he was a good student, well-reputed and ambitious. He applied for a chemistry degree at some higher education institution you’ve all heard of and found it all such a dreary bore. But he wanted to stay in Moscow and so married a stranger in a hastily calculated move to obtain a residence permit.

Well, he was permitted to reside in a two-bedroom slum run by a greedy landlady. As part of the lease, he had to live with her degenerate husband and son, both revolting drunks. What a time, permanently residing . . . Viktor groveled for jobs, did everything in the house, cared for the drunks who called him peasant, and at the end of the day was tortured by his wife’s increasingly demanding sexual aspirations.

Such a life completely exhausted Viktor O. A few months of this led to the incident. The drunks screamed at him as he hurried out the door, already late to one of his three jobs. When he finally got in, he was summoned to the office of K, one of his six managers, and received a requisite dressing-down. However rather than nod his head and continue the usual course of business, Viktor instead broke down in tears and went screaming down the steps and onto the shop floor tearing at his hair.

He ran into the chemical lab drooling and out of breath. He was no longer frightened, although his hairs still stood on end. He felt a reassuring calm wash over him as he surveyed the room. He was not Viktor O, he was Berthold Schwarz! And he invented gunpowder and quickly blew up half the factory.

Once properly restrained and beaten, the medical staff, by means of psycho-chemical coercion, pretty soon convinced Viktor O. that he was not Berthold Schwarz and that gunpowder had already been invented.

Viktor reluctantly agreed that he was not Schwarz but also denied that he was Viktor O. Re-finding himself, he quickly wrote *We* in thirteen hours (which, incidentally, he had never read) and now walked the Earth as famous writer Yevgeny Zamyatin.

The medical staff forwarded his novel to the literature department. The novel was recognized as a work of talent, but acknowledged to be an exact copy of a book written decades earlier by Yevgeny Zamyatin. Viktor was dismayed to learn that the writer had passed a long time ago and he was, therefore, not him.

The patient succumbed again to a deep depression, still not recognizing himself as Viktor O. However, he quickly rebounded and became interested in painting and in the morning on the hospital wall shone a frighteningly inappropriate Madonna. Viktor convinced himself he was Raphael and earned a chunk painting commissions but the medical staff confiscated most of it.

The exorcism of this newfound Raphael took a month. Viktor O. softened. He realized he could never hope to be such great men. He began picking up more modest roles—Patient Q from room number eight, or Urizen from down the hall. However, the staff did not compromise and each new persona was met with an equally potent chemical cocktail.

'An astonishing patient,' the Director said, turning to the medical staff, 'He is ready to be anyone but himself. However, his insurance is in arrears. It is high time to end this.'

The Director turned to the patient.

'Viktor O, you are . . . Viktor O. No one else. On this basis, I categorically discharge you as our patient.'

Discharged, Viktor O. staggered through the dank streets as a green rain fell on the city. He looked so distraught and ragged that a passing limit worker, covered in oil and ash, offered to treat him to a beer.

The air in the tavern was stale and hot as the beer. Soon a messy fight bubbled up, swallowing Viktor O.'s benefactor as he clocked a student, who pulled out a knife in fear of his mortal soul. The limit worker grabbed Viktor by his lapels, lifted him overhead and tossed him at the student. Viktor's eyes were on the blood-and-tooth splattered floor as he flew over and smashed right into the student's face. The student stammered back and then smacked his head on the wall, leaving a streak of blood as he sank down to the floor. Viktor moaned and clawed his way back up to the bar. He was almost finished with his beer before someone cranked him in the back of the head.

He woke up at the police station. They were shining a bright blue light at him intensely.

'You were used to kill a man,' a policeman said.

'I . . . didn't want to kill anyone,' Viktor sputtered. 'I'm a patsy . . .'

'It is true, he was merely used as a weapon,' one detected said.

Another stood up and began pacing the room. 'If he is guilty of murder, then so are all knives and guns and thus they should be locked up. But since that is not the case, we must conclude that this man is therefore material evidence!' 'I concur,' said the third policeman, 'he ought to be remanded until the trial is over. We can put him in the evidence lockers.' The group concurred and brought Viktor to his locker.

Viktor settled quietly into his new home. He enjoyed the duties and responsibilities of being material evidence, relishing the investigative procedures, which reminded him of children's theater. In one such experiment, the limit worker took Viktor by the lapels and recreated the motions of the murder, lifting Viktor above his head and then onto a chalk outline of the deceased student.

The trial was also great fun. Viktor was the star material evidence, featured alongside a broken beer mug, a box cutter wrapped in plastic, and the legs of a stool. The day laborer was sentenced to eighty years. Viktor bid farewell to his locker and his cozy profession as material evidence. On the courthouse steps, he looked at the sprawling city. Instead of taking the usual road to his two-room hellhole, he walked along Koltsevaya Road and settled in a small indiscernible grove below the overpass.

There he lived steadily, first as a stoic philosopher, but, due to the cold and scarcity of berries in the forest, Viktor O steadily succumbed to his wild side and began raiding the surrounding villages for sustenance. During the gloomiest winter nights, he did not disdain from tasting human flesh, either. As a consequence of his devolution, he developed horns, fangs, and coarse bristled hairs about his body. Some sources even indicate there was a tail in the picture as well. All of this God abundantly bestowed on Viktor O out of His Goodness and worry about the survival of every creature in our unbearable climate. So wise is the Lord that He also did not overlook the most base urge of all and turned a blind eye when Viktor O snatched a luscious and fertile train station janitor.

Without the slightest delay, Viktor O began multiplying to a catastrophic extent. Within two years, the population of Viktor O's reached over a hundred persons. Mobile squads of these greedy rovers devastated the entire Moscow region as though plagues of old, leading to a total collapse of gardening and agriculture. In the end, despite the protests of animal rights activists, local authorities sanctioned the hunting of Viktor O's.

Sportsmen from around the world spent numerous bloody seasons near the Russian capital chasing this most dangerous game. And indeed these market forces achieved a remarkable outcome, for the sighting of a Viktor O in our area is a rarity, a fantasy tale. If there are any left, they are leading a hermitic existence in the dankest reaches of the wildest woods. According to local ethnographers, the very fact of Viktor O's existence came into question and he is now the subject of suburban folklore rather than classical natural history."

"That's it?"

"Well . . . yes."

"And what was that constant beeping there?"

"My battery is dying, so it beeps. Did you not like it?"

"A battery? Yours?"

"I mean, in my cellphone."

"And here I thought maybe it was your heart. Perhaps you had some kinectic stimulator of sorts, you know, in your heart or in your head. As for the story, well, you know, it has a bit of an antique quality to it. Moldy. The whole deal with residence permits, the limit worker—there's no residence permit or none of that now. It's an old authority tale, your short story. I'm not saying this out of bitterness of course—"

"Replace the residence permit with the registration, then, or a credit check. Edit out all the old references. It will be like a totally fresh story."

"Maybe, maybe we can replace the permits, fix it up. Hm. How much are you asking for it?"

"Well, I think it's a decent enough short story. I wrote for my pleasure when I was a student and a writer. I was also a poet and a philosopher back then, you know, twenty years ago. So, as to its moldy quality, you are, of course, correct to note it. I want twenty-five thousand. I used to be a rock musician also."

"Yes, yes, I know you were everything, truly. Now you are somewhat different. However, even then you were different, because your different beings didn't really matter. You did not come to fulfill any of them. You existed somewhere between your selves, in the contradictions invisible on a major scale—no wonder you are in politics. There is no way I am going to buy it for twenty-five k."

"Well, in Rubles then."

"Hah, okay, then. But why give up so easily?"

"You are well aware that the demand today is split between so-called highbrow literature and that of a more pop culture persuasion. My story is not a very popular product, but it is one dear to me and I have over a hundred more works that you know will sell, and, if you publish this story for me, I'll give them all to you. Do the math."

"Why flush them to me?"

"Because you will enjoy it, you'll see. Will you publish this story?"

"Yes, yes, publish it in the Observer. You can see to that."

“What about reviews, any criticism?”

“I can get positives from Wiseman. Weisberg negative, but stir up controversy—people will want to defend you because he’s such a twit. Oh, some relatively famous footballer can touch on it in an interview, you know, not much of a reader but this story caught him, could not tear himself from it. We’ll have some mid-tier politician brag about reading it on late night TV. Then of course there’s the Internet. In this dump, there’s plenty of everything on anything and for cheap. Twenty-five thousand rubles.”

“You mean dollars.”

“I won’t do that much dollars or Euros. Wiseman, Weisberg, the footballer, millionaires will all praise you and you’re hesitating over Euros.”

“I’m only taking dollars.”

“Fine, go ahead. Twenty-five hundred dollars. Weisman will complain—he prefers rubles, but he’ll deal.”

“Great. Remember to use the same pseudonym.”

“You can’t be serious. How can you demand dollars and then keep publishing yourself under an unprintable and unmarketable pseudonym?”

“Well, I am more or less famous for such things. Rebranding involves extra costs and risks.”

“Then take five off the deal. The Observer was such a pain to persuade last time. Their Chief Editor is a former Orthodox soldier.”

“Former soldier? What? The guy isn’t even thirty.”

“He’s thirty-two. Was in the Caucasus War, Order of Courage and all that.”

“We can bribe him. Throw him ten for his hero status, but deduct a few as a penalty for being gay.”

“What? How do you know he’s gay?”

“You said it yourself!”

“Who? Me?”

“Yeah, just now. A former soldier and you-know-what.”

“Orthodox?”

“Yeah, yeah, exactly . . .”

“Uh, okay then, well . . . Sanya will drop off the money later. He’s my driver, but taking a day off—got something with his leg, or his wife. It’s always his leg or his wife and I confuse the two. This other guy will be there, my guard. What’s his name? It always slips my mind but you know him, seven-foot-tall guy. Remember you sold me your first story and we celebrated together? He also tried to pull us apart when we struck up a fight later—when you said something real nasty about Pushkin. I had to defend him. I broke your nose. All for Pushkin.”

“And I broke yours as well. Can’t seem to recall any guard being involved. Doesn’t matter though, let him drop off the cash tomorrow before noon.”

“Sanya!”

“What?”

“Sanya is my guard’s name, just remembered.”

“Ah, same as your drivers.”

“Yes. Sanya, with just one ‘s’.”

“Meaning?”

“Not with two . . . Well, goodbye then, Pavel Evgenyevich. I’ll pass the story along to Sanya.”

“Till later, Yegor.”

CHAPTER TWO

Meanwhile, a sluggish and sticky storm was slowly worming its way behind a looming skyscraper. Having flickered a few voiceless bolts and illumined various new buzzwords in the sky, its wet gait subsided before reaching the city center. It slid off to the edge somewhere, where it broiled in lukewarm madness. The city was enveloped in an unbearable, sickly sweet stuffiness the likes of which is only tangible in Moscow. Hot, fatty streaks of smoke spread through the city, pushing their weight against the windows, desperate to seep. Yegor thrived in the stark cold and thus would fall ill in such heat. His apartment was temperature-controlled with all the latest air conditioning technology steadily maintaining fifty-two degrees Fahrenheit. He kept winter clothes and earflap hats on hand for the rare guest.

He was scheduled to meet first with Agolstov—an alcoholic, poet, translator, and coke connect. Then he would have to meet with Nikita Mariyevna, the journalist. This meant enduring at least one hundred steps in the squalid heat outside. Both meetings were scheduled at the Diamond restaurant, located on the ground floor of the building in which Yegor lived in a luxury top-floor penthouse.

Diamond never changed its name despite a thricefold change in management. At the end of the eighties, it was the first Soviet restaurant open all night. Inexperienced losers would drift in for a quick bite but soon fall captive to the slovenly drunk Chaldean waiting on them, forcing elaborate specials of mystery fish assortments onto their bills. Beyond the tables, bullied musicians lived out their unfulfilling fantasies as they crooned about the Don River, maple branches, and the tears on their beloved's kerchief. The bouncers who kept the musicians on stage were buffoonish brutes—people named Shoe, Tata, and Gosha the Huguenot.

By the nineties, the dark-blue MOM tattoos began to disappear from Russia's criminal element, shot down by the young and progressively minded gang leaders. Diamond was renovated to note this new development. Lobster and steak appeared on the menu. The waiters sobered up. Bandits mingled and mixed, their trim haircuts sleek like well-rounded pebbles on the White Sea beach. The leaders grew meaty, with rosy cheeks and pig-like eyes. They had never

seen prison and were therefore as fearless as only the young could be. They were also sentimental types who believed in philanthropy for the arts, at least to the extent that their shallow minds would allow. Some invested in galleries, others in the publishing houses springing up after the Union's fall. It was around this time that Yegor moved into his penthouse, dropping into Diamond occasionally to cure his Saturday morning hangover. But soon he grew familiar and would often dine there as if it were his own kitchen.

By the beginning of the Zero years, the local gangs were completely mutated. The gold chains hanging from their necks became much lighter and concealed beneath suits. Tattoos faded like medieval frescoes. Some of them started picking up English and traded in their fake Versaces for real Balenciaga. They got high-ranking official wives and ballet dancer girlfriends. Beautiful, chubby offspring were spawned and then sent off to Switzerland for schooling. Life started to be harmonious.

Amidst this, Diamond became fashionable and famous. Everything became so stylish and tasty there in the way that could only be borne by a bored and never-satisfied sub-species of human.

It was in this third refashioned Diamond that Yegor was fated to meet Crybabe. She was accompanied by three men of varying ages, one with black hair, one with white, and one with a tinge of platinum. They looked as stern and expensive as undertakers who had just collected their bonuses in an affluent neighborhood struck by recurring epidemics. Later, it seemed so strange to Yegor that he had noticed those ghouls first, as if she had dissolved into them and only emerged slowly, like a cresting wave.

Only after did he see her fully—so incredible, unusual, extraordinary, and imperious. She had a presence of unavoidable consequence, making one wonder whether it was love or death. Thus began the beautiful disaster of Crybabe, the terrifying merry-go-round that seized and enthralled you with a glowering fury. She knocked you out of breath, capable of gloom, lucidity, humor, and fear in one afternoon.

One of the undertaker-types turned out to be a classmate of Yegor's and wasn't an undertaker but rather a kerosene distributor. He strutted over and introduced himself. Yegor pretended to remember him but could not put a name to the face. Then she said, "I'm Crybabe." He did not ask whether that was her real name, which seemed so silly and yet so real at the same time.

He later realized that the kerosene distributor was Crybabe's lover. The younger one was her husband, and the eldest, with the platinum streaks in his hair, was her cousin, although a cousin so far removed that they sometimes slipped up so that, out of pure habit, he served as a second lover.

That evening Yegor was quite gregarious. She, on the other hand, spoke only until she realized how incompatible she was with him. They had nothing in common, yet she was immediately snared by him. She looked at him and felt a nuclear brightness, a tremendous weight in all surroundings of this supra-world, her thoughts spiraling in twin helixes—was this world his or was it the realm of love?

Yegor had just crawled out of a dark divorce—he gave his ex-wife the house and took this luxury apartment in the slum for himself. He was alone at last—in control of his destiny, he believed. He did not want to love anyone. Crybabe was like a new battle for a harrowed soldier, covered in burns and bruises from yesteryear's bitter fight.

CHAPTER THREE

It was in one of the sparkling facets of the Diamond that Yegor chose to hold this meeting with Agoltsov. He took his seat under a TV screen framed by an ornate picture frame, broadcasting a glitching portrait of Zvorykin the Engineer. Around them, gum-chewing “fashion models,” having undergone intensive pre-sale training and wearing extraordinary make-up complexions, intermingled among local connoisseurs and buyers.

The atmosphere there was too brilliant for an alcoholic—colored lights endlessly glittering, mirrors everywhere—but to bring Agoltsov to his home would have been unacceptable from a purely hygienic standpoint. Moreover, meeting anywhere else would have entailed an arduous journey in the ass-drenching heat. Postponing the meeting was impossible, as his comrade owed him a great deal by that point.

Yegor espied the time on a waiter’s watch. Eight o’clock. He had exactly an hour to spare for the debtor and an hour for the journalist. Then he would crawl back home—in time for his session with Crybabe. All should go well, provided she isn’t late . . . Then, interrupting his thoughts, Yegor smelled a pronounced filth in the air, indicating that somehow the wretched poet had arrived on time. The debtor’s visage was graced with a swollen upper lip, blackheads amongst his temple, ragged stubble, white hairs on his head that sprouted out his nose and ears. His grey eyes matched his white head perfectly. And of course his tie was spotted and smeared, apparently used, variously, as a toothbrush, a handkerchief, and a polishing cloth for his shoes. Yegor could not give him another glance, glaring instead into space as he addressed the poet. He did not eat, he only ordered a vodka to wet Agoltsov’s whistle. The heap of a man chased his vodka with air and lit up a damp cigarette whose blue smoke mingled with the steam of his hot tea. The ash from his cigarette fell into the tea, which splashed onto his spangled tie. Vodka, on the contrary, was handled with professional precision, and every last drop landed in the debtor’s belly. He drank his tea noisily, in the rural manner, gurgling and smacking. Each limp drag of his cigarette brought the poet into a fit of pathetic coughing. Only the vodka was metabolized with any dignity—solemnly and safely. Agoltsov was in high spirits after a few sips, spreading his presence like an infernal mist across the restaurant hall. The models and their clientele reacted to Agoltsov’s miasma most agreeably, apparently mistaking it with a luxurious cheese aroma or the scent of some vintage cigar.

"You can't keep letting me down like this," Yegor started while watching Zvorykin the Engineer flicker on the dirty TV screen. Agoltsov answered him by taking a shot and squeezing his eyes.

"Sergeyich cannot wait much longer. He, unlike yourself, is a Governor. Everything else is going according to plan—except you."

Agoltsov had another shot and washed it down with tea, splashing more on his tie.

"He has a book tour in September. He's set it all up himself, to his own accord. He had to pressure some sponsors, powerful people. And he promised them a new book of poems. And where is it? This book?"

Agoltsov drank, had a drag, and started coughing and groaning.

Yegor continued, "Intelligentsia is extremely fond of him. The Governor-cum-Poet - this is the poet and the tsar in one face. However if the book is absent, ratings are being risked." Yegor leered at Zvorykin the Engineer.

Agoltsov took a sip, and finally, started speaking. He spoke loudly, so that the nearby models stopped their giggles and whispers. "I dream that I am falling . . . From some mound . . . or a hill . . . above me in the halcyon of a July morning . . . Beneath its dark I can't tell if I jumped willingly or was pushed over by someone.

"But anything I try to get a hold of now is all the same—one ton rusty autumn is dragging me down . . . To the bottom . . . I can't cling . . . Get stuck, or extend my fall somehow.

"And with each passing second, further below—Mother, watch! I am falling . . ."

And more:

You shall suddenly sprout through scraps of the urban wind.
Through the crackle and the chatter of the crowd
You shall hear the glow of tomorrow's century,
In the mocking silence of fate.
And from the place where so solemnly decays your dream in
the extended September,
On a light, as confusion, lunar disc you will fly—to watch the life from above.

Then, observe dexterous harlequins, brilliant female
Dwarfs, rare breasts, cheap magicians, inflated giants,
Frolicking under a blazing circus tent.
Observe how night is bitter for the current weather,
As the day's anger is mercilessly simple,
How locked up in your own empty freedom
You are lonesome—to tears, to the bottom, to ashes.
Look—here life goes on. Look—it passes.”

And more:

“You should have seen the wind,
The wind of a greedy dream, that comes from
A wild field, pungent with the smell of life,
Driving away a flock of inflorescences,
Through a quicksand of an incandescent afternoon
Up to a shallow downpour.
You should have seen how the Sun
Redeems the Spring out of the Tartar Sky.
You would have known with what currency
This May was paid—it would deem upon you,
How high is sadness; how tenderness is unrealizable.
You would sing differently then.

You would have suddenly found ashes
Above your head and fire under your soles.
You would run off from home,
To hide away better, to drown not here
And not with those tears.
And to disappear in different manner.”

“I have no more . . .”

“Only three, then? We can't make a book out of this,” Yegor sighed with menace.

“Three, yes, but of the highest sort. Who said the book must have so many poems?” Agoltsov growled. He drank again, ate, drank some more, and then offered another: “Screw you. You and your Sergeyevech. Give me freedom. Rise up, chief. Sergeyevech is no poet, he is a rascal, and you—his accomplice. I will see you in court. I will sue you two. He is not satiated with being Governor? He wants to grab literary and non-literary types alike, this little bitch. Interviews, books with golden lettering . . . All when these are my poems—mine, not his. Let everyone hear the truth!”

"The poems are written by you. But they are his. He paid you for them, you fool. He is a poet and you are on his contract, just like a pupil of Michelangelo. And I . . ." Yegor drifted off and stared at Zvorykin the Engineer, who came in and out of signal.

Agoltsov fumed, "He is rich and famous, while I am poor and anonymous; a masturbator; oh, and a faggot to top it all off; and a drug addict; and a liberal. You see, Yegor, I am listed in each and every risk group. Statistically I must have AIDS and delirium tremens, and all the other tricks from the psychiatric textbook. Give me back my liberty. I want to be rich! For I am a genius." Agoltsov chased another shot with a chomp.

Yegor sighed again. "First off, you are not poor at all. That insane Sergeyevich pays you a grand per line. He gives me the same amount. Which publishing house, which magazine, will pay you as well? You drink and sniff it all away. And give it to all your boys. Secondly, fame—that's a mighty empty subject. You are a genius, hence, you are above everyday nonsense. Thirdly, you still owe a screenplay to Sergeyevich's niece, the one who's graduating from the best film school in Moscow. Remember? You promised to write it yourself."

"But I wrote it . . ."

"That was a hack job," Yegor interrupted.

"How do they know whether it is or not? You put Khlebnikov under that Sergeyevich's nose and he will think it's my work. For him it wouldn't matter if it's by Khlebnikov or an ode by some Pantylkin—everything is the same for him. Same goes for his silly niece."

"You're right, they really don't get it," Yegor explained patiently, "But they have consultants who are erudite bastards, not unlike us. So be gone with your hacks."

"PR me, Yegor. Oh, PR me!" Agoltsov drank more vodka. "Half of my income will be yours. I'll be fashionable, like Kirill, that bitch. Serebryanikov, like Severyanin back in ancient times. I crave freedom. For a long time now, being a servant, I have dreamed to run away from these shackles."

"Humanity is doomed to be free. C'mon. Sartre. You are free, I am free, everyone is free. Everyone is free to make a contract with anyone else and include any conditions in it."

“Once establishing such a contract, one is obliged to fulfill it.” Yegor’s speech started steadily rising, “That is precisely why you have until the twenty-second to produce ten more poems, and the script for the niece. If you don’t start working right away, I will take you to the yard behind the garbage cans and shoot you in the head. You know how much money’s to be made.”

“Nepotism,” Agoltsov sobbed.

“What?”

“Promotion of nieces and nephews represent an active practice of nepotism. I need a thousand dollars.”

“Give me the poems that you just read and I’ll give you more.”

Agoltsov laid out a crumpled paper and grabbed the cash. He put away another shot and stumbled towards the door, coughing left and right. And—as was his habit when faced with complex situations—pondered the prospect of killing himself in a way that would not hurt terribly. Perhaps suffocating against something soft or with a poison neither bitter nor sharp. All this so no one would get on his nerves anymore.

Disgusted, Yegor abandoned the table previously occupied by the genius. He plunged further into the depths of the Diamond, closer to the bar, and directed the waiter to send his way a woman who would make them feel as though the actress Mashkov had entered the restaurant.

Nikita Mariyevna arrived on time and looked exactly like Mashkov. She was about forty.

“Hey there, lad, will you feed the lady?”

“Of course, dinner is on me.”

An androgynous waiter wearing a blouse and pants approached the table. They brandished a unisex name, Sasha, written in bold letters on their nametag hanging from a vaguely shapely chest. Their voice, neither shrill nor coarse, was quick and engaging while describing the restaurant’s appetitive and specialties.

Nikita broke in, “I would like something light. What would you suggest?” The crucial difference between Mashkov and Nikita Mariyevna was the latter’s fuller figure. She was one of those women who sought every possible way to get thinner—be it folkloric techniques or empirically-verified know-how. She lost weight painfully, brutally, then gained it back in an instant.

“We don’t have anything that light, I am afraid. We had an udder dish on the menu earlier this month but the public insists on ignoring the udder. For haute cuisine we offer veal tail. There’s abalone, as well, but that’s not for everyone, either. I’d recommend slow pan-roasted abalone with Peruvian jalapeno. Usually it comes with shallot, but we are out of shallot today. Without shallot the abalone is not abalone. Otherwise I must admit it’s much like any other restaurant—a rather dull menu,” the androgynous server concluded with compassion.

“Well, I meant ‘light’ as in . . . Something with less caloric content and harmful toxins.”

“A food can be harmful to one but nutritious for another.”

This relativistic answer, coming from a paid employee of the restaurant, puz-

zled Nikita. "Perhaps arugula salad with bottarga?"

The server frowned, "Salted and smoked dishes are bad for the kidneys."
"Tomatoes with mozzarella?"

"Tomatoes are red vegetables. They can induce allergic reactions, like anything else red," Sasha's tone was that of a medical directory, "and mozzarella is pure cholesterol."

"Beef fillet. If it's not too fatty."

"It is only fat—marble-like in its fatness," Sasha assured them. "Yes, and the uric acid present in such high amounts such can lead to gout, God forbid."

"Sea bass . . ."

"Usually high in mercury content. Prolonged fish intake can result in CNS shutdown."

"A shutdown?" Nikita Mariyevna was dumbfounded.

"Central nervous system. Fish, though, is healthier than meat. And porridge is even healthier than fish. Cucumbers are healthier than porridge and only water is healthier than cucumbers. The air, of course, is healthier than water. But, if you insist, go ahead and order the fish. Unlike the others, they won't kill you. If your central nervous system fails, you'll just fall into a vegetative state."

"I'll refrain, I suppose. It's already quite late, anyway," Nikita said, abandoning her gourmet aspirations. Yegor, who had felt his hunger creeping soon after Agoltsov's departure, ordered the arugula salad, the tomatoes with mozzarella, and the marbled beef. Sasha noted the order without commentary and departed at once.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Nikita Mariyevna—how did your childhood friends address your father? Uncle Masha?"

"Dad's name was Mariy Solomonovich. And by the way, you've asked me this three times already. You asked each time you drank your way into your notorious drunken anger. You ask and rage and then forget all about it. And why are you asking me sober all of a sudden? You must angry today, definitely angry."

"But why Mariy? It's seemingly a non-Jewish name."

"It's Roman. Marius was a populist and opposed the oligarchy of General Sulla."

"I thought Marius was some military guy."

"He was a leader and defender of the people while Sulla was all about maintaining the status quo—he was like the deep state," the journalist squealed quietly.

"Sulla was dubbed 'lucky' by the people: 'Felix.'"

"Iron Man,' too. The people, however, did not give him this nickname. He invented it for himself."

"I will not argue," Yegor pulled his plate and fork closer, "but I will say, however, that Sulla stopped the Civil War. But why name you Nikita? That's not Hebrew, is it? Have I asked you this as well?"

"Yes, you have. They named me in honor of Khrushchev."

"Interesting. But you're a girl. You were a girl, I mean."

"And so I remain a girl in my heart. My father despised Stalin with such a passion and was so grateful to Khrushchev for ending his repression . . . So he decided to personally immortalize his name that way."

"Well, I guess that's better than being named after the Thaw. Or called 'Gagarin' to honor the first man to reach the cosmos."

"Laugh all you want," Nikita Mariyevna burrowed nervously into her purse. "I'm still grateful to not be called 'Party's Twentieth Congress' or something like that. May I try your salad?" Yegor normally did not tolerate this type of gastronomical familiarity, but restrained himself.

Nikita dexterously slipped her fork into the arugula thicket. Yegor ignored it and began. "Sergeyevich, otherwise known to you as our poem-crafting Governor, or, in your own words, 'our Nero,' read your article on him and his policy regarding to the chemical plant. The article, in his view, showed merit, but wasn't quite fair. He agrees that the enterprise produces lots of smoke and dust, but these are just superficialities. The positive dynamics of oncological diseases, especially among children, he says, do not correlated with the dust and soot. The argument is simplistic. Nothing of the sorts had been observed before."

Nikita answered with her mouth full of green, "I touch on this in the article—the wind current has shifted this year."

"You know all too well that I'm not an expert in this field. Discussing wind currents and carcinogens with me is the equivalent of reading Einstein to a pig. I'm talking about something else here. Sergeyevich whole-heartedly requests that you write a refutation of your earlier article and publish it under his name. It should be a triumphant and brilliant reply, naturally. With accusations of lying and incompetence."

"Let me try!" squealed Nikita as Sasha placed heaps of mozzarella on the table. Yegor, despite his rather menial job, was a sensitive and squeamish man, sometimes to an unhealthy extent. Cursing himself under his nose, he pushed the plate towards Nikita and she went on happily to indulge herself. "It's a cynical offer, no doubt. How much money am I being paid to screw myself?"

"Twenty thousand dollars, or, as the patriots would say, five hundred thousand rubles."

"His niece's husband owns the chemical plant. Governor, his niece, and the abiding son-in-law each year shove forty million into their pockets, American dollars. Filtering facilities and compliance with environmental laws would cost them half that. They are being stingy while kids are dying. And he offers me twenty thousand so that I, like that NCO's wife in the news, can flog myself. This all too modest and boring," troubled Nikita Mariyevna concluded, demolishing the final morsel of the mozzarella.

"I expected this reaction from you," Yegor smiled. "Sergeyevich asked me to acquaint you with an alternative payment structure, as well. After all, freedom of choice is the basic value of democracy."

When I have a choice, I tend to make mistakes," Nikita Mariyevna replied. "However, go ahead, lay out what our dear Sergeyevich really wants. Let me hear your true price."

"Sergeyevich knows that you are one of Russia's most respected journalists. He wants to see an article written and signed with your pen name in the very same newspaper next week. In this article, you completely refute everything you wrote prior, indeed, and recognize the chemical plant's value in the field of artificial fur manufacturing. As per Sergeyevich—you will praise him for encouraging competition in the industry as well as for his initiatives protecting the environment and children's health. For instance, you can claim that, by introducing tons of faux fur into the markets, the niece's husband has saved millions of fox from extinction. Or foxes, is it? As well as sable . . . sables, to hell with it."

"Those who can afford sable will not start wearing your plebeian faux-fur all of a sudden."

"Not mine, but Sergeyevich's."

"Especially not his. As far as I know, that very same felt is used for production of coats to be worn by poachers."

"You mean hunters."

"Every hunter in Russian is a poacher. How does your Fur King envision this scenario unveiling? How shall I explain the sudden change of my position?"

"He knows you are clever and will conjure something. For instance, new facts have emerged under fresher circumstances. Or you may denounce the previous article by saying you did not pen it and your name used without acknowledgment, whether by editor's mistake or maliciously. The paper will side with you. This will happen for an extra payment naturally."

"To hell with the extra. What's the basic pay for such a task?"

"We won't offer you green American paper, which is losing its value exponentially, but something more tangible—a valuable piece of land in a prestigious location."

"By that I assume you mean two square meters near Vagankovo Cemetery?"

“No, Nikita Mariyevna. In exchange for this nail in the fur industry’s coffin, you shall receive . . .” Yegor took hold of the marbled meat. “Meat is not recommended for you, Nikita Mariyevna, the uric acid will subject you to high risk of gout, and the cholesterol—three consecutive strokes. Back to the land: you will receive a luxurious two hectares by Lake Holodnoe. Heard of it? Total Russian paradise: white waters, like Lukomorye, the fairy tale.”

“Isn’t it a nature preserve?”

“Not the entire territory. There are unprotected blotches, which are commercial.”

“On the lake?”

“Do not fret, all is done in accordance with the law, with an iron seal.”

“But it is so far away . . .”

“Be patient, a direct highway is being built next year. The Germans are constructing it. Well, Ukrainians, but using German technologies.”

“Or Tajiks, using Ukrainian technologies.”

“Your irony is in vain. It will be a half-hour drive from Moscow. Well, by your car, maybe an hour, max.”

“That place has no communications whatsoever.”

“Everything is already set up, but not a soul knows about it. You’ll have neighbors, but the elite sort, the kind you always nag about in your articles on corruption.”

“If they live by Holodnoe Lake, it means I was nagging them for the right reasons.”

“Governor’s bank allocates mortgages for around thirty years under a preferential interest,” Yegor continued, “if you continue cooperating, you won’t be asked to cover that at all.”

“Is that so?”

“All this will be done in the hopes of long-term cooperation, of course. Our Nero seems to have plans of an Imperial scale. Thus, he must publish clever articles, deliver clever speeches. Who shall write them for him? Plus, your support will guarantee more sympathy among the, so to speak, irritated social stratum.”

“I will think about it,” Nikita dived into her purse again.

“I need your response right away.”

“Let me try the meat.”

“Don’t get distracted. Yes or no?”

“You are angry.”

“Is that a ‘yes’?”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“Go ahead, eat, there’s more left. And the last point: Deputies Donbassyuk and Don want to book their next TV debate. The debate will be on technical regulations of milk, or something along those lines.” Yegor looked at a cheat sheet in his pocket. “Don will be supporting the government plan and Donbassyuk will play against. They will also debate the gambling business. Don is for a total ban— he took some money from strip and dance clubs; they hope the gambling clientele will increase their influx. Donbassyuk will advocate for minor restrictions. Casino owners hired him in turn. These two also tricked beer brewers and vodka distillers. Don lobbies a complete ban on consumption of beer in every space, except for homes, bars, and restaurants. He doesn’t get money from the vodka guys. Meanwhile, Donbassyuk is for the complete and final ban on the advertising of spirits and their sale to persons under the age of twenty-fucking-five years. Beer brewers are financing him. That’s what’s up.”

“I shall arrange a proper game of debates for the deputies. These themes are complex, especially the technical regulations. I will write up their roles three weeks in advance, no earlier. And how does this newfound Tom and Jerry divide their bribes, Yegor? Or they don’t divide them at all and just pocket what-

ever comes their way?"

"No, they have it all arranged in a brotherly manner. They are companions, after all. One goes to the beer brewers and threatens a crackdown on the vodka people. He promises to protect them, speak out against it in the media, in the Duma, to block potentially harmful legislation. He takes from them, say, five hundred thousand. The other, meanwhile, visits the vodka producers, threatens them with a total beer brewers' crackdown, all the while offering them the very same delegate's intercession. Let's say, he asks for a million rubles for his service. If they don't believe him, he signals to the other delegate, and the anti-vodka legislation ensues in real time. In short, the clientele gets trapped quite easily. Later Don and Donbassuyuk stack their finances fairly and divide them into two. In this scenario, they each get seven hundred fifty thousand. They're generous guys. And, as you know, they're honest, though stupid. These two concepts are, perhaps, interchangeable. However, you and I are not getting any money from these tricks. So, for each debate, as per usual, you will collect fifty thousand. Don't forget the word count and the easy, accessible language for the masses. Otherwise, you will be scolded. And, please, don't take longer than three weeks. They still have to memorize the speeches and rehearse their roles prior the Parliamentary session."

"I despise power." Nikita Mariyevna hissed with revolutionary fervor. "Governor's, delegates, ministers, security service, the police—greedy hordes around the throne. They are killers of freedom, genius, glory . . . I would strangle all of them. I hate them, I hate them, I hate them."

"It is not the power you hate, but life—life, as a whole. For it did not turn out the way you had intended."

"And you? Would you accept it? The way it is now? Injustice, violence, stagnation . . ."

"These are qualities of life in general, not exclusively of authority. I also envision life differently, but I do not wish to crush it, as you do. I feel for life. I wish to be a kind neighbor to it, to cohabitate, even; and to become better in tandem with it. I would like to improve with it, yes. And you wish to destroy it. What for? Life can be boastful, but at the same time it is quite small and flimsy, and, in fact, so funny. It has imagined itself to be glorious and has thus become insolent, despite the fact that it has huddled in the temperature gap of ten degrees, in some imaginative physics hole, out of which it threatens the dark-

ness, and calls to God with its fickle voice, and fights with infinite Death for some microscopic skyscrapers. It is silly, unprepossessing, courageous—this life. I feel sorry for life, for mine, for yours, and for ours, entirely. It puffs itself up and jumps to appear higher. And then, it's gone, just like that. It is foolish and beautiful. I am completely for life. And you are against it. So, power is just something that came to mind first.”

“Yegor, this pro-life hymn would have been moving had I not known that you, pardon me, are a bandit.”

“That is unfair, Nikita Mariyevna. I was a bandit, but I quit.”

“And, having quit, you have become indulgent for life?”

“I have, Nikita Mariyevna.”

“And with all seriousness you consider that one can be promoted to governor, minister, and MP by honest means?”

“I think that is less likely, but still possible. I also think that dishonesty is ubiquitous in your publication, as well as in the family, and the monastery, and the asphalt brigade, and in the ministry, and in Parliament—dishonesty has spread through all of these more or less equally.”

Why did you drag the family unit into this discourse, Yegor?”

“Because you called me a bandit. And because it is true. I did it for the sake of the truth.”

“You are getting older and displaying senile conformism,” Nikita Mariyevna howled.

“One minute you call me a bandit, the next a conformist. What is to be done? Who shall I be? You are hard to please.”

“To be a bandit in Russia—that is true conformity. I will finish everything within the deadlines. See you then.”

“But what about dessert?”

Yegor, finally alone again, relaxed, drank some tea, listened in on the conversation between the bartender and Sasha. By the conversation, he was able to guess Sasha's gender. "Female after all," he decided, and settled with "her," in his usual semi-generous manner. Throughout his moneyed life, he experienced some awkwardness in his interactions with the service industry and the help, unwittingly annoyed about neediness and how it degrades some people, people who aren't yet wealthy, who it seems will never become wealthy. Leaving too small a tip would make him feel bad, but leaving too large a tip would be laughable (not to mention insulting), and leave him with little for himself.

What exactly was so degrading about a job like, say, a waiter, Yegor couldn't quite articulate, but he knew for certain that if he were to be a waiter himself, in the very first hours of his new profession whoever happened to be his first pretentious or overprivileged customer would taste the full fury of some haute cuisine dish, or the nearest lady's leather purse, or serving tray, or pepper shaker, or anything else that suited the occasion for accidental, spontaneous, hasty, artisanal violence.

Sasha, meanwhile, didn't register this psychological dissection at all and without a hint of gratitude took the tip.

The humidity settled down in the evening, and the sky became heavy and gray, almost black in some spots. The city was a sauna. People out in the street sweated and suffered as they dodged Hummers and BMWs; slimy bodyguards waited for their VIPs, who lingered at the Diamond or any of the open boutiques. Yegor's exit gleaned some curious looks from the bodyguards, but once they determined it wasn't him they needed—nope, not our guy!—they left him alone. He weaved his way into the side entrance of his home.

Yegor himself never had any bodyguards. He belonged to quite a wide collective of strangely rich Russians, whose income and moral leanings allowed

for the so-called millionaire lifestyle: having the looks and spending habits of absolute wealth, yet spiritually drawing a zero. Money was accumulated in significant amounts and spent mindlessly on God-knew-what. Yegor had no idea how to save or manage it, although he aspired to do both.

Suddenly he needed a new car. Mercedes? Lexus? Tesla? Suddenly he needed to give generously to the private school where his daughter Nastya was set to attend. Suddenly the father of his ex-wife was ill with an extremely rare disease that could only be cured with experimental (and very pricey) American medicine, which a socially responsible business could only obtain in a dire situation. Suddenly previously chartered stretch of land turned out to be riddled with contractual faults, which began a legal battle for years, worsened by greedy attorneys and monetary inflation. Suddenly the dollar fell, then the ruble. A business meeting over breakfast turned into lunch turned into a wild nightlife escapade and so on—and let's not forget the three-week binge featuring a heavy consumption of "Petrus", the company of the sleekest professional girls, VIP musicians, and dancers as his guests, all to the delight of the squad, and with last-minute business trips to Paris where the party continued. Oh, and then a divorce could happen, which meant the ex-wife and Nastya would need a house. Plus some kind of monthly support payments. Plus hearing the complaints about how financially tough it was to single-handedly rear a child. Boredom and emptiness could lead to the spontaneous decision to start collecting medium-fine art in the interest of aesthetics and capital. By the advice of an art specialist, some watery nonsense by Aivazovsky could be acquired, or, guided by personal taste, an acrylic by Klee. Then the impulse would fade, one dumb purchase hanging above the plasma screen TV and another above the elliptical machine, so there was something to look at while working out, and something to throw away when it was revealed to be not a genuine Klee but a garbage copy. Once in a while, Sidorov (his "best friend") would beg for money, giving his word that he'd pay it back, only disappear—for weeks, without a trace.

So there could be no savings. Living more frugally than his means seemed pointless. A descent into poverty due to a couple of big purchases seemed inevitable considering this rate of growth—likely to happen at any second, in fact. So the richer Yegor became, the more precarious his mental state. A cold, calm pride—what those schooled in London came back calling a "stiff upper lip"—was essential to this type of millionaire. Their future, with all their chemical plant auctions and offshore stashes, wasn't a sure thing.

It was turbulent, tough, and murky. Worst of all, which they could foresee in this future, as time has a habit of running backward and forward in deranged karma-kinetic sequences, was the reflection of their own poor and horrible past. The abandoned, betrayed, dark past. Deserted in the night, like a helpless infant, heartbreaking and cruel, just to indulge a forward momentum to wherever the eye could see. Left there with all its pathetic treasures, unloved by its lovers for the first time, the first homesick feelings for old plebeian friends and provincially pitiful relatives. Left with nothing, hopelessly attempting to claw out of the chains of memory, poverty, naivety. The past, like a lover scorned, was devastated and vengeful. An encounter with the past would spell destruction. Because of this, Yegor was always moving forward, without fear or even ambition, turning his back on his memories, not knowing what would become of him, as long as it wasn't what had been before."

Yegor's mother, though strong and healthy, was a chronically unfortunate person. Unluckiness could very well have been a disease. She thrived existentially on misfortune. Her first husband died on their wedding day from an apoplectic fit at twenty-four years of age. The guests didn't recognize the emergency, yelling "Gorko! Gorko! Kiss! Kiss!", and while the bride stood to kiss, the groom sat staring intently at the cold cuts beyond. Stared, stared, and then, once the bride tapped him on the shoulder, toppled onto the best man, dead as ham

The best man became the second husband and Yegor's father. The third year of their marriage, he went crazy, to the point where he was actively dangerous, attacking random people and animals without warning. The dead groom had bashed him right in the brain, from which the best man never recovered: he fell ill immediately, and all three years was erratic, although several doctors assured he was tame, at least for the time being. The best man's son, however, grew up stable, clear-minded, and, most notably, apathetic. The one anomaly in his character—nighttime sojourns with his eyes closed. He sleepwalked most often in the spring after a particularly influential read, or a movie. His somnambulism was mellow and harmless, although one day, when he was in the army, he did something that shocked everyone: he sleepwalked into the weaponry room and loaded up ten guns. To the alarmed security guard's question of "Why?" he answered, "I have no idea," and was pardoned after a psychological exam, and once he left the army his sleepwalking began to go away on its own. The best man eventually was committed to a mental clinic and Yegor had no memory of or interest in him.

He never got to know his mother's third husband, for she, apparently not wanting to impose her son onto the stepfather, would see him on the side. Yegor saw so little of him that at times he thought this third man hadn't even existed, just a figment of his mother's imagination to confirm her misfortunes. Judging by her stories, excessively detailed, almost implausible, he was drawn up to be a dramatic subject—a genius, or an alcoholic, or an alcoholic genius, in any case a mournful husband, unworthy of love, which made him frighteningly lovable. It wasn't enough, however, to air grievances about the husband. Yegor himself had inadvertently fueled a few of his mother's dark foresights and gloomy phases. She thought that Yegor ate too little and drank too much. Even

worse, he left school. Then he took too long to get married. Then he married the wrong girl. Then he delayed having grandchildren, and then, after Nastya was born, his parenting style wasn't good enough, as it wasn't compatible with that of the older generation. Basically, mama would cause drama in any situation, over any subject.

When she, a year and a half into that third marriage, was lightly, quickly, and smoothly relieved by her first and last ever heart attack, Yegor didn't show her the slightest sympathy. He didn't go to the funeral, and he relegated all ritual duties to anyone he could find in his family—aunts, cousins, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, uncles and their nephews, brides, grooms, grandmothers, granddads, even an heiress—people who actively participated in going to morgues, cemeteries, crematories, and memorial dinners, that sort of thing. Though he was discouraged by his apathy and clueless as to what a person was supposed to do in such situations, he did honestly offer his condolences. A person, he believed, was taken from this world by the soul, ordered up by something divine, but the corpse had nothing sacred about it, just legal and bureaucratic complications. He thought about how his mother had a mother, and that was something different altogether.

Every summer from the ages of two to fifteen, Yegor spent time with his grandmother in her village. His mother's mother's name was, like Chekhov, Antonina Pavolvna. The village was located in the ugliest part of Russia, not exactly in the steppes or the taigas, nor the hills or canyons, nor the white or black sands, neither here nor there. A village in bumfuck nowhere. Dusty, grassy, old. Filled with piles of logs and houses indistinguishable from those logs. A half-constructed church built by vulgar priests. A ravine filled with broken wares, which were scoured in the morning by some local guys, Kolka and Sanka, sipping bootlegged wine, searching for scrap. They went who knows where, a destination unknown even to them, wherever destiny took a Russian troublemaker with an iron will. But destiny didn't take them far; they wandered past the bridge, ending up in the ravine by a tractor, and went to sleep next to the swamp. The river by the village was small, as were its fish. The tomatoes in the garden were small and green. The onions were bitter. The apples sour, the boredom inescapable. The light in the houses at night meek and antiquated.

But in his childish soul he loved not which was better, but which was closer, he loved wholly this tiny village, this piece of Russia, with her melancholy and her ennui. His most endearing dreams were about endless fields, clovers warmed by the sun in the pastoral landscape, where bumblebees and dragonflies seemed to laugh in joy along with him. His grandmother, who appeared in his dreams as well, would call him home to drink milk, and he would answer with a big hearty laugh and run away, still small, smaller even than the grass . . .

Antonina Pavolvna was a moonshiner, the last master of her dynasty's bootleggers. With a recipe sequentially passed down from generation to generation, the Samohodovs themselves, including Yegor and his mother, to an extent, were sober people. They were also wild and lonely people; unique, antisocial, and more cosmopolitan than their village peers. Their self-made brand of wine was extremely popular among their close circles.

They were often punished, but never fatally—a slap on the wrist, a warning, or some kind of public retort to their neighborhood alchemy. But off the record everyone respected their product. It was true, too, that Antonina Pavolvna was the last local master of her trade. Her children and grandchildren had moved to different towns, and she, with an ear to the barrels home to liquid processes only she could decipher, had no interest in passing down the secrets of her trade, whether of wine, beer, honey, butter, or liquor, to her offspring. She did, however, often take Yegor with her to the edges of her garden, by the river, where she gathered supplies and constructed a tiny but effective bootlegging operation.

He loved making a fire under a cauldron and watching how, drop by drop, the legendary products were made. Grandma would let him put his finger under the boiling drops and taste a sample. It tasted bitter and grown-up, causing anxiety and promising too much, like the kiss of an older girl. This was a deterrent from following in the footsteps of his prior generation.

One day long ago and another day ten years later, having aged greatly, during his last summer in the village, Mr. Aniskin, a policeman in charge of their area, participated in their divinations. Aniskin, self-conscious about his corn-shaped physique, star-less shoulder straps and gun-less holster, appeared to be on the precipice of alcoholism. He helped bring wood and pour things into the cauldron, sat around silently until the chemical process was complete, bashfully sipped a few glasses, and stumbled back to his motorcycle, now covered in neighborhood kids. Grandmother would give him a canteen for the road,

a “fire extinguisher” of fresh wine, and, perhaps because of this, her bootlegging career never ran into any legal hurdles.

Her husband, Yegor’s grandfather, she buried long ago, and she lived by herself in a house on the outskirts of the village. Besides the art of bootlegging, she busied herself with fishing, bird hunting, home repair, religious icon painting, and the occasional song on an imported (grandpa fought the Great Patriotic War in Berlin) mandolin. Her personal businesses should have made her wildly rich for the village, perhaps even for Moscow at the time, but they didn’t, and she wasn’t a special case—no matter what, ordinary Russian citizens, knee deep in dirt or flying in space, sweating in the fields or bleeding in the war, with or without oil and gold, just didn’t attract capital. Even if they had an Americanized ethic under their sickles, they would’ve already been beaten to the punch by a Frenchman, or a Chinese man, or a Ukrainian man even . . . As for the Russians, no penny big or small seemed to stick.

Antonina Pavlovna possessed a plebeian character. Her soul was modest, even naive. Sweet, light, colored by one virtue: kindness. In the absence of other vices or characteristics, her kindness had no foil or contrasting trait, and she was discreet, quietly minding her own business. Within her all-encompassing kindness, unnoticed by many modern people the same way they failed to notice heartfelt labor, there was young Yegor, at least until he grew up and grew out of her. He grew out of her the same way he grew out of his old, simple personality and, over the years, into a rougher, larger, more internally twisted one.

No one came to guide Antonina Pavlovna on her journey to heaven, nor did Yahweh himself speak to her in His ominous tenor through the clouds, the storms, or a burning bush; she didn’t fast, didn’t pray, and the religious icons she painted were strictly for sale. An unholy Ficus plant grew in her terrace, yet Yegor still considered her a Saint. All things considered, the Almighty Lord colored the unattractive narrative of Saint Antonina Pavlovna with a fierce, slow, natural, painful death. A terrible and tough illness, the name of which was forbidden from memory because it was an insult to the human condition, was what the Lord bequeathed upon his laborer. And He reeled her in like a village fish, slowly, quietly, gently by the soul, so that her spirit, hooked to the other realm, wouldn’t be completely torn apart. For a full year this dance played out. And then the old lady, tired of fighting the illness, couldn’t hold on to life any more. It cracked her apart, the pain, and she passed, and the Lord took her and saved her.

Yegor saw his grandmother at the beginning of her suffering, when the sickness first took hold of her, and when the pain was just making itself known. Yegor saw the harbingers of death in her eyes, and asked only, “Why? What for? Why her?”

After that he left the university, the name of which he still couldn’t recall, and headed straight into the army, where, in the midst of training, he received word of Antonina Pavlovna’s passing. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, amen. Yegor left to go to the tech park, where unstable “souls” such as himself hid from “tough and unnecessary army duty” and for hours grieved his first adult tragedy—quietly, modestly, properly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the autumn of his life in Moscow, Yegor was an average student in an average school. He knew nothing of the school when he was accepted; it was simply the first that had come his way. School was easy for him, he did well, but he didn't try. Towards all the subjects, including science, he exhibited a condescending and laughable curiosity, much like a tourist at a podunk small town looking at something he thinks is an ancient treasure. He had a lot of leisure time, which first went to girls and guys and partying—in between the metro, sleeping, eating, before and after sex, drinking wine and vodka—before he started reading books, books, books, booklets, notebooks, textbooks. At first it was a whimsical curiosity, but it turned into something more selective and intense. In the past millennium, when his literary habits were just forming, people used to read novels, huge paper books filled to the brim with arrangements of letters. In those fairytale-like years in Old Russia, super-readers walked the earth, those who could finish *War and Peace*, *The Life of Klim Samgin*, and even *The Glass Bead Game* in any translation. That is to say, what are reformed Marxists to do, the freely educated and well-rested patrons of the lethargic Party's parties? They could find something to do in their spare time, but what to do at work? They don't even let you drink there. Nothing but read. So they read. A solid communist residence itself was congruent to the setting of any boring laureate's novel. So just like that, reading literature held together all those restless minds within the swamp of their boring lives.

Little by little Yegor started to understand that he was not an ordinary reader. Academically, he belonged to the lowest reading level, like Chichikov's *Petrushka*. He enjoyed the process of reading in which the letters became syllables, the syllables became words, and the words became sentences, whose deeper meanings were irrelevant. The process of narrative composition didn't interest Yegor. On the other hand, words, separate from their meanings, signs, symbols, semiotics, those not native to corporeal reality, those brought Yegor joy. He was interested in the adventures of names, not people.

Names didn't smell, didn't push each other, didn't smack their lips annoyingly. The daily mechanisms of life—the thick weight of iron, the flashy, the thin, the thick, the cold meat of his untamed Moscow which fed his corporeal flesh, and his external body, his outermost layers—slowly peeled off, and his internal perspective, bottomless, egoless, sexless, senseless,

freely and intangibly undulated and aligned, ripped apart and fused together into sometimes wonderful kaleidoscopes of others' eyes and visions.

His own reading canon was formed so grotesquely that it was useless to share with others. When asked about his favorite compositions, he thought for a while, seemingly lost, and barely answered, something like: "The Letter for Al-labiu about the non-existence of three gods, by Georgy Nissky," or, "John Donne's untitled sonnet," or, "A few paragraphs from Podnyataya Tselina." That was the most he could think of, the most he offered anyone else.

His tastes and perception were strange—he noticed this himself, how lonely and alienated he felt from all human castes. His whole world, he felt, was contained within a shell, and it bothered him to his core that he couldn't break out. His shadows, his puppets, his imagination, were all controlled by the outside audience, but not his own self.

He thought he might have been wired to be autistic, or turned inside out completely, only imitating a connection with the agents of the outside world beyond his boundaries, agents who spoke with fake voices and internal dialogues, so that he could fish for information about useful things like books, food, clothes, sex, money, and glory.

He was sure that true divine knowledge was empty and abandoned, and that people sought it rarely; that people gathered beyond the border of God's imagination, in the deep dankness of dirty shores, holding on to their small places, buzzing towards gossip and superstition, and not leaving under any circumstances towards the middle, where there is a calm and free flow of ultra light beams.

He heard it—he couldn't sing it or repeat it, but he heard it clearly and knew it exactly—through noise and static, through the chaotic tempo of time and timelessness—grand, flat, and rigid, like one of Giotto's frescoes, the laugh of the genesis of silence, enlightened for eternities before and after our time. The laugh audible only to a few people whose hearing was forged in this special mold.

He understood what he heard, once, when he was a child. One blinding, sunny July day, when all of the jumping crickets emitted their same leveled, flat, barely audible, and almost silent noise—right there, before his eyes, ripped the very fabric of reality, the veil of ultimate beauty. The seams of time were torn and

all of the most recent layers had peeled off. They were erased, and vanished: the river—blinked like thunder; the forest and fields—folded like a yard of textile; the church, houses, livestock, and gardens—took off like frightened birds; the sun—merged into the sky like a shadow. And a laugh broke through those powerfully enchanted events—the sun, the gardens, the livestock, churches and houses, the forest, the fields, the river. By name, they appeared to be the same, but something within them had changed—not in fullness, or emptiness, or volume, nor were they destroyed or chewed up from within but quite the opposite—strong and lush, significant, created forever from the pure element of silence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Having served as a paratrooper, without difficulty or enjoyment (which was odd for someone who understood Husserlian ideas), Yegor decided to make his existence more minimal, believing that the more modestly a person exists, the less negativity and bad energy they emanate and attract, thus the less of a chance of harm coming to them. He aimed to live as modestly as possible and so started working at a giant publishing company as an editor in the subdivision of Twentieth Century Unpublished American Poetry. Work was, for him, an easy and leisurely passage of time. The writings and translations of various American poets from that time flowed into the subdivision from all USSR publishers. Many of the works had been censored for reasons unexplained: perhaps they were politically controversial, or had never gone to press due to creative differences, or were never completed, or other censorship dramas. Texts from the latter part of the century were organized by decade ('60s, '70s, etc.), by genre (novel, epic, song lyrics, etc.), and by quality (masterpiece, solid read, so-so, graphomania, abomination), and sent out to two addresses. One named Yanis Anselmovich Menshe and another I. U. Kuznetsov. Who these people were and what they did with these controversial texts was unknown.

From over-reading, Yegor himself began to exhibit some graphomantic tendencies, even started calling himself a poet (thankfully for just a short time). He participated in illusory, rebellious literary movements; groups that met only to name themselves, steal amplifiers and hi-hats from nightclubs, and break up immediately after completing their mission, like a rock band in their drunken underground protests. He translated Gregory Corso or Allen Ginsberg from time to time. And he was perhaps the first in this lilywhite, rhythmless country to experience the curses in the lyrics of American rappers.

His workspace was a tiny room across from the switchboard, where almost daily the electrician Mr. Tolya would get drunk on bootlegged wine, electrocute himself, yell for help, and get carried away to the health center by a janitor. The tiny room fit the entire subdivision, it seemed, and besides Yegor there was his manager Ivetta Ivanovna Bukh and her deputy Cherenko Igor Fedorovich. The managers' only subordinate at the facility was Yegor. Truthfully, they didn't exactly "manage," and the customs in the subdivision were casually instituted in a familial style. Ivetta Ivanovna was a woman with a mighty figure of unbelievable girth. Her desk overflowed with packaged and unpackaged imported

believable girth. Her desk overflowed with packaged and unpackaged imported cakes, pastries, puffs, croissants, cookies, biscuits, candies, teapots, cups, jams, and other dessert-time paraphernalia. She sipped tea and snacked constantly, didn't do anything useful herself and didn't force others to, either. Yegor would address her, a carelessly aging lady who had never in her life been healthy or youthful or beautiful and so had nothing to lose in her old age, with sarcastic compliments, which in their deceptive flattery would've offended a different sort of woman. But Ivetta was robust, lazy-souled, and warm-hearted. She had been planning for about fifteen years to fall in love with her colleague Igor Fedorovich but never got the chance—time and time again she was distracted by pastries and jams, exotic candies and chocolate mirages. They were far sweeter and more delicious than Igor Fedorov, who was skinny and bald, smelled bad, and covered to the waist in dandruff flakes. Not to mention that Chernenko was married to another apple-cheeked sweetheart much like Ivetta. This man she lusted for was also considered to be Europe's greatest Wallace Stevens expert and would recite "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in perfect English at least three times a day. Thus, Ivanova, who never read anything and couldn't tell the difference between Cummings and Kerouac, who was only sent to manage the subdivision by assignment from some professional bureau, turned out to be completely wrong for him. But she wasn't an enemy, either, and all three coworkers actually got along well, never sacrificing their friendship for work. The management received a salary a bit higher than a hundred rubles, and a little less than that for Yegor.

Having become lazy in this slumbering, unappetizing, and unimportant existence, Yegor also married someone in his workplace: Sveta, an editor who worked on the floor above for the same hundred-ish ruble salary and who, compared to Ivetta, was quite the marvel. Sveta worked in the subdivision of Memorial Literature of Tlensky and Ukbarsky Civilizations (Tlensky she knew well and Ukbarsky she learned on the fly). Both were dead languages and their literary works were obsolete. The subdivision was created at the height of archeological sensationalism in Patagonia, when Tlen and Ukbar were first uncovered, and everyone waited to see ancient skulls and rocks and incredible treasures. But years went by before the skulls and rocks were exhumed, and the incredible treasures had yet to have been found. In haste, the crypt--

ograms on the stones were translated. The Patagonian hieroglyphs unilaterally praised the likes of their kings and contained frightening images depicting masses of wounded and decapitated enemies. There was no literature to be found there. The management either forgot or was too embarrassed to shut down the subdivision, and instead of researching ancient monuments and literatures, the staff solved crossword puzzles, read banned nonsense, and gossiped about the misadventures of Mr. Tolya.

Sveta, however, was an enthusiast(e). She held a mailing list for the world's Tlen speakers—five, including herself. She studied Ukbar, for some reason. She wanted to believe in the drama and sanctity of what she was doing, that there would perhaps indeed be grand discoveries and literary masterpieces in her dead languages, so she held her work to be special. Yegor pitied her with a pitiful pity, like the kind he felt for his stuffed animals in his childhood, and then, later, towards all the women he was close to in his life. They fought constantly, Sveta yelling in Tlen, Yegor yelling rap lyrics, but because they didn't understand each other, they never truly got mad at each other. He didn't want children, believing that he had no right to give life to anybody and couldn't be held responsible for the death that would inevitably follow.

Of course, coinciding with the terrible timing of their marriage hanging on the precipice of divorce, Nastya was born, and he, with a logical sensibility, made the decision that the word “happiness” might have had some meaning all along. His pity turned into something gentle, almost like love, but not for long. If only for one minute, perhaps a quarter of an hour, those feelings provided him with warmth even through the coldest and most frightening January nights.

CHAPTER NINE

One day, the native and familiar dwellings shifted, roared, and exploded. The Soviet foundation shattered and shriveled, and the wildest drafts wandered in, roaring through the deepest crevices, and the serfs within began to stir. Coughing, wheezing, and little by little, yawning and staring, they emerged, following the Western scent, creating a new Parisian super-paradise, replacing their Soviet socialist lifestyle and the land that belonged to no one, unearthed by Ulyanovich Lenin, yesterday's worshipped leader, today's bloodthirsty and pretentious bastard.

Minds were confused, and of those born into servitude some fled into freedom, some fell into a comatose subservience, others into vulgar nihilism. Party leaders scolded the party, komsomols started organizing underground banks and societies, ensigns turned into killers, social heroes started slowly but surely selling government-funded oil and defense, hiding dollars in laundromats and dacha bathrooms while holding clandestine meetings where they bitched about reform and lamented the abolished rule. After wiping the tears and snot and sweat from a good cry, they'd go to a privately owned diner and sell their dear Russian defense equipment to various non-Russians. And then they cried, and cried some more. Sell, cry, sell again. Good! It was good . . .

Yegor accepted these changes without much of a shift in his own emotional climate. For him, living under any regime life was good, because life seemed pointless under any kind of rule. This made the regime less of a priority in his view.

One day he and Igor Fedorovich left their firm for the swap meet to buy unregulated German beer and Polish biscuits—chocolate, for Ivette. In the middle of their trip, Yegor began to feel uncomfortable, not quite like himself, though he wasn't sure why. Then he saw the people surrounding him. Kids in plaid pants, some purchased in bundles, some sewn from blankets and curtains at home, and the "pyramid" jeans that were in vogue for two or three weeks at a time, then thrown into the garbage and forgotten. A glimpse here and there of sweat pants, hanging from the knee, and clearly fake Adidas. There were too many of these guys on the promenade, and it got crowded. They circled him, stopped, and stared.

Yegor was frightened to death, so much that he didn't even register the fear. They were gopniks, bandits from the first wave of democracy. Igor Fedorovich tried to flee but, after being struck in the throat by a tangle of sweatpants and "pyramid" jeans, settled down.

"We got you, boss," growled a plaid-panted bastard at him. "The Boot swears to you. Now we'll take you to the schoolyard and shoot you. Don't worry, it won't hurt, just in the back of the head, you won't even notice. Just don't try to escape, don't make a sound . . . Who is this hotshot?"

"Don't worry, he's a fellow from work, my editor, he has nothing to do with this." His unexpectedly smooth and tempered tone of voice surprised Yegor. "Don't touch him."

The plaid guy stared Yegor in the eyes for a long time. Yegor looked within himself, finding nothing, like a tree in the middle of the country at midday.

The plaid guy moved a few steps away, the other tracksuit and pyramid thugs circling around him, except for three who guarded Igor and Yegor, fiercely whispering curse words to each other. Then a redhead, who appeared to be wearing genuine Pumas, stepped away from the pack, came over to Yegor slowly, and said, "Sorry, we didn't recognize you, we didn't understand at first. Total misunderstanding. Say hi to Uncle Akhmet from the Lubertskis. And you, asshole, be grateful that you are out walking with this respectable person, otherwise you'd be shot in the head and dead in some school's garbage can. You'll be dead eventually, don't even doubt it, but not today, okay, not today."

The redheaded gangsta shook Yegor's hand and took his bros to that same schoolyard, where they could have shot Igor Fedorovich, who appeared to not only be an expert in Wallace Stevens, but also a boss, asshole, and bastard.

"Yegor, we won't be getting beer. Just walk behind me," mumbled Igor. They walked back to their workplace, circled it, and entered an old building constructed during Stalin's time, a residential castle-like apartment somewhat reminiscent of a dorm, filled with various boozing subcultures. On the fourth floor there was only one door. Chernenko spoke into the intercom, "Chief, Chief," and the door opened. For the first time Yegor saw a functional intercom. An old dude with long gray hair, who looked like Einstein after he won the Nobel Prize and shaved his mustache, opened the door for them.

"Fedor Ivanovich," Chief quickly and absentmindedly introduced himself.

CHAPTER TEN

The place might have been a storage vault, or an office, or a hotel room. From some angles it looked like a showroom or a disused design pavilion. Everything that could fulfill the desires of a well-read, semi-cultured, five-time lottery-winning assistant engineer of a mid-sized factory was stuffed into this area, its tackiness an assaulting to the eyes. Here were: European furnishings of Turkish-Hungarian quality, five or so Mitsubishis and Akais, Italian furniture imported from Armenia, canned beers, Amaretto liqueur, Rothmans cigarettes, brightly packaged pistachios, and boxes inscribed with Xeroxed foreign writing and packed with money.

Fedor Ivanovich silently poured liqueur into shotglasses, emptied an ashtray of its ash, and poured some pistachios into it before delicately leaving the room. Chernenko and Yegor plopped down into chairs. For about twenty minutes the two of them furiously ate the salty pistachios and swigged the sugary liqueur.

“What do you think, why did they let us go?” asked Cherenko Igor Fedorovich, the Chief, drunk.

“I guess they figured me for someone who knew something or mistook me for one of their own, and got scared,” replied Yegor.

“Almost. But not quite. At first they got scared. But then, to justify their fright, to analyze it logically, they decided that you were the right hand man of Mr. Akhmet, the chief criminal of Balashikha.”

“What do you think they were afraid of, what make them think this?”

“There’s something in your eyes, in your expression, that’s just so . . .” After a long pause, Chief slowly said, “Quiet, within you, always quiet, even when you’re frightened or happy. With that kind of quiet you could rescue stupid children and helpless old people from fires, or you could be a guard at a concentration camp. That kind of fearless internal quiet could be considered detached, apathetic, indifferent. Anthon Palich always said to fear apathy. He fears those qualities in you. I’ve always noticed this in you, but today, I see it. Now it’s not just a feeling I had about you. It’s been confirmed by life.

“Your apathy isn’t a product of weakness or stupidity, quite the opposite. It’s the strength of your will. Your mind. You are indifferent and undaunted by everything, because everything around you is insignificant and meaningless. Only something truly grandiose can enchant you. Something so huge that perhaps the entire world will seem tiny. That’s what these men saw, how tiny they were through the curtains of your eyes, and that frightened them.”

“I was scared, myself,” admitted Yegor.

“No, no, that’s your facade, but that’s not you. Because of that I’d like to offer you an opportunity to collaborate on something.”

“On what?”

“On very significant matters. Will you hear me out?”

“I’m ready.”

“I don’t know if this good news or bad—but communism will fall. For almost forty years, people doubted that Stalin was dead. They didn’t believe it. They thought he faked his death, hid in a cabinet, and spied on us from a distance, gauging our fear of him. He giggled, he sharpened his Georgian knives. But then his body was found under a ladder, in a pool of piss. And spat on. And suddenly there was no more fear. The master dies, the lackey laughs. The problem is that, aside from the lackeys, no one’s home. Thirty million lackeys are now on the loose. The guys at the top, with their self-important airs, sit in palatial czarlike chambers, they know—they have no authority. Only they haven’t broken the news to everybody yet. They’re ashamed. But they’ll break soon. And then it will begin.

“In a normal country there would be a civil war, but we have no civilians; it will be a war of the lackeys. Which isn’t to say it would be worse than a civil war, but it will come to some very low points. The lackeys will begin to divide their old masters’ trash, some waging war on Islam, others on the media, others on the financiers. The lackeys will be feral and bloodthirsty. They will live wretchedly, kill cruelly and die cruelly, they will share, and they will divide.

“I am gearing up to participate in this unpleasant event. It’s important to collect as much money as possible, and, even more importantly, things that can make and keep making money. Well, it would be a stretch to go for oil or vodka, we

don't know nearly enough about the product, although those are the strongest points of our economy. So we have to make do with less lucrative, more familiar things. Books, books, Yegor—that's our share, the share of the angels of high-end literature. Vodka, oil, that's the economy; we can own the culture . . .”

“Let's drink, Igor Fedorovich, let's drink,” interrupted Yegor with a sticky glass in hand.

“For your information,” announced Chernikov, sipping and staring somewhere beyond the floor and beyond tomorrow, “for the longest time in our swamped little staff, something has been rotten. Left-wing circulation, deficit compositions, manipulation of pamphlets, trash dissertations, transcriptions of illicit video . . . The management knows but turns a blind eye. They don't touch it, they've left the intelligentsia alone for some time. So the intelligentsia steals, and they steal very methodically, with tact and independence and grace. Which is exactly how the intelligentsia should be, independent and humble. They steal as a symbol of protest, to dig up and shake up and siphon from the foundations. Bandits and komsomols will devour the basic structure, but the foundations, of course, will be devoured by proletariats of the intellectual class.

“Of all these publishers circulating underground papers beneath the government, and the pamphlet bootleggers, book counterfeiters, and street peddlers, I am gathering an organization, which the mainstream would call the mafia, but our stream will call . . . I don't know what.

“Our mission: to bring all the illegal business in our publishers—intelligentsia and these friends of mine—together under our control, and then all the publishers conducting illegal business across the country, and then all the legal business, too.”

“Well, in all of them . . .”

“Okay, most of them. We'll make enough money, ideally hard cash, to buy them all within a few years when privatization begins, and it will definitely begin. We will create a gigantic publishing conglomerate—legally, and we will have so much influence on politics, and so much authority and power . . .”

“We'll be magnates. We'll be like the sun,” mused Yegor, feeling the liquor glow. “Right now we have three streams of income. The first—almost legal. To move

all equipment and staff to cooperatives, to initially and privately make books, and sell them. Right now, this literate country will go for it. They'll go for Nietzsche, Platonov, Nabokov, Hemingway, Chase, King. Our native bestsellers will emerge, too. Business will boom.

"The second stream—completely illegal, a black market of literature. Left-wing circulation, unlicensed texts, publications without authorization or rights. Basically, intellectual piracy. And just like that, a monopoly, a stronghold on typography, special interest stores, et cetera."

"This is so amazing, Igor, I could just kiss you!" cried Yegor, but he didn't know how to kiss another man, so he didn't.

"The third stream is . . . neither here nor there. It's legal, but frowned upon. Not sure that it will work, but it's worth a shot. Literary counterfeits and pranks. The 'lost appendices of King Lear' that were 'found.' Sensationalism. We just need someone to compose them in Old English and Old Russian. Like a made-up Nostradamus. Rediscovered journals of Hesse. Intellectual provocations aimed at pretentious idiots. Pseudoscientific theories. Friedrich Engels—a woman, the lover of Marx's wife. Shit like that. Premium pricing, in small circulation. All in all, a boutique of falsified gems.

"And I think a lot of rich and political guys will show up. Some of them might want to sponsor intellectual and creative people of raw talent—who isn't a failed writer? They'll have a bunch of young girls with them, starlets who want to sing and act. And we'll be there with movie scripts and songbooks. And then the boss, who will want to go down in history as a great poet. A dramaturge. A new-wave Griboyedov. We'll have a whole crew of talented but awfully impoverished and alcoholically weak-willed poets. We'll buy whatever they have that's been lying around, whatever poems and plays they don't need. We'll buy them for cheap. But we'll sell them to the big bosses and executives for price tags that Tolstoy wouldn't even have dreamed of. Two hundred dollars an hour to bang on a typewriter at corporate parties. And we'll produce them under the executive name for the executive budget. They'll be expensive productions. And the poet—that's for life. Then we'll always have to pretend to be poets for these bankers and execs and pass other people's poetry off as our own. We'll have constant clients. It will be like a drug for them. So, Yegor, a collaboration in this third stream of organized income is what I wanted to—"

"I'm in!"

“—offer you. If you're in, then, firstly—”

“What, what do I have to do?”

“—you must kill Fedor Ivanovich.”

“Without question.”

“Right now. For bonding, I'd say, and dedication . . .”

“No matter. Just . . . with a firearm. I couldn't stab or strangle him.”

“Here is a gun. Fedor Ivanovich, Fedor Ivanovich, could you come here for a minute . . .”

The old man entered with a tray. First his tea set exploded, then his heart. One cup remained intact and into it poured the wounded Fedor Ivanovich's multicolored blood as though from a samovar. Strangely, the old fart didn't fall right away, but stood and stood for a long, long, long time. And that whole time, the shot sonorously echoed as if in slow motion throughout the room. Then he fell, unconscious, transforming into some kind of rag doll, and lay there, not splattered all across the parquets but modestly folded up.

Yegor pulled the trigger of his killing machine until there was nothing left to fire. Its remaining bullets shot out all around the room, Yegor shooting not at Fedor Ivanovich but into some dark abyss projected from his own loneliness.

A floor above, in apartment #50, a shitty apartment from which the police escorted a family of criminals about every six months only to see a new family of criminals move in a week later, a group sat around a table chugging wine. One of them wiggled his ears and inquired, “Huh, they're shooting again? Killing again? Downstairs?” “Let them kill, probably deserved it,” another one retorted. “Who, man?” “All of them, now refill my glass.”

“Congratulations, brother,” said Chief. He walked up to Yegor, took out a pair of scissors from his pocket, and artfully snipped Yegor's hair. “You now have a haircut that is ready for a new duty, withdrawn from a perishable world into an eternal war. Consider yourself accepted into the organization. And you can know its name—the Brotherhood of Black Books.

“You are now a Blackbooker. Keep the gun for yourself. You can take some cartridges from the kitchen cabinet. Alright alright! Now, pour some more liqueur.”

