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THE REAL FOUR

Novel

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*“One of the many inconveniences of real life
is that it seldom gives you a complete story.”*
Somerset Maugham

Prologue

There was a dark silhouette of a school building standing out in the background of the starlit sky. That moonshiny March night two guys were seen climbing a high birch tree to the staff room on the third floor. When they got to the precious window, they quietly opened the top part of it with a penknife, and the smallest boy climbed in through it and opened the rest of the window from the inside. Two more guys were hiding below, in the lilac bushes, and were watching the school yard. After the first pair had disappeared into the room they also began to climb up from one branch to another, rushing to take part in the great affair of “mistake correction”.

The boy with brown hair that was second to climb into the staff room was bigger than the first one and was wearing a short jacket and a blue scarf. Having found himself in the dark room, he threw himself onto a chair and stared at the wall. Two months ago he was standing in the exact same place in front of the teachers and promising not to skip lessons.

That day he was also staring at the wall where there hung a big portrait of a bloke with a round face. Tonight the moon would light the room, then suddenly get obscured with the tree branches moving in the wind, slide on Khrushchev’s bald head, stop for a while and disappear. The boy appeared to be stroking the big head of the Head of the country and praying to him, “Please don’t tell anyone. OK? Please don’t!”

At that time the small boy quickly found a big wooden bookcase in the far corner near the door, and started touching all its boards with his thin fingers as if they were violin strings. At last he found the lock, pushed it with a crow bar and the door opened. The form registers were standing on the shelves in even levels. On the binding, he could see the form numbers painted in white oil.

“Wait for us!” a blonde boy in a light coloured coat and cap shouted, he was the third out of the teenagers who got inside through the opened

window. When climbing through the window sill, he overturned a pile of exercise-books and was now trying to put them back. The fourth boy, who had hair as black as tar and was wearing a school uniform and a scarf round his neck, bumped into the one who was picking up the exercise books from the floor and fell off the window sill, and was now moving a heavy desk struggling to climb out from there.

“Shhhh!” snapped the boy that was sitting on the chair and “stroking” the bald head of the outstanding leader. Then he turned to the small boy dealing with the registers and added confidently, “We’ve got to take several of them, otherwise they will know.”

Along the windows of the staff room there were desks and lots of chairs. Under the desks and chairs there were female shoes casually lying about. On the opposite side there were rows of bookcases, different sizes and heights, with glass doors. In the stuffy room one could smell worn shoes and wet chalk.

The boys walked around the staff room. The fact that they were in the enemy’s headquarters dazzled them. Everything interested them. What’s on the desks? What’s in the drawers? Whose exercise books? Everything attracted their attention although they could hardly see anything because of the darkness. Only the black-haired boy was messing around near the window and couldn’t make up his mind whether or not to move away the large heavy desk.

Without waiting for his partners, the skinny boy in a new school blazer with its collar cut off in the Beatles style, grabbed seven registers in brown faux leather from the right end with a single movement, tucked them under his shirt and rushed back to the window. Now he could feel with every cell in his skinny body that he owned the most important documents of the modern times. It was that Talmud of form 7B that condemned all four participants of the secret affair to finishing the term with a mark “3” and even threatened him with a “2” in Maths. Now everything would change! Now they would have a chance!

Suddenly, they heard shuffling footsteps quickly approaching in the hallway. It could only be the DT teacher. All the pupils at the school liked him. Vasilyich would let them stay in the workshop and make something whenever they wanted. Just for themselves. He, being a war invalid and having lost his left arm at the front, would spend nights mostly at school, near the shooting gallery, and had no family of his own. The boys would see him in the basement many times when they

wandered there without a torch or matches. But today as unlucky as they were, he happened to be on the third floor during their act of rebellion.

When they heard the key turn noisily in the lock, the boy who got stuck near the window slammed the hated desk, got himself free and shouted "Watch out! Run!", then jumped on the window sill. All the exercise books that the blonde boy in a coat and a cap had just folded in a pile fell down again. The black-haired lad, without wasting time to look for support, was very fast, like a monkey, climbing down while jumping from one branch to another, using just his arms. Once he was on the ground, he quickly got up and ran.

One second later, holding with his hands the registers hidden under his blazer, the small boy climbed the window sill. How easy it was to climb up the tree and get into the window! It was a different story to climb down. He didn't have any time to calculate the trajectory or walk step by step on the narrow moulding. Without thinking, he long jumped straight onto the birch tree, deciding to grab the nearest thick twig. His blazer got torn by the little twigs, the registers fell to the ground and he himself hung on the twig unable to reach the nearest branch or the tree trunk. Being annoyed or frightened and in pain, he whined not daring to call for help loudly.

The light switched on in the staff room. In a second Vasilyich appeared at the open window.

"Hey!.. Hold on, just a moment!" the teacher couldn't find anything suitable at hand so he bent over the window and clinging his toes to the iron radiator stretched his arm to the lad. "Hold on! Can you reach? Come on! Come on! A bit more!" He didn't even think about what his pupils were doing there and what was going on. The main thing was to pull that skinny boy back in or he would fall and kill himself. Down on the ground there lay a stack of concrete kerb stones prepared by the builders in winter for the future pavement. A long line of light was falling on the stones through the brightly lit window. The shadow play made them even more scary.

Next moment something long and massive fell onto the teacher. The boys could see him go limp from the ground, bend over the window bay, slide down the wall, fall on the stones and stop moving.

Frightened from what he had just seen and instinctively trying to do a runner and disappear, the small boy tried to swing as much as he

could on the branch, let his arms go, leap to another branch below, but he couldn't get hold of it, and so slipped to the third one and in the end fell... It was not that high but he still hurt himself. As he limped and covered his stomach with his white shirt, reddish stains of blood appeared through his shirt, and he got close to Vasilyich. The wide open motionless eyes were looking at the boy and they were the eyes which reflected the bright light from the third floor window. Some dark liquid was flowing under the teacher's head, in all directions. The small boy touched the puddle of blood with his finger and smelt it. Then he touched his wet and bloody palm, smelt it, jumped up and was about to run. But in a moment he changed his mind. Suddenly he remembered that in the eye of the departed there left an image of the last person he saw while alive. So squatting near the motionless body, without realizing what he was doing, the lad began to rub Vasilyich's eyes frantically with his palm. After some time, he calmed down and realized that it was ok as he had managed to destroy the evidence. Or maybe having just thought it was silly, the boy stood up, looked around and walked away quickly, bending over and hobbling.

After that the boy in the coat and scarf appeared in the window. Slowly he sat on the window sill with his back to the staff room, touched his head with his hand, then raised his palm to his face and looked at it. Staggering, he walked along the boarder of the wall. On the boarder there was thin ice and although the boy slid a few times, he did not fall. He got to the tree and slowly, stopping once or twice, climbed down from one branch to another until he reached the ground. There, around the birch tree he could see the registers lying about, and further away, on the long stones, the DT teacher was lying with his right leg clumsily turned. His eyes and cheeks were stained with blood. The lad didn't come close to him. He didn't collect the registers, he just picked up a couple of them which were lying nearby, then he looked around again and disappeared into the darkness.

Only an hour later the last of the boys left the staff room. Down below he saw the same dreadful scene. He couldn't think straight but he thought he should get some help. But how could he do that? He had been standing for a few minutes over the teacher's body and hesitating but he couldn't think of anything so he headed to his mate's home, the one who was the first to shout, "Run!". That night he was home alone. The conspirators had arranged to meet there.

Chapter 1

1.

A day before 1st of September Serezhka Bogdanov got the flu. Hot honey tea, hot milk with horrible burners, butter and soda made him change his sweaty clothes hourly. He had to stay in bed for nearly a fortnight. Near his pillow, were lying his wooden chess figures. He played war with them. The black ones were ours, the white ones were Germans. In the corner of the room, on the back of the chair hung his new school uniform; ironed trousers, a greyish-blue shirt and a belt. A bunch of white asters in a vase on the window sill had been prepared for school but now had withered and just reminded him that he still had to go there.

Last spring a man came to them and had a long talk with his parents; he must have been trying to persuade them to sign their son into Form 1 in the French school. In their estate were lots of pre-school children, but their parents didn't feel like sending them to that school. There was something strange even in the name of the school. What's more, everyone knew – if a child is invited to go to that school, there must be a catch. But the nearest school was no good – little gangs, constant fights, stabbings, gambling...

In August all 7-year olds were assembled in the school hall and were made to repeat French words after a teacher, this way they were trying to figure out if their pupils-to-be would be able to speak French. If a child had a good ear he could repeat that abracadabra. Otherwise the admission committee and especially the man visiting the families in spring wouldn't have been so pleased.

Serega was the best in his yard at gabbling in German when they played war. Not “tra-la-lah”, but “Hande hock, halt, zuruck”.

He didn't know what the last phrase meant but he liked the sound of it. He even looked like a German; blonde hair, blue eyes and a straight

and slim nose. The main thing was that he had a long, sleek fringe to one side. What's more, he also knew how to "shoot". It was a real dry sound with a crackle of a German gun. Surely, French cannot be more difficult! None of them had heard the language before, though.

The tall man who had been to their homes last spring turned out to be the Head of the French Department and his name was Anatoliy Ivanovich. He had returned from Algeria where there was a war against France. They knew it was somewhere in Africa and he had been an interpreter there. After a wound he had returned to Leningrad and tried to convince everyone the country needed French-speaking specialists. So three years ago a girls' school was turned into a mixed one where they taught a foreign language from Year 2 and additionally taught nearly all the subjects in the same language. Only History, Geography and Literature were French, even Military Schooling was taught with French guns, planes and legions. But Maths was the same – in French or Russian.

Sergey came to school for the first time only in mid-September, he had been wandering around for a long time until at last he stopped near the door with a sign "Form 1B". He heard the bell ring and saw three rows of pupils line up to the left of the door, along the corridor. He recognized a lot of boys even though they all looked the same, in their school uniforms and with short hair and trimmed fringes. Vovka and Yurka were even bouncing and waving their hands calling him to join them. At the front there stood a strict and very important-looking Ninka Smolina from the same block of flats as Bogdanov. On her sleeve she had a white arm band with a red cross. For her nothing changed. She used to be a nurse when they played war. She still was...

Serezhka remembered when once being "badly wounded" he suddenly jumped away from Ninka and fell on the ground face down, like he had died. Under him there lay a wet, lost by someone and unobservable on the wet grass 5-ruble greyish-blue note. A fortune! Later, after the "battle", they were all enjoying sweets "Golden key" brought with that money and for some reason everyone was making a fuss of Ninka Smolina, not him! Especially Yurka Lisochkin. Bur Serezhka's mum told him off for no reason. She wanted to know where he had got the money from. The salesgirls from the shop had reported to her her younger son had been there and bought some sweets. His mum's children were always reported. Her elder son if he gambled, and now her

younger son. She was a midwife in the maternity unit so all the women in the neighbourhood knew her.

Ninka was checking how clean pupils' hands were. She started with the first row, then the rest. If someone had dirty hands she wouldn't allow them inside the classroom. Sergey didn't know what to do. "Shall I join one of the rows? Which one? The end of the row?" When everybody went inside the classroom, even the children who had to go to the toilet and wash their hands first, Smolina turned to him and without a word took his hand and led him to the classroom, her face very strict. She took him to the desk where a girl sat with her arms crossed. The girl had two short plaits that stuck up with white ribbons in them. She also had large blue eyes and the longest black eyelashes you could imagine. Serega had not seen her before. The girl could not have lived in their estate. He had never seen such long eyelashes before either. Ninka Smolina was at the desk with Lariska from his block of flats No.11. And Yurka Lisochkin was with Tanka Badarina from block No.5. The boys from both of these blocks were at war but the girls didn't take part in it. Vovka Spivak was at the desk on his own, his was the first desk in the middle row, right opposite the teacher's table. Terrible! Wouldn't like to be in his shoes.

Sergey wasn't amazed by the first lesson. Everybody was sitting and listening to the teacher. He couldn't remember anything because something important happened – he tasted the sweet cheese for the first time!

During the first break the pupils were allowed to have a snack. Everybody stayed where they were, got their food and munched their packed lunch. Serezhka's neighbour was called Alyonka Livanova, she took multi-coloured processed cheese slices out of a packet and let him try. The cheese was sweet and smelt of some fruit. Sergey had eaten only Russian or Dutch cheese before, his mum would put slices of it on a piece of white bread and he wouldn't taste any difference in it. He couldn't even imagine there were other kinds of cheese – multi-coloured, sweet and sour or caramel flavoured.

When the second break started Yurka and Vovka were the first to run out of the classroom. They waited for Serezhka, and the three of them joined the stream of other pupils walking along in twos or threes along the corridor and then past giant windows. When they were in the far end of the corridor they stopped, sneakily opened a big door

and found themselves at the safety staircase. It was as wide as the main one, made of marble, with rounded edges of the steps but without the long rug along it. Yurka winked at Serezhka merrily as if to say they hadn't wasted their time while he was ill. He took off his belt to not slow him down, stretched forward his arms, pushed off with his feet and went sliding down the stairs. Vovka and Serezhka followed him. When they were at the bottom of the stairs they quickly went back up and then slid down again and again on their bellies until they heard the bell ring.

Of course, Smolina noticed how dirty their hands and shirts were and sent the boys to the toilet to wash themselves. The water made their shirts even dirtier than before but their hands were clean so Ninka let them go into the classroom.

The lessons finished early and the parents of the first year pupils sometimes couldn't pick up their children, so they had to make their own way home.

The girl who sat next to Serega lived near the cinema next to the park with delicate wrought rails around it instead of the usual fence. His parents didn't let Serezhka go that far but if Alyonka's parents didn't pick her up Bogdanov would take a chance and walked her home protecting her from gangs.

The Livanovs had a separate flat with a bathroom. It had a long hallway with glass bookcases full of books. A lot of different books. Their coloured bindings caught his eye, magnetized and called further away, into the room where he could see a different type of a bookcase, short and tubby, with monograms around the glass. Alenka had her own room with a small desk and a big green lamp. Near the window was a very unusual piece of furniture to lie down on, covered with thick brown checked fabric – neither a sofa nor a bed. In the room where Serega lived with his parents and brother, he had his own folding bed but they would take it out only at night time and put it up under the big round dining table. In the morning they folded it up and put it between the wall and the mirrored wardrobe. His elder brother slept on the sofa in one corner, his parents on a wide iron bed in the other. Near the window they had another storage unit where they kept their plates, cups, glasses, but no books.

So now, with his new school life Sergey saw another world. He hadn't known it existed. And not so far... Sweet cheese, straight rows

of books, a big white bathroom, a shower and even an electric fridge. He didn't feel envious or puzzled. Only curious. He felt like lying in this beautiful white enamel giant iron pan with its taps of hot and cold water and also a hot running shower.

When they became older Alyonka followed Serega's advice and started using her parents' books when she needed to translate a French author as her homework. To talk her into cheating, he had to explain to her an advantage of such technology. "She is a grade A student – that explains everything! She'd rather do her work with a dictionary for hours," he explained to himself her moral principles. Afterwards, she got used to it and would let Serezhka copy her homework or would whisper the right answer when he was asked in class, or during a break would tell him the plot of "The Little Prince" which he had to retell in French at a Literature lesson 5 minutes later. Their form was quite small anyway, and in their French lessons it was divided into three groups, each group with less than ten people. So their homework was controlled very strictly.

It is worth mentioning that Livanova, one of the few girls in class, was always behaving with great dignity and was a good friend in spite of being a disciplined and diligent grade A student.

In Year 3, just before New Year, everyone was sitting nicely at their desk waiting for a lesson to start. For some reason the person who came into the classroom was not their French teacher, but their form tutor, who was a Maths teacher. She strictly demanded from the boys to put on her desk all the pistols they owned; the ones made of wood, wire, playdough, toy guns bought from a shop which shot with amorse. All of them! You could understand her. She used to work in a girls' school. And the boys couldn't sit in class without playing their favourite weapon. Of course, the noise disturbed the teacher. She didn't get used to it.

The boys didn't want to give her their pistols. Then the teacher decided to look for them herself. She opened the tops of the desks where the "armed hooligans" were sitting. The lads had to give up; they slowly went to the teacher's desk, nearly crying when they were giving in their possessions. Bogdanov took his black plastic browning, which his uncle brought him from Moscow, and discreetly put it into Alyonka's desk, behind her school bag, staring at her. She didn't say a word, just shut her eyes. Her fluffy black eye lashes could nearly reach

the middle of her cheeks. Serezhka was admiring them and completely forgot about the form tutor.

“Do you need a personal invitation, Bogdanov?” hissed the teacher and headed for the big book case taking all collected pistols with her.

“I have not got one...” Sergey whispered. “Haven’t got one at all.” Saying this he raised his arms and twisted them the way magicians do when they want to demonstrate an object disappearing.

“What do you mean – you haven’t got one? You, Katya,” she said to a girl sitting in front of Bogdanov, “get everything he’s got over there on his back side and put it on my table.”

Everyone laughed but the teacher didn’t get why. She wasn’t bothered with the standard of speech. The main thing was to take away the pistols, count them and put them nicely in the book case. Katya looked in Serega’s desk and didn’t find anything there. Disappointed, she looked at the form tutor, lifted her hands in dismay and took her seat.

“If you want to get your rubbish back come and see me with your parents,” the teacher declared.

The boys understood quickly that the offer was not that simple. So, if you don’t want your toy back, you don’t have to call the parents. Well, the pistols were not that good anyway. Most of them made the pistols in their DT lessons out of wood. And they only had blue paint for them. They had a very good DT teacher who also taught Military Schooling in the upper school. Everyone liked him. He was a war invalid and he had three medals on his blazer. He was always pleased when they were making something themselves. If it was pistols, he didn’t mind. So they decided that calling their parents to school was dangerous. That would be a worse disaster than a loss of their weapons.

Strange as it may seem, the smallest of them, short and skinny, couldn’t calm down. Petka Philippov – he was always called Philya – tried to persuade them to go to the headmaster and make a complaint. His pistol was shiny, made out of bound wires, with a firing cock. He didn’t make it himself but found it in the school yard, cleaned it and later bragged about it. His parents were solicitors and they worked somewhere abroad. The only grown-up was his Grandma, and she was quite old. No one went to the Headmaster, of course. They decided it was useless. Because the form tutor was always right. That was mo-

nopoly on the truth, as adults said. It didn't matter. It was easier to make new ones.

A week later the bookcase was found opened and the pistols had disappeared... They couldn't blame all the boys and it was useless to search for the guilty one. So everyone forgot about the loss. Especially because it was just before New Year and everybody was getting ready for the school concert. So the form tutor had more important things to do.

Straight after New Year, in the morning of the 2nd of January, Serejka had to drag from his home to school his small accordeon Veltmaster and play "Our proud Varangian won't give up..." and Yurka Lisochkin had to sing. Then Vovka Spivak joined them. He was reciting Mayakovskiy's poems about the Soviet passport. After that, behind the curtain, they put on white musketeer cloaks with red satin crosses they all had made at Ninka's and Lariska's and giant hats with feathers, made out of drawing paper. They liked those costumes so much that all three of them, without asking anyone, came into the stage wearing them. They had no swords or even sticks. But they could feel their clothing was beautiful and the audience liked them wearing it. One of them had hair as black as tar, another was a brunette, so they looked like real French boys. Never mind about the third boy, the blonde one. So they were walking on stage taking off and putting on their hats and taking a bow to the audience. They knew very well who was who. Serega Bogdanov was D'Artagnan, Vovka – Athos and "Lisa" – Yurka Lisochkin – Aramis. Only Porthos was missing. What could they do if there were no tubby boys in their class?

Yurka, starting to jump up and having no sword, got a small shiny pistol made of wire out of his pocket. Exactly the same as the teacher had taken from Petka Philippov. And Vovka Spivak read the poem about the Soviet passport again. Alyonka was pushed out onto the stage. She had a brown velvet dress and a cardboard crown with coloured foil glued to it. She looked like a queen. And her eye lashes! She came onto the stage and nearly tripped over her tangled dress, but then she drew herself straight and, as if she had been doing this all her life, took the frills of her skirt with her fingers and proudly floated to the musketeers. They understood they were honoured by her presence and bowed to her, reaching out their right or left feet and waving their hats in front of her feet. It looked like a performance. The chil-

dren behind the curtain applauded and popped out onto the stage. They wanted to be part of their success. The pupils from another form who had performed a Spanish dance, joined them.

The head of the French department also came out onto the stage. Anatoliy Ivanovich announced that a revolution had just taken place in Cuba and communists had won. Now there was socialism in the other part of the world. Everyone was happy. The audience stood up and clapped their hands. The pupils performed everything for the second time. This time in their musketeer costumes, which was very exciting.

The first school years lasted a long time. Form tutors changed, some pupils left, others came into the school. Some of them couldn't get the hang of the foreign language, some moved house and changed schools. They introduced a new grade for pupils missing lessons – a “three for behaviour for the term”. A deed of horror – satisfactory! Usually everyone would get a “five” or a “four”. It was impossible not to! Only “good” or “excellent”. What do you need to have done for your behaviour to satisfy the other people?

2.

By Year 7 everyone was happy with their school. By then many of them could speak French fluently even using complicated Conditional sentences and Subjunctive Mood. But they were too shy to use the right pronunciation.. Especially the boys. But if they dared... It sounded as beautiful as the new History teacher sounded. Then everyone enjoyed listening to the unusual male French language at their school. Even the Maths teacher was nearly fainting from it although she didn't understand anything. You can imagine how thrilled the girls were. They all fancied the History teacher. The boys had to wait until the girls became sensible again.

In the classroom there was a big map of Paris brought from France by the History teacher. It showed every house, every lane and of course all the tourist attractions. Every pupil was allocated a part of the map and was supposed to learn everything off by heart. What was built there, who it was built by, what was there now, how to get there... For instance, how to get from Notre Dame to Arc de Triomphe. Or more

difficult – from Vendome Column to Austerlitz station. Bogdanov got the Latin Quarter and Vovka Spivak got Elysian Fields. Their task was simple – to talk about buildings, construction, architectural monuments, history... But it had to be of the both parts of Paris, Serega's and Vovka's. "Bonjour, Serge. Comment ca va? (Hello, Sergey! How are you?)" said Vovka and then smacked his friend's back. "Bonjour. Voldemar (Hello, Volodya)," surprised Sergey slightly crouched and said the first words that came into his mind, "Et combien d'etages y a-t-il dans votre maison? Je suis oublié déjà. (How many floors does your house have? I can't remember)". Bogdanov casually started counting on his fingers.

The group burst out laughing. The teacher turned out to have a rich imagination, the golden clip on his burgundy tie was bouncing up and down following the glee of the class. What was so special in the conversation? But try to imagine two friends meet and start talking about the storeys in their houses as if they had nothing else to talk about. Anyone could think they were sick or stupid.

The behaviour of the Year 7 pupils had become unusual and unfamiliar. Their new feelings made their knees weak and their eyes shiny, they made them both learn their lessons and skip them... All of a sudden Bogdanov turned into a modest and shy boy blushing at every given opportunity. Vovka Spivak was constantly writing someone notes with incomprehensible handwriting or in code so that no stranger could read it. And Lisochkin... Well, he was blocking his new senses by going to the gym during lunch breaks and lifting weights. Nevertheless, everyone was changing. At first they were sincere with each other and shared their secrets. But then, gradually they realized their new feelings couldn't be discussed aloud. Each of them got their first secrets and their relationships were changing into something new.

Shyness, modesty, fear, well-done homework, competition victories... That was their first love. Each of them was taking their first shy but strong steps. This love could be happiness, sadness, motivation or a great disappointment. It is wonderful when love is mutual and it is awful if it is not. But in both cases there was something charming about it. They would understand it later. Meanwhile... They needed some time to listen to themselves and their experiences.

Bogdanov of course was in love with Alyonka. But she fancied Lisochkin. Lisochkin didn't love anyone but didn't mind flirting with

anyone. Just for some training, like lifting weights. No one knew who Vovka Spivak fancied. But he was in love, that's for sure. They all liked to discuss why Bogdanov blushed so much. Especially when he was standing in front of the class and answering the teacher's questions. It couldn't have been just because he usually didn't learn his lesson and was just trying to get a "three"... But it could have been because at that moment She was looking at him and She would see everything. Other people wouldn't understand anything but She would.

That Saturday their lessons finished early. They didn't have Maths which was the last lesson. Everyone was pleased that the teacher was ill and Alyonka was the happiest. Livanova hated both algebra and the teacher. She, an A-star student, the first time in her school life was likely to get a "four" in the third term. In algebra. This month she was asked to solve maths problems twice and both times she got a "four". That was over the top.

Alyonka looked very happy putting all her stuff into her small lilac school bag and was about to leave. She bent down to do the laces up on her winter boots and had a peep at Serejka who was standing at the big wooden bench near the school entrance. He usually was standing there after lessons. Today he was looking at her and was waiting for something, you could read it on his face.

"Shall we go for a walk, Sereja? Would you see me home?" she said loudly and beckoned to him.

"Alright," he sounded indifferently. "I will catch up with you".

He waited for Alyonka to walk forward and quickly made his way to her. He either didn't want other people to know he fancied her or was trying to show that he was not that keen to walk over the hills and far away... But just one word "Sereja" from her lips instead the usual from Year 1 "Bogdasha" made him shiver and his red from the frost cheeks became absolutely scarlet.

A minute later they were walking together, but not towards her house. He was silent. So was she. He was carrying her school bag. His was often left in school not to be carried to and fro. He did his homework at school, just before the lessons.

"I can't keep silence all the time! I've got to say something..." Serega was thinking in despair. "But what can we talk about? It is silly to talk about the weather. Love? No way! Why don't they teach important things at school?"

They had been walking along the avenue for over an hour taking a long circular route. It was getting dark. Yellow street lamps were turned on. An alley of high birch trees was stretching along the pavement. The heavy shiny frozen droplets made their branches bend. The light was refracted in those droplets and formed multicoloured circles looking like small rainbows. You don't see this phenomenon very often. To get it, it needs to be raining for a long time in the morning but also the temperature needs to drop down by the evening up to at least five degrees below zero. The children, without saying a word, stopped at the same time, struck with the beauty of it.

Alyonka embraced his neck. Her warm and delicate hands slid down his hair, back of his head, his ears and stopped somewhere between his scarlet cheeks and neck. With her eyes closed, Alyonka touched Serejka's cold cheek with her lips. Her warm breath smelling of baked milk was nicely tickling his fluffy cheekbones and chin. He felt a slight chill and a rapid pulse. All his face pores seemed to have opened up as he was enjoying Alyonka's smell. Her eyelashes landed on his cheeks and took the heat off his lips. He started kissing them as fast as he could without understanding anything. A second later he stopped, collected-himself together and gave her a big kiss on the lips...

He didn't feel much. He didn't even realize that it was him who kissed her. Her palms and eyelashes touching him was much nicer. And the kiss... Well, firstly, he was thinking about how to do it properly. As he was taught... And his feelings, sensations and all that stuff came second. For some reason he remembered "Madame Bovary" by Flaubert. You get a glimpse of a foot heel or skin between a sleeve and a glove... That was more than enough. But a kiss! Too strong. Blocks your feelings. Over the top.

Alyonka gently pushed Serejka away, re-arranged first her scarf, then his hat, and smiled at him, so he felt so easily, as if he had been carrying something heavy but now got unburdened. He thought about Lisochkin with his weights. "He's stupid!"

Suddenly they both started talking at once about the same things without feeling awkward, as they used to talk in Year 1 or 3. They discussed all their school friends and teachers. Bogdanov got a feeling that Alyonka was really interested in Yurka and that how Vovka Spivak was so good at algebra and the Maths teacher liked him. For the rest of the way home she was talking about the "four" she was getting at

the end of the term. She thought it was terrible and her parents would be really cross.

They soon saw Alyonka's house. It started snowing. Its fluffy flakes fell on her eyelashes and stayed there, but in the end they turned into tiny creeks and dripped down her cheeks. It looked like Alyonka was crying. The snow covered frozen droplets on the tree branches so the street lamp lights didn't make an illusion of small rainbows.

Near her front door, at the window and warm radiator, they kissed again and again... Serejka was happy.

He returned to his place and heard a new song which sounded exactly how he felt, "This white twilight keeps flickering, we are standing at the edge of the dark."

3.

The friends would stay after school in the school basement and think about all the possible and impossible ways of correcting marks. The situation wasn't critical, nothing terrible had happened. It was only about a "three" or a "four" for the term. Not a big deal. But Serega described their hopeless future, talked about their conscience and intelligence, which hadn't been touched by hard work and drills. They decided to call Philya. He would be mostly interested in improving the situation. Only Vovka Spivak seemed to be not in the game. He was always very good at Maths. He only had three "threes". Three "threes" sounded cool. Even elegant. But the boys knew he could come in handy. "He will do! He always thinks of something!" And it was a challenge.

Petka Philippov got everything at once and in a second he had a plan. They just had to decide who would climb into the staff room with Philya. They all knew it was him who had to open the top part of the window. But who would follow him? Yurka suddenly remembered he'd just been at the teachers' meeting where they talked about him skipping lessons. So he knew the staff room very well. And everyone, who had been asked by a teacher to bring the register in before a lesson, knew exactly where they kept the registers.

"Livanova is so lucky!" Lisochkin was disappointed. "She keeps saying she is going to get a "four". She will owe us..." As soon as he

looked at Bogdanov, he had to shut up. He had never known his friend could have a temper like that. Suddenly Serega thought that Alyonka might have asked Yurka to think of that as well. Even if she did, what's the difference? Once, after the lessons...

"We'll all climb in there," Sergey concluded.

Time was dragging very slowly. Two weeks passed. Now they had to hurry up – it was nearly time for the spring holidays. At last Saturday night came.

...When they all were in the staff room, being triumphant over the victory over the teachers of all over the country, they heard someone's footsteps in the hallway. The boys were not ready for that. And they didn't have a plan B, a plan of escape. They panicked. They saw Vovka Spivak get out of the trap between the desk and the wall, not being scared to make a noise now, and jump on the window sill. Bogdanov could hear him shout something. Philya followed Vovka. When he was running to the window, the registers fell out from under his shirt making a lot of noise. He was tripping over them but still got to the window fast. The room was dark. Bogdanov was in the far end of the big room, behind the bookcases and couldn't see anyone, and Yurka Lisochkin was waiting for Philya to get off the window sill. He didn't have time to get out so he hid behind the heavy curtain. As soon as he did, the light went on.

Serega knew he would be found any moment, so he dashed to the far bookcase with globes and maps, opened one of its doors, took out a black globe with white stars, climbed in between the two bottom shelves and covered himself with a folded map of the Arctic. He hunched up and managed to close the bookcase door with his boot toe. Just one door. His heart was beating so fast that the boy got scared and thought about leaving his hiding-place. He knew he would be found soon.

From behind the window you could hear Petka Philippov's whining and sniffing.

When Vasilyich entered the staff room, he stopped for a moment and turned the light switch on, which was just to the left of the door. The big room was filled with the bright light. In front of him, over the row of the tables, there shone the glass of the windows. One of them was black and the cold spring air was getting into the room through it. The teacher could hear someone cry vaguely. The man quickly headed

for the window, looked down and saw a boy struggling to hang on a tree branch. The teacher bent down, leaning on the window sill.

The boy hiding behind the curtain carefully came out and quietly stepping on the parquet, went around Vasilyich intending to leave the ill-fated staff room, get into the hallway and there... Having heard someone's steps behind his back, the teacher who was leaning forward and stretching his only arm to Petka Philippov, suddenly turned his head towards the light and clashed with...

"Lisochkin!" he said angrily having recognized his pupil. "Why are you here?!" Everything collapsed like a card tower. At first they were so lucky, all they had to do was quickly leave the staff room, leave the crime scene... Now he had been recognized! That was the end! He was overwhelmed with anger, he was angry with himself, angry with Philya who was still squeaking behind the window, angry with the disabled teacher with three shiny medals on his old blazer...

Yurka didn't understand what he was doing when he ducked behind the curtain again. The curtain suddenly stretched sharply and pulled the massive wooden curtain pole from the plastered brick wall with its screws in the wooden fillers. Was it the teacher who treaded on the heavy burgundy curtain or..?

One end of the curtain pole struck Lisochkin's head and the other one slammed Vasilyich' neck. His gravity centre moved for a second, his legs raised from the parquet floor... A moment later the teacher disappeared behind the window...

The next day after the terrible incident, an investigation began. For a month all the boys from the seven eldest forms were interviewed by an investigating officer. At school, at the militia office, with and without their parents. It was clear someone killed, pushed the DT teacher out of the window. Who was it? The answer was obvious. It was someone who needed the registers. Someone who broke the window open, opened the bookcase with the registers, stole them and wanted to take them away. But the teacher got in their way and was killed. Two registers were stolen, and one of them was of form 7B. Apart from the registers, another thing disappeared – a golden pen on a precious stone stand in the shape of the Eiffel Tower. That was a gift from the delegation of the French Ministry of Education.

The search led quickly to Petka Philippov. His ripped school uniform, grazes on his arms, deep scrapes on his stomach, broken tree

branches and blood everywhere. His blood and Vasilyich'. Petka's bad school marks in the third term would convince anyone. The motive was evident.

Later on, according to Petka, the investigating officer learned that the teacher had been trying to help him to climb back to the staff room when he was hanging on a tree branch. It was likely Petka grabbed his arm and pulled him so strongly that the teacher couldn't keep the balance as he didn't have the other hand, and he fell out of the window. Petka denied this ending. But there were no witnesses. Neither for him, nor against.

The DT teacher was buried and Philippov was sent to a young offender institution in Kolpino, near Leningrad, under the article 89 of the Criminal Code for 18 months. Petka's parents were present in Court. At last people could see them. His Grandma used to come to school. This time, they had to break their business trip. They looked very important. His mother was wearing a strange colour dress, as if she was at a ball. In the end she burst out crying, and Petka's father gritted his teeth and didn't make a sound. After they left the court room, they started arguing over whose fault it was.

The solicitor did everything he could. Everything was so evident and the facts were so outrageous that the city's Prosecutor appeared in Court. To educate the children, all of the form was called into the Court.

Philya admitted everything apart from the teacher's death and the disappeared pen. At the end of the sitting the judge stood up and read the verdict, missing letters and rushing. Everyone stood up. Philya was standing with his head held high proudly towards the audience with a sparkle in his eye. Like Lenin did in a film. As if he was saying to the rest: "Here we are! I am a bright personality again. As in Year 1. Am I not?"

Of course, his three mates had a noble impulse. At some point they felt like jumping up and loudly announcing their participation... At some point... But the moment was gone and Philippov looked at them as if to say: "Be quiet, don't spoil everything!" Of course, he was the solicitors' son, he knew what he was doing. If a group was acting by previous concert, they would get up to six years! And the teacher was killed! To be honest, they didn't criminate Petka with the death. His solicitors had obviously done their best.

Vovka Spivak was especially suffering because they had kept silent and hadn't helped Philya. When the judge was telling the verdict, he was shifting around his chair and whispering, "That's not fair, that's not fair!"

"Hey, you," Lisochkin would tell him, "how have you got a 'five' in Maths? One person is definitely not four." It was better for Philippov to say he had been on his own, and for the other boys as well. They told the investigating officer they had been at Vovka's doing homework. He had been living on his own for two days. Of course, Vovka confirmed that. "Don't let it wind you up! Are you a truth-seeker? We don't know anything. And Philya? He is not a friend to us. He is a D-student!"

After the verdict all the four were feeling some guilt. They had been in the same class with him for many years. The three boys also felt guilty. Because of Vasilyich or Philippov. They went through the loss of everyone's favourite DT teacher and some special form of betrayal. They didn't know it could happen to them. In the war films traitors were different. They betrayed their Motherland. But here... They did want to stand next to Philippov in Court. They really did! They knew from books that if someone took the guilt upon himself, he got the punishment for them. Of course, after coming back from prison, he got his share, but in this case there was nothing to share, no money, no Motherland. Apart from some golden pen. Plus, it was Petka Philippov who was likely to get a "two" in Maths.

At first the boys got closer. They were constantly talking about what had happened, discussing all the details and came to the fact that Philippov was actually not from their yard, but from a big Stalinist house where all the flats were separate and they all had baths. And he had made friends with them not long before. Only a year ago he asked if he could come camping with them, make a bonfire and cook potatoes on the fire. It was then that he jumped from the shore to their raft and they all fell into the water, came home absolutely wet and got told off by their parents.

So they decided Petka was not really their friend! That was it! As far as they remembered, Petka always caused trouble. In Year 1 he didn't come to the performance where all the children had a small part. Then Alyonka, who was supposed to speak after him, couldn't say anything and didn't know what to do. How can you say, "I've got

a box," if no one said "I will draw a horse" before. She was fluttering her eyelashes and helplessly looking around with her little plaits waving. She was waiting for Petka's words, but only Vovka Spivak took his chance. He came out of the row confidently in front of the hall full of parents and teachers and loudly recited Petka's words.

Before Petka started school, his parents made him play a violin and read a lot. At five years old he used to read grown-up books. In Year 1 the teacher would ask him to stand in front of everyone and read "Neznaika" or "The Wizard of Oz". He was small, slim, with a big collar around his long and thin neck and an Octobrist badge on his chest. The badge, made out of red foil, was bent and attached to his shirt with a safety pin. He wore his wide belt with a big buckle too high, just under the badge. From under the belt there hung down long and undressed folds of the shirt.

Philippov could feel he was exceptional and was trying to stay like that. But it was getting more and more difficult. The head start he got when he was very young was running out. All the children could now read and write and no one really wanted to play the violin.

Soon a group of humanists, the ones who loved Russian and French literature, separated from the others. A small group of five. Vovka Spivak and two girls, who came to school in Year 4 but could speak French reasonably well, were now known as "mathematicians". One of them was in their form, one in the other. There appeared social differentiation in school. This girl was a ballet dancer's daughter, and her dad a sea captain. Another girl had a double surname spelt with a dash. Most of the children lived near the school, in communal flats in blocks built in the thirties next to a big factory, or in 2-storeyed buildings with a staircase built by captive Germans after the war. Their parents didn't really want them to go to the "French school". They were scared their children would be sent to Africa after school, to Algeria, or at least to France, straight to NATO.

So Petka was willing to gain his former influence and he was now jumping from desks to the floor imitating a sea devil from the movie "Amphibian man". He also cut off his blazer collar with scissors and grew long hair to look like the Beatles. If that was not enough he would get a mouthful of mustard at lunch break, sit still in class and then open his mouth facing everyone and casually stick his tongue out. Well, well! To wait half of the lesson for his self-esteem. His patience and

diligence when he was learning to play the violin must have helped. Also, he remembered the days when he felt very special or even the best in Year 1.

Series of tests started. But you could cheat, unlike when you had to answer in front of the class. Alyonka got a “five” for her Maths test. And for the term. The boys didn’t really improved their marks. The tests were a success for some and a failure for the others. Sometimes they could copy someone’s answers, sometimes – only part of them.

Childhood... A year later they were told Philippov had died in prison. For losing a card game some young scum bags made him swallow a “hedgehog” – a heap of small nails tied with wires.

After this news the three of them went different directions. They never stayed together or went to girls’ birthday parties even though they used to before. Each of them thought they had blood stains which everyone would see and they couldn’t rub or wash out. They were everywhere – on any clothes they wore, on their underwear, on their bodies, like Petka had blood everywhere on his body after he fell. Even inside them, in their stomach and gullet. Weird! As soon as they found themselves together, they felt like Philippov was standing in front of them, alive, awkward, skinny, in his ugly school uniform with a big collar and a hand made foil Octobrist badge on his chest. They felt like leaving and not seeing each other any more.

Spivak left first. After sixteen years his parents got a new flat. All Vovka’s family, his mother, father, younger sister and him, at last moved from a 14-metre room in a communal flat to a separate flat on the fifth floor in a new district of Sosnovaya Polyana. After that Vovka was late for school every day because he had to take a train, then tube, then walk to school from the station. He would come to school in muddy ski boots but he got away with it. All the teachers knew Sosnovaya Polyana was not very nice, it was far away and it was always muddy there. Both in winter and in summer. Even cabs didn’t go there. He was the youngest in his class. He could have not got to school because his birthday was on the 28th of September. But even then he was very bright and he folded his birth certificate several times so that the last digit of the year could not be seen. It was not a big deal to accept him to school earlier. Being a good mathematician, he saw life through formulas and theorems. He was brilliant at solving mathematical problems, he would turn complicated shapes of pyramids so

easily to solve their volume. He was allowed to come to school in muddy boots. Besides, Spivak attended lectures at a university for upper school students. The first year university students would train to speak scientifically at those lectures, they would spend hours talking about complex numbers, closed and open sets. The girls from school said they were not supposed to understand everything at those lectures but they had to learn to strain themselves to follow the lecturer's logic. When you felt it was not interesting it meant the listener couldn't handle it, couldn't understand anything. In the beginning of the series of lectures this happened straight away, but in the end – later and later on.

The Maths teacher always praised Vovka. Maybe because he didn't care about any other subjects. Apart from French. He would say, "This is just a waste of time". All the other teachers would tell him off. At their lessons Vovka liked to write mathematical symbols on the textbook pages, and say to the teachers, "This is MY book! I can do what I want with it. I can even burn it!" Once at a history lesson he reacted the same to the teacher's comment. But this time instead of his usual algebra formulas he drew a big bright blue potty instead of a tree stub under the proletariat leader in the picture "Lenin in Razliv"...

Vovka was expelled from the Komsomol League. To protect their son's mentality, his parents moved him to another school, close to their new flat. But this circumstance didn't effect his plans. Firstly, in his new school he became a Komsomol member again. The old school decision was cancelled. What else could they do? Secondly, in a couple of years his dream came true, he got into university straight away. He didn't even need the extra year he had to save him from going to the army.

He was a very impulsive, abrupt and intolerant lad. If he didn't like a subject or a lesson, that was it! If they expelled him from Komsomol, he didn't care! If he liked something, he would live with it. He taught himself differential calculation, it took him just a month to learn to play a piano. But he would play only the Moonlight Sonata, nothing else. Because he was fond of it. Soon he learnt English. And later on he quickly got married.

Lisochkin and Bogdanov had to see each other every day. Their friendship was over, but their horrible secret was still pushing on them making them both closer and more distant to each other. Was there

something that could cover their past? Everything was worsened with a love triangle Serega – Alyonka – Yurka, where everyone was in love in a chain: Serejka fancied Alyonka but she fancied Yurka.

What is more, unlike Spivak or many other people in class, both Lisochkin and Bogdanov didn't think of what they could do in life or what they wanted to become. They felt as if the time cut out a big part of their life and again they were little children, before that night incident, and they could play war or walk around arm in arm, the three of them, Yurka Lisochkin, Serega Bogdanov and Vovka Spivak. Their mums would open their windows and call them to come home. Then the friends would start singing a famous song "Three tankmen, three merry mates..." and their mums would smile and let them play another ten minutes...

In Year 10 they made up their mind about what they were going to do. Yurka was visited at school by some men in suits; during the lessons he would go out of the classroom to talk to them and they would leave school very pleased. He secretly told his friends he was going to go to the High School of KGB, learn Arabian and stuff. He did look like a Syrian or Iraqi and his grandad had worked in NKVD. He was meant to go there and then after graduation he would go somewhere abroad and pretending to be an Arab he would defend his country.

Bogdanov became interested in chemistry. For some reason he had a "five" in it. He couldn't help it!

4.

For some reason? When he was in Year 10, one winter night, he was studying Mendeleev's rule sitting on the lid of the cooker in the kitchen. The wooden closet with a hole under the window, serving as a fridge, did not interfere with his work. His felt boots and the cooker made him warm. The neighbours were asleep so no one wanted to put the kettle on in the kitchen.

"When no one is interfering you can learn anything you like," Sergey said to himself and instead of his chemistry text-book, he opened "Metaphysics" by Aristotle. When he had something difficult to do, he always had some simple things at hand, a TV programme or something else... "This is very clear and you don't have to prove anything. UNESCO considers Aristotle the cleverest thinker of all times for

a good reason..." Serega thought. Being in a really good mood and in comfort, Bogdanov forgot he was in the kitchen to revise for tomorrow's test. He would have got a "three" for it anyway. Maybe, even a "four"... Serega started singing quietly, "Maybe, a dog, or maybe, a goat!" He was dreaming.

If I had not got a "two" in Year 2 and if I had not had to do my homework on the landing window instead of at home, and if I had not got a "one" for it... He was thinking about what would have happened if... Sergey could have become an A grade student. Like Valka Prohorova or Tanka Badarina, who Lisochkin had been sharing the desk with all school years. Those two girls were always eager to stand in front of the class and answer the lessons with some unhealthy joy. "How sad they are," Bogdanov felt sorry about them. "They don't know what it is like not to know anything and to go to school where you can fail any second. To be a C grade student you need to be very skilful. To be able to answer something, to start solving a mathematical problem calmly even if you have no idea how to do it... Oh, yes! Lisochkin won't have to learn a lot, he will work as a professional..."

Bogdanov got a "five" in his chemistry test. It was not just a normal test, but an all-republican test. It was that "five" that influenced his plans for the future.

Electronic clouds, affinity, chemical valence and entropy were filling his life for the next six years. The consequence of this complicated phenomena was interrupted by exams, construction brigades and usual birthday parties. Not all of them, of course... Only Alyonka's, Ninka's and Tanka's. You had to meet there. If you didn't go to a birthday party it could mean only something out of the common happened or you didn't want to see your childhood witnesses. When they met and sat at the table full of vinaigrette, herring and Russian salad the girls had cooked before the party, they would talk about their science, university, brag about their new knowledge.

Three and a half years had passed since they finished school. Everyone wanted to see each other, to see their differences. "Who finds it easy to live in Russia?" asks Nekrasov, and Mayakovskiy answers in his poem "Good"..." one of the philologists Marinka, started. "Who, who finds it easy? Probably a plumber," Vovka Spivak said. "Firstly, plumbers are proletariat, so they have nothing to lose. Secondly, all the world is open to them, they can enter any door..."

"I was writing about a sick physicist," Yurka Lisochkin said. "we had to score at least 19 out of 20. So I tried my best."

He was in Leningrad just for a couple of days, came to the party and sat down with Smolina, the birthday girl. Having had a drink, he tried to hug Ninka.

They were all tipsy and were not aware of what they were saying. Each of them tried to talk to the people sitting opposite or next to them. Alyonka and Serega were sitting in a corner, having a coffee and talking about life and human values. They had been sitting at the same desk for three years. Those were the best years when you learn everything very easily.

After Vovka sorted out Nekrasov's question on vital importance, he started thinking to himself, "How different they all are... It's like a mad house... These feel good and those feel good. They are all so simple. Maybe I just haven't seen them a long time. Six years, three years of another school and three years after school."

Vovka was the last to come to the party. Because he had a long journey from Sosnovaya Poliana or maybe he just went crazy with his Maths and he thought he had the right to be late. They couldn't say. But he had changed a lot since he had moved school. He knew that, but the others didn't. They didn't even want to, they just felt good.

The golden medallist Valka Prohorova was not with them. When she was in her third year of university she married the assistant professor. Her rival, who was a silver medallist, Tanka Badarina, came to the party. They competed in everything. One of the girls used to get upset if the other got the latest "five". It didn't matter what subject it was. Any subject! All of them! It looked like a penalty in the final of the football championship. One of them, who didn't fancy Yurka Lisochkin, was always jealous about the other one being in love with him.

The first in class was always the "golden" girl. Especially after she came back from Germany where she had been living with her parents for two years. She was the first to start using make-up, style her hair, wear trendy blouses which you could see her bra through. She even smelt differently. Maybe, it was her perfume... No surprise, elder boys paid attention to her and later she quickly got married.

But the other, "silver" girl, didn't keep waiting. One day she turned up to her friend's, who had changed into a good housewife and was cooking in the kitchen, without any make-up, with her hair undone

and wearing an apron. Tanka announced straight away, "Well, Valusha, I also have a hubby now. There he is, standing outside." Valka was silent. She was wondering who it could be. Tanka understood what her friend was thinking about and said quietly he was a children's author.

"Well, I see..."

"Tomorrow we are leaving for Tela, to see his parents," finished Tatyana, pretending she didn't hear Valka's rating her husband's work.

"Where is it?" the "golden" girl asked, trying to keep down her joy. She was already smiling and feeling happy that her friend's husband was from some hole of a place.

"That's in France, near Toulouse."

At the party Lisochkin was flirting with Smolina all night. "He looks like a sailor with a moustache," Alyonka looked at him, "He just needs a striped vest, a hairy chest and a guitar."

As Ninka didn't need to be walked home, Yurka was going to go with Tanka Badarina he used to sit at the desk with, but her French husband called Dominic was already waiting for her downstairs. Bogdanov left the party early. His mum was ill and he had to take medicines to her and replace his brother looking after her. Sergey couldn't even stay to have tea and cakes. He quietly said goodbye to Livanova and disappeared...

So Lisochkin had to walk Alyonka home. All the way he was chatting about nothing. It was a cold November night. Livanova's parents were on a business trip in Kiev and Yurka invited himself in. He had three hours before his train to Moscow. He took Alyonka's keys, opened the door, found the record-player and turned it on. Then he danced with her to a Johnny Holiday song. Most of the songs were fast but they were dancing slowly. He was talking all the time. He must have been taught to talk like that. When Johnny started singing "Penitencier", Yurka picked Alyonka up and carried her to the sofa-bed which Serejka tried to figure out in Year 1 – was it a bed or a sofa?

Chapter 2

I.

After graduating from the chemistry department of the University, Sergey was allocated to the Arctic and Antarctic institute and got to go on a Polar expedition in the Chukchee sea. Then he went to the Beaufort sea, which is over Alaska and Canada, and the Bering sea... He passed all the tests and turned himself from a chemist into a geographer, like a polar explorer. He published his first works. He got his first megabucks. Between the expeditions Bogdanov would meet his school friends. All, but not Alyonka.

Once, when Segega was still at university, Yurka, who was already a lieutenant, came to Leningrad for a day to see his parents. They met and Lisochkin blurted out, "Livanova has had a baby. Don't you know? It's not yours, is it?"

Since then Sergey had been avoiding Alyonka. Once he wanted to visit her but he chose not to. He would meet other girls somewhere in a doughnut shop downtown or in a cafe in Nevsky Prospect. Bogdanov would affectionately tell them about a storm and breaking ice under a plane's skis in the North Pole. The girls would listen to his tales breathlessly and eat ice-cream. When paying, he would show them a very unusual 100-rouble note and say, "This is for a coffin and a storm. They pay us three roubles sixty two for an hour flight, the same price as a bottle of vodka. They also pay a tenner each for landing."

The school friends knew Sergey fancied Alyonka so they didn't dare to talk to him about her. Even though they knew everything, or nearly everything...

Now, Bogdanov was asked to go on all significant expeditions where they landed on the ice of unknown thickness, or where they had very important data and a lot of money. Then followed Antarctic and saving of vessel "Ob", stuck in the ice. For the first time in the history drifting

station “North Pole – 19” got located on an ice island. Serega Bogdanov took part in it. He got rewards and respect. Again respect and rewards... And a year later...

The District Communist party Committee decided to use a vacancy for an engineer. They sent the quota for admission to the institute where Sergey worked. The main thing now was for the candidate to fit the vacancy. To do that Sereja had to be considered appropriate.

All polar explorers were appropriate. It was a matter of natural selection. If a person is crap no one will go on an expedition in the sea with him or land the Arctic ice not knowing how thick it was... But Sergey also was a young professional and an active Komsomol member. So they made a decision to accept him into the Communist party.

Bogdanov had no doubts about whether he needed all that. His father was a party member. During the war his party membership saved his life... Talking to himself like this, Sergey noticed a very peculiar thing. When he was busy doing social tasks, for example in Komsomol, construction brigade or polar expeditions, his life was filled with energy, interesting meetings and experience. When he was busy with his studies, chemistry or geography, something broke down in his chain of pleasant events. He would submerge in a narrow world of electrons, molecules and undercurrents... It was also interesting but... That little world demanded a special drive for knowledge, and that knowledge you couldn't use straight away. The attitude to reality that Bogdanov had was demanding a different kind of experience. Serejka would say to himself, “So what? A self-recorder put two peaks instead of one everyone was used to. Not a big deal. A magazine article, a dissertation don't change a lot.” It is much more challenging if you have to change your relationships, deal with people, make decisions together and act. This sort of work attracted him and was often a success. It also prevented his personality from being socially infantile.

Sergey couldn't work or study consistently. He belonged to the people who liked to enjoy what they were doing. Their work had to be energetic and of small duration. Construction brigades, expeditions to the Arctic were just the things! A couple of months of really hard work, when every minute was filled with decisions and relationships, so it was always joyful.

If Bogdanov really liked something, he got carried away and the rest of the world seemed to disappear for him. He loved to be dragging

two six-metre planks on his shoulders, pushing a wheelbarrow full of matrix to the second floor on those two planks all day long... All this in rain and mud. He loved jumping out of the plane onto the ice and knowing it would take off any second when everyone knew the depth of ice was less than twenty centimetres. He loved talking, collecting information, laughing, squinting at the bright Arctic sun. That was his life.

Now, after he became a Communist member, the young romantic person would own a new document, which meant access to a career ladder. It would be like a stamp “free entry” to a restricted company. This stamp, small and blue, looked like a little vodka glass upside down, it was mysterious and had dangerous liberalism in it. The little glass was in the same row with arrival and departure time, lunch break time and hazard degree.

2.

In July 1967 Yurka Lisochkin went through security and became an applicant of the 2nd Faculty of the Red-banner KGB High school named after Dzerzhinskiy. Secret service. School leavers could become students of it but the competition for them was much tougher than for military men having already served in the Army.

Yurka was accepted.

The lucky ones found themselves in the High school with the wire fence around it.

What were they taught six days a week for three years? Their day started at 8 in the morning with physical exercises – cross country, gymnastics, swimming, wrestling, skiing. Their school day started at nine in the morning and finished at six in the evening with an hour lunch break. They were given excellent education. Their education was said to be four-in-one – specialized, juridical, linguistic and military. The foundation of their education was juridical and specialized subjects. Criminal investigation, administrative law and international law were the main subjects. In the end they got a degree of a legal expert with foreign language skills.

Yurka was studying Arabic and Persian. He also knew French from school. English was optional.

After graduating from the High KGB school he was working as a police investigator in a district station for a year and a half. Then he went to a training course to study the country, language peculiarities, religion and traditions for a year... Now Lisochkin was thinking about a business trip abroad.

But before going abroad he had to get married. Those were the rules. Yurka didn't even have a girlfriend. He spent all his time in barracks and he was always busy. He hadn't seen Alyonka after that party and he didn't know much about her. And they lived in different cities.

Lisochkin didn't know anything about his school friends. Even though it was not natural for his work. He just didn't want to know. He had interesting and hard work ahead of him. He was lucky to get an opportunity to go abroad three years after graduating. But he could miss that opportunity because he was not married.

Back in February, Yurka rang Ninka Smolina in Leningrad. She was finishing her sixth year at Medical School, and she knew she would have to go somewhere to Karaganda after graduating. So they both were joined together by chance. It was that year that the life of both of them was going to change.

Now, after marrying Yurka, Ninka was almost happy. Everything happened in good time. "How good is that!?! Going abroad, hard currency, work as a doctor and he is so cool... in the uniform and with shoulder loops." She used to fancy him. Not for a long time though. Yurka knew that from the silver medallist Badarina. Tanka had always been his secret agent.

This world was so plain. On the first of July Ninka, who used to play a nurse in all boys games, left for her husband's duty station and in a month's time was working as a physician in a local medical unit of Damascus.

Livanova was bringing up a son, she graduated from a biological department without a gap year. After her diploma defence she stayed to work at her university. Alyonka's son was two the day the couple Lisochkin-Smolina left. She was dreaming of him going to her French school. She really wanted it. The school had the same teachers. The teacher of French history was still there. And their form tutor, who was also a Maths teacher, the one who took the toy pistols from the boys, still worked there. Katya, the leader of their Pioneer organization, after graduating from the Pedagogical Institute, came to work as a Rus-

sian and Literature teacher at their school. That was the second year she had been ringing everyone about a get-together on the 1st of September but no one else would turn up. So she was standing with a sign "1967".

In Syria Lisochkin's post was a Soviet military adviser assistant. At the same time he was a special secret service member in the embassy resident agency. Its officers were spread over in different towns with military reservations and centres. They were spying on the intelligence service of the USA, France, England and Israel, trying to protect thousands of Soviet military specialists from their underhand plotting. The opponents were working out their plots knowing them by sight. And all of them were watched by the Syrian intelligence service, trying without success to find out who of their nationals were helping both sides.

Everything was taking its course in Leningrad. A year had passed. Then the second and third. Bogdanov followed the principles established at university and got a second higher education graduating from the Hydrometeorologic institute and passed Ph.D. Defence in geography. He also got married.

Like it or not, he returned to science again. He missed a year of interesting expeditions with his friends. His bosses said to him, "If you are a scientist, go and work in the library. Study expedition reports". That is what he did.

He was elected a Party committee secretary of the Oceanic department. He began to study this new wisdom. What is control over administration activities? Where could they get in? What could they not? How could they carry out morale building activities at a non-party boss of a laboratory? It is worth mentioning that those fifteen Communist members of the department must have been doing something right – the All-Union Scientific Practical conference "Mighty and Creative force of the socialist competition" members came to them for adopting their experience. A newspaper "Leningrad Truth" had a big article about Sergey. It was not about chemistry with its molecules and atoms and not even oceanics with its crazy formulas picturing currents...

After those fireworks of his new success outside science, Sergey Bogdanov was called into the Communist party committee of the institute and then to the district committee and offered to become an inst-

7
3

ructor of the Industrial department of the district party committee. There they told him what it was all about. They said it was a very prospective offer, he would get a flat if he didn't have one, everything would be at his feet. In a year or two, after getting some useful experience of party work, he could return to his institute, but get a better post, become a director and deliver his great competent resources of a scientific organizer.

The opportunity was freaking him out. "It's a paradise! How great!" Bogdanov was dreaming.

Everyone who was giving him advice would say the same thing, "Don't even think of missing this opportunity! Don't refuse!"

Two days later Bogdanov joined responsible officials of the district committee of the CPSU. He entered his new office in a modest rabbit fur hat and a decent Finnish black coat and was aiming to work hard and enthusiastically. In his new office there was nothing but three desks, three safes and a big portrait of Brezhnev in a wooden frame on the wall. "It is a mystery, how I can make the life of the Soviet people better in this district using just these plain things," the new appointed instructor thought.

The empty desk was reserved for him. The other two were occupied by the organizing instructor and ideologist. The three of them were supervising the same thirty different institutes and factories. To be exact, they were supervising their party organisations. Each of them was working in his own direction. For instance, the organizing instructor was in charge of the correct work of the district party organization, keeping the right percentage of workers and technical engineering personnel. Six to one! No other way! It was thanks to him that four years before there had appeared a rare and desired vacancy for the Communist party in the institute where Bogdanov worked.

That poor organizing instructor! Did anyone feel sorry for him for his dedication? Now that Bogdanov could see his colleague suffering, he understood that to compensate a vacancy for the technical engineering personnel the instructor had to look for six workers willing to join the party. If not, the most dreadful thing would have happened – the percentage between the workers, peasants and engineers, fixed from the above, would have broken. There would be a threat to the Communist party, its degradation. The party of those who had nothing to lose.

At the same university, but at the faculty of Maths and Mechanics, Vovka Spivak studied. In all their university years he had never seen his former school friends. Neither Bogdanov, nor Lisochkin. Apart from the birthday party of Ninka Smolina, when most of their form got together. He never went to building brigades. But every summer he, his wife and friends would go somewhere far in Siberia camping at big rivers, floating on a raft, climbing steep rocks.

His raft was a rubber aggregate and occupied the whole of the room in his two-bedroom flat in winter. His visitors would go round it trying not to trip over its thick ropes and metal oars. On the walls of the room hung their photos. On one of them Spivak was on the raft at the Yenisei rifts, on another he was standing knee high in red caviar in Vladivostok fish institute... There was a big photo of Vovka with a giant bear heading towards him. They were obviously living in their little world, trying to protect it from everything in town. They didn't have a TV in their flat, but they had a heap of rucksacks in the corner, they were always ready to escape from the city and go anywhere not to see or hear everything happening. He was willing to escape from his school, then university, now his work, city streets...

Once after coming back from Siberia, Vovka was walking along Nevsky Prospect. With his hair short, in his worn out jeans and a black t-shirt, he was walking carelessly along the pavement and watching people pass by. Over his shoulder hung a pair of new ski boots he had just bought. A militiaman approached him, carefully took his elbow and without a word led him down a side road, behind Gostiny Dvor.

"Shh," he whispered, "be quiet. Follow me"

"What's the matter? Where are you taking me?" Spivak was really annoyed.

"It's alright, everything is fine," the militiaman answered as though he was talking to a crazy person.

Three minutes later they were at a militia unit at the underground station "Nevsky Prospect". The sergeant unlocked the door of a small room. There was hardly anything in it, not even a window. There was just a little desk with a drawer unit in the middle of the room. On the desk there was an old black ebonite telephone. From both sides of the desk there were a chair and a stool. They came into the room.

The militiaman switched on the light, put Spivak on the stool, went around the desk and noisily threw himself on the wooden rickety chair. He had been staring at Spivak for a minute, constantly turning a matchbox around and tapping it on the desk, before he slowly pronounced, "Well... Have you stolen it, bastard?"

"What?!? I don't understand..."

"What do you not understand? Where have you got the boots from? Have you got an ID on you? How long ago were you released?"

"I haven't got any ID. I don't have to carry it with me, do I? What do the boots have to do with it? I have just bought them. I can show you..."

"So, you don't have an ID with you. That's nice..." the sergeant said softly, and he suddenly jumped up and shouted, "What's your name? Where do you live? Your address!"

At first Vovka felt abashed but he soon got himself together and calmly said his address and phone number. The militiaman started dialling the number diligently. The telephone dial was spinning and creaking like an old cart wheel. At last the nasty sound stopped.

"Why are you ringing now? No one is in," said Vovka.

"I thought so! You probably don't even have a home."

"You can ring my grandma, she will be in. She lives in Moscovskiy Prospect."

The militiaman got engaged into his favourite task – dialling the number. He looked like a good pianist, willing and eager, bending all his body over the telephone. His face looked diligent.

Someone answered the call. But after the sergeant introduced himself, the person seemed to get scared.

"So, you don't know Spivak, do you? Is that what you are saying?" the militiaman was enjoying what he was hearing. He had an inhuman smile on his face. His eyes were shining, his head was swinging like a pendulum. In his consciousness he was imagining the combination of two words "staff sergeant".

"Could you have dialled the wrong number?" Vovka sounded uncertain now.

"Could've... But I won't any more... Petrov!" he called someone. The door opened and a young lad in the uniform turned up. "What are you up to?"

"Just writing yesterday's report. Why?"

"Nothing. Take this one to the cell," he pointed at Spivak. "I will be around later and we'll get all the paperwork done."

"Are you serious? I will complain! You have no right! Give me the phone..."

Two militiamen took Vovka with his ski boots to a cell where he saw drunks and troublemakers. The sergeant and a man wearing civilian clothes came four hours later. "He must be an investigation officer," Vovka thought.

"Why did you start a fight in the militia unit, Sir? What was that for?" the one in civilian clothes asked. He was waving some papers in front of him. "We have already got a complaint!"

The investigation officer had already checked everything. He had rung Spivak's grandma, then his university, sent someone to the sports shop... He knew they had to let him go. But Spivak threatened he would complain. They didn't need all that. So they fabricated statements from holiday makers and could now open a case against a troublemaker. Of course, if the troublemaker suddenly realized it was better to forget everything that had happened, they could meet him halfway. Spivak suddenly remembered a taxi driver who told him, "Don't ever be different from the others. For instance, if I am passing the road traffic militia checkpoint, I always put my hands evenly on the steering wheel, raise the sun hood, slow down to 60 kilometres and smile as widely as I can. They could always stop and arrest me for a couple of hours. They've got the right to do so... They can also break the law or just make a mistake and send me far away. It will take them a year and a half to find out and sort out. Do I need that?"

"Deary me!" Vovka thought, "Why did I have to stand out? I will never leave the house without a passport any more! And a letter from the university. I will always wear a grey suit now. Or a stripy one, like prisoners. Damn that Nevsky and Saigon! I can get away with second-class coffee". That sort of reasoning was enough for the militiamen to understand the arrested man respected their work, so they got his signature under the statement that he had no claims and let him go.

For Spivak the feeling of freedom had never been real, so after his sufferings right in the middle of the city it became ephemeral.

Vovka was a fine and vulnerable personality. He loved "Hamlet", but only translated by Pasternak. Lozinskiy's translation wouldn't suit him. He could read Corneille in the original, knew Ciborium's mono-

logue by heart. He could declare Figaro's speech in court from Beaumarchais' in French so expressively that people could understand without translation, just by his mimic and intonation. There was no space for tolerance in him. When he was in Year 8 he expressed his attitude to the ideological idol of his country without fully realizing it, and since then he couldn't stop himself. Every time he got a chance, he would show his disregard to his teachers, fellow students, law officers and everything around him, as long as it was about ideology or trivial offence.

It didn't surprise anyone that after having worked as a computer operator for 6 years in a security institute, remembering his nationality and without any prospect in his career, he resigned. He understood he was taking a chance. That was a lot of risk for him. People who don't accept the system of the developed socialism and don't tolerate the society, soon get rejected by the community. To rise after that was almost impossible, Vovka had known that from his parents since childhood. But he still resigned.

After quitting his job, Vovka had been out of work for quite a long time. He was moonlighting with translations. He had been out of work for nearly four months now and it was getting dangerous. It was threatening him with Article 209 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, but Vovka would find an excuse for himself. He would remember the saying he saw in the newspaper "Smena", "If you suddenly feel like working, you need a rest. You'll pass through it". He would also add a folk wisdom, "Work is not a wolf, it will not run into the woods".

Gradually his energy was concentrating in one direction. He engaged himself in dissidence actively and with his eye open. He was distributing dissidence underground press, took part in demonstrations in front of the American Embassy in Moscow to support political prisoners. In his mind the words "dissident" and "human right activist" were the same. In the early eighties he would often translate articles for news-bulletin "Chronicles of Current Events".

What he was doing was "saving potential" to found reasons for the granting of refugee status. He was also waiting for five years to pass after he resigned from the security institute. He was arrested many times but then freed, he was being watched, his telephone conversations were monitored... It would cost even more to other people. They would be sacked, excluded from university, arrested, charged with

criminal offence, followed by a prison or a mental hospital. Thank God, his destiny was different...

Any act of repression towards Spivak from the regime usually caused fury and protest from his new friends, relatives, just common people affected by the unfair actions.

Among the dissidents, it was used to come and visit the flats of their friends as soon as they learnt those were going to be searched. To be present at a flat-searching was considered a gesture of solidarity, similar to the one when the three friends were going to do in Year 7 in the court room during Petka's case. Those days Spivak believed in this sort of solidarity, but not now. So he didn't really go to visit problem flats.

A dissident is a person who is constantly experimenting with his life. This is a special sort of culture – culture of social bright behaviour, culture of conduct. For instance, a dialogue between the regime and dissidents is not aimed to convince an opponent. The latest aimed just to the third party, mostly the public opinion. Mostly, the public opinion abroad. The domestic public opinion was absent at the time.

Vladimir Spivak was always questioning himself. On one hand, he knew he was the same Soviet person as everyone else, not better or worse than them. He drank the same vodka for 3.62, he hunted cheap chickens for 1.75, celebrated New Year with bananas and pineapples and listened to the same speeches. You couldn't get away from those speeches, it was only their dissident meetings that were shut down by a special radio station. But on the other hand, he was different. He was signing special petitions, after which he knew his flat would be searched. He refused to participate in Lenin's voluntary Saturday work, he knew he would be jailed any time. So, was he different? Spivak was always feeling awkward for being a dissident in front of his friends and relatives. Why? He never talked to his school friends about it and they had no idea.

In the end of 1980 Vovka found the answer to the question. The book-essay "Will the USSR last up to year 1984?" by Amalrik helped him to find the right answer. Everything he and people like him were doing was called one word, a "game". At first he was offended by the word. But a game is not just fun. Any game is a model. What did dissidents games simulate? Was it political platforms which would never gather more than just tens of followers, or plans of reforms which would never

be realized? Dissidents were playing a civil society regardless of their ideological and political orientation. They were playing the first rough and imperfect model of the society. It was the game that the fragile and unformed human mind wanted, however strange and unusual the game was. Amalrik described in a detailed and persuasive way.

Now Spivak had a goal, a purpose in life. He purely rejected that concept but he couldn't help apprehending that an idea had always existed. It could be different. Even cross-bearers were driven by the idea of planting Christianity.

When the radio station "Svoboda" mentioned Vovka Spivak's name, foreign newspaper correspondents managed to find and interview him. They were always interested in spiritual things, the origin of a dissident's personality.

"So how come you, being a person devoting your life to Maths, can sacrifice it to signing a few political letters? You are not a follower of Yesenin-Volpin by chance, are you?"

Vovka was flattered he was known as a mathematician and connected to the famous scientist and dissident.

"For me the question whether to sign or not, whether to try to do something or keep out of action is specific every single time..." Spivak said. "Sometimes a risk needs to be taken, sacrificing usual values," Vovka was saying this and thinking, "This correspondent is about to ask me about Petka Philippov. No, that one!" Then he collected himself and continued as if nothing had happened, "Sometimes I feel disgusted by the opponents if I know their words are worth nothing. Each of their statements is based on self-justification logic."

"What about Yesenin's son?"

"What about him? He lives in Boston. No, I am not acquainted with Alexander Sergeevich, but he is a famous mathematician and also graduated from the Mathematics and Mechanical department, but in Moscow. I know his latest lectures in mathematical logic. I don't think that would interest you."

"Vladimir Borisovich, have you been abroad? Are you allowed?"

"I have been to Uzhgorod, that's quite enough. It is in this country, but feels like Hungary. You must know you can't walk somewhere in Moscow and pop into a cafe for a coffee... It is possible only in one place in this country – cafe "Saigon" on the corner of Nevsky and Vladimirskiy. That's the only place. Even if you found a place it will

be shut or full up or they won't have coffee in there. Even if they have coffee, it will be second-class, from a tank. Do you know what I mean?"

The correspondents smiled foolishly and didn't know what to say. They were pleased with something. Probably pleased with the coffee they had in their country. Maybe they were just stupid. They had their questions for him, that was it.

4.

The building of the party district committee was appearing yellow on the background of high fir-trees. The light was brighter when it got dark and the spotlights were turned on. On the facade facing the prospect, to the left of the front arch door, there were about ten commemorative plaques for the victory in the socialist competition.

The ground floor was occupied by the executive committee of the district people's deputies. The party committee started from the first floor. A broad grand staircase was leading there, its marble steps covered with a long scarlet carpet, which was a gift from Moldavian communists for the October revolution jubilee. At the entrance there was a militia post. The carpet here was narrow, but the same bright colour. It was reminding everybody it was a district party committee and the happy future of the area was made up there.

Bogdanov's boss was Sokolov Vladimir Ivanovich, a tall blue-eyed man in his middle forties who always had his brown hair brushed back neatly. He was always wearing a thoroughly ironed suit but he would sometimes allow himself to put on shirts different colours, not just white. They were all pastel colours. But this little detail let everyone think he wouldn't go far and finish his career somewhere in the town executive committee.

Today they had a meeting. Bogdanov was fascinated by Sokolov's scarlet cuff links moving smoothly. With all his cells he was trying to absorb the ferments of staff work which filled the office of his new boss. Sokolov was giving instructions to his colleagues and sometimes, but not every time the phone rang, picked up the receiver. He felt when the call was important or maybe just answered the phone every third time. He also managed to sign a lot of documents prepared for him by his department. Sometimes Vladimir Ivanovich would stop

for a moment to look at the document diagonally and see if there were any wrong numbers or silly things. He just felt errors without reading documents. He could see mistakes in some wonderful way on the dark background of the insignificant text. He was the best to know what the main factors of the district were, which of them and when to show. Sure! He had been in that post for four years!

“One more thing,” the boss suddenly remembered the report they were getting ready for the plenary meeting on technical progress. “The first secretary always says, “We don’t have enough party spirit.” Try to be simple-minded. You should start each paragraph in the report with “The district party committee, party committees and party board of primary organizations...” And then carry on with your report. A second later he had a doubt about whether they understood him correctly, so he added, “Well, not every paragraph, of course...”

After the meeting they had to ring all the district plants and factories concerning the monthly plan realization. That was the most important thing in the world. Will their district complete the plan? If not then there was no sense in everything else – the first secretary’s trip to the Central Committee, collecting of “clever” data from the factories, a plenary assembly on the technical progress which no one needed, they won’t be able to report to the higher authorities on all sorts of decisions.

A month later Bogdanov’s new colleagues were certain he had got the hang of his new job. He familiarized himself to the daily proceedings and, unlike his boss, he controlled the real responsibility but not just the purpose of a document, words or a fact of presence. In a couple of days he could close a resolution, whether it was issued by the party Central Committee, region committee or town committee. He could compose a few notes about that resolution being completed in their district. The resolution looked completed. And another resolution... All of them! He could handle the data in his own clever way, and it would look smooth, like a straight line without anything sticking out. He could put the facts together so that the whole of the resolution looked completed.

At first Bogdanov was in charge of scientific organizations – universities, research institutes, design offices. But he was also often sent to the meetings at the big associations where quite complicated problems were being solved. He didn’t find it difficult to play dumb and at

the same time to be a responsible party member. He would just be present at a meeting or assembly – all that was needed from him. He wouldn't create any additional problems in any community. What is more, he could join other party committee members when they drank raw spirit watered with liquid nitrogen followed by a lump of sugar. While the sticky boiling in the air liquid with the temperature one hundred eighty degrees below zero was slowly flowing down a thin metal spoon, the content of the glass was gradually cooling down and the space around it was filled with white thick fog and the glass was getting covered with frost. It was during that dazzling spectacle that Bogdanov was toasting to the meeting being over.

Two years passed. Bogdanov got a promotion. His new post was deputy of the department. Before Bogdanov the position was held by a bulldog, who was opposite to Sokolov. He was short, with receding hair and a soundless walk in his soft shoes, never making a noise. His colleagues would call him "Lenin" behind his back, even though they knew it was rebelling. Now they would say about him, "He is a real businessman, he knows and has control over everything."

Even though he was good at business, it didn't reflect on the financial situation. Not in general, of course, but as a result of the staff activities. They only had wages and a bonus, that's if all of the district was good. There were no bribes in the party organization at any level. Even in merchandising there were no bribes, there was a barter trade of deficient goods.

Once Bogdanov decided to buy a samovar to give it to Lariska, his school friend. She was going to get married a military interpreter and they were going to fly to Cuba to earn money. At that time you could only make money if you worked somewhere really cold, like the Arctic or Antarctic, or abroad. So all people fled the country. Ninka Smolina and her husband went to Syria. Tanka Badarina and her children's author went to France. Now it was Lariska's turn. Not everyone went abroad though. Alyonka still lived in her old flat with her little son.

Bogdanov had a thought about where to get a samovar and went to his school friend who had not been interested in anything, had not had any friends, Serezhka couldn't even remember his name. He used to be an ordinary pupil. After school he entered the commercial institute named after Engels. They had not even studied commerce at school.

When Bogdanov found himself in a store room of a big shop, which was his school friend's office, he thought he had gone mad. In the corner on the scuffed floor there were all those things you could not find in any shops in the era of developed socialism – Italian women's boots, rump steak in a nice plastic bag, Tula's samovar, a Czech crystal chandelier, live ruby roses, a watermelon, some Syrian bedspreads.

All these things were expected to be collected. The electrician's department manager had small creased notes "To... from..." and bank notes in his suede jacket pockets. While Bogdanov was chatting to his friend, some people kept coming and going. But the school friend would drink cognac with every single of them. He drank without eating at all.

When Bogdanov left late at night, his school friend could hardly walk. He kept taking calls and writing notes when he got home. It went on and on.

The only question which was torturing Bogdanov was, "What can the party instructor do in this mad house, how can he supervise trade organizations?" Heaven knows. However, he didn't really attend the party meetings. His colleagues were expecting different things from him – it was his credit if they could buy cheap chicken, half a kilo of sausages and a bunch of bananas, and a tin of red caviar and a saveloy before a bank holiday.

5.

Volodka Spivak learnt quite early what was really happening around and not what they showed on the box, which the rest of his school-mates thought was right. He didn't learn it at school. Not when he was expelled from Komsomol. It happened in the institute. It happened when Vovka made a statement of himself as a bright mathematician. His father thought it was time to explain everything to him clearly. His father knew Vovka was ready to listen.

He told his son about Vovka's grandad having been a political prisoner, about himself walking to Leningrad all on his own from far away. He told him about his work, about his bosses bullying him, laying their hands on his inventions and not publishing his articles and monographs in Maths. Not philosophy or history – Maths!

Vovka didn't have any illusions about where he lived. In fact, his short life and unfortunate adventures at school and institute only ag-

gravated his forming pragmatism and amusing youth intolerance and nihilism.

His father's words had been hanging over him all his life, like a giant lamp shade with a 100-watt bulb always switched on. "We all are so used to mass lies," old Spivak said, "that we consider them not just allowable but perfectly natural and even essential supposedly to support peace. We don't think it disgraceful not to make a stand for someone found guilty unfairly. Sometimes it's a mere nothing, but we don't do it." Vovka's father paused, then he said through gritted teeth, "So we are cowardly and unprincipled. Yeah, there are many more of the living people with amputated personalities."

"We probably have to wait," Vovka continued his father's thoughts, comparing their logics. "In the end someone might drag us out of crap..."

"They might not. We have too many excuses helping to get off conscience. One person is finishing his dissertation, the second one doesn't want to let his boss down, the third is too scared to wreck his business trip abroad. The younger one thinks he is too young, the older one thinks he is too old."

Listening to this reasoning, Vovka got distracted and remembered he had also had his own behavioural logic in Year 7 and his excuse. After painful reflections he had decided that Petka Philippov was to blame. He was stupid to be caught! He should have gone in for sports and not played a violin.

Spivak got married when he was at university. He didn't marry the girl from his form who always went to the Maths lectures with him, but he married her friend Olga from the same year. She moved school in Year 8, but unlike Vovka, she got into boarding school No.45 by the university while Spivak moved to a school near his new home in Sosnovaya Poliana. She also graduated from the Mathematics and Mechanics department and was strict and self-motivated. Her main quality was she supported her husband in everything he did. Her granddad had also been a political prisoner and her parents did not actually plant any ideas of patriotism and love to Motherland in her. That having been said, they often confused the ideas of a state, its authoritarian power and a country with its people. Olga knew that and said, "What can you do? If you don't confuse these ideas, you will be confused in yourself and your own doubts, thoughts and conclusions. Even Maths is not enough for full-functioning life."

They, young, educated and impatient, wanted to live somewhere with a nice climate, mountains and the sea, where they didn't have to worry about the lack of money, pressure fall and underground peak hours. They tried to push the ideology of big glass letters on the buildings off themselves. They were sick of the insanity of the power. They could not believe it because it didn't respect its educated people. It tried to fill the life with the conclusions torn out of context and being therefore absolutely stupid, like "Marx' doctrine is almighty, therefore it is true!" In the world there are so many scientists, and one out of three of them lives in the USSR. They all took their tests in Marxist-Leninist philosophy and they must all know that as there are no absolutely indissoluble materials, then there is no absolute truth, either in humanities or in natural science...

When he was with his friends, sitting at the table or just having a coffee and talking about the future of the country, Spivak liked to tell the same anecdote, whether it was suitable for the occasion or not. It was about worms in the dung and in an orange. When the father-worm explained to his son why they were not in an orange, like the other worms were, he said, "Sonny, that's because this is our Motherland!" When Spivak was telling this joke, Olga tried to change the subject or take him away. By the late-seventies Vovka and Olga had already had two children, two daughters. The parents removed all books by Mayakovsky from their home. Books about the Soviet passport, the party, a million-fingered hand, clasped in a fist, hell of work, which was already being carried out... They removed everything to play it safe.

Chapter 3

I.

Maximum security penal colony UT No.189/33 was located in the Ural taiga, two hundred kilometres from Perm on the railway from Nizhniy Tagil to Perm. The camp had a territory of approximately five hundred to five hundred metres, surrounded by the woods, with an alarmed razor wired fence.

An officer on duty occupied a booth over the camp. In colonies like this there were usually not so many prisoners, about seventy or eighty. At the same time, in No.6, which was a penal colony, located just a few hundred metres away from No.189/33, there were about two thousand prisoners.

From the camp outside Leningrad Spivak was transferred to Perm, but not to “Perm-33” as he was supposed to under sentence – to No.6. The local administration must have thought he was transferred to another camp under article 209. His documents under article 190-1 had not been delivered to the special unit. No one knew that Spivak, a buster and evil, loved “Hamlet” and was crazy about the underworld language of Francois Villon, the main bandit and last poet of French Middle Ages.

It happens sometimes. He wouldn't shout about it.

The whole group of people under arrest, where Vladimir belonged to, was sent for an isolation period. Officially prisoners adapt there to the camp conditions. He knew that from the last camp where he had spent two months. For twelve to seventeen days that the newcomers stay in isolation, the staff are meant to shave their hair, wash them, give them work clothes, test and introduce them to the colony. But this only happens on paper.

Vovka realized something was wrong when one of the security guards said they had bad luck and that was the end of the game. “What

do you mean – bad luck?” Vovka thought. But he couldn’t ask security guards questions.

He didn’t have to wait long. As soon as he entered the territory of the camp, he was showered with a hail of blows. He started running, followed by kicks and blows, until he got to a room for isolation period. He could feel how scared everyone was, including himself. Two prisoners were taken somewhere upstairs. Four people were standing at the wall, with their arms and legs apart. An officer was hitting them with a baton trying to make them spread their legs. He asked, “Are there any reds?” Two of them said, “Yes,” and were taken away. The other two stayed, Vovka and another man who he didn’t remember. Where did he come from? He looked like a Kirghiz, small and skinny. The tension was growing. Another question was asked, “Are there any offended?” The other prisoner also left. Spivak was left alone and understood that was the end of him. Someone said, “Looks like you are a greyhound.” He didn’t know what it meant so he kept silent. He was hit again and taken to another room. He was feeling like a scared animal when he had to run between the two rows of officers, hit by batons and kicked hard. When he was kicked on his leg he fell but could feel blows continue. He heard someone’s furious voice, “Get up, scum bag!” Struggling to get up, he moved to the end of the corridor.

He could hear someone’s cry of despair from the room he was being pushed in. When he was about to run into the room he noticed someone’s body in blood lying near the door. Inside all of the newcomers were squatting on the floor of the room, which was three by three metres, with scuffed brick walls.

The officers would take each of them by the scuff of the neck and lead him to the table covered with a red cloth. On the tablecloth there were paper forms which the prisoners needed to sign. Vovka saw the officers beat up one of the prisoners in the corner of the room. They were not just beating him up, they were stamping on him, because he refused to sign the form. After a long procedure of agreement the poor bloke was carried out. Now it was Spivak’s turn.

Vovka was thinking of signing it unwittingly but he knew that would be the end of his dissident career. When he was led to the table he took the three pieces of paper and crumpled them up proudly and threw them on the floor. Spivak followed the papers in the nick of time. The blows on his head were so strong he thought they had a hammer. Vovka lost consciousness.

He woke up in a concrete crypt with a small light bulb on the ceiling behind a railing and water on the floor. Having seen him move, the officers of the isolation room picked him up and started beating him up again methodically. Their calm worsened the situation. It was not an outrage of feelings, it was their everyday work, like painting a wall with a lunch break.

Vovka was feeling “personality amputation” his father had told him about. It felt like being dragged face down on the rubble and losing his own features. He could notice it after being on his own for a long time. He couldn’t go for a walk, they fed him every other day, the light bulb was so dull he couldn’t see anything. He didn’t get any warm clothes. In the corner of the cell there was a stinking piss-hole. The door was bright blue for some reason.

The first forty eight hours Vovka could differ day from night. In the day time he would walk back and forth and at night he tried to sleep. But the monotony, cold and hunger took their course, added by bad headaches after beating up. His muscles shrunk and didn’t stretch after bad injuries. He had lumps the size of eggs on his back and shoulders. Without moving his body the lumps collected liquid in them. They were growing and hurting. He knew he had to move his arms and legs intensively to rid of the liquid and lessen the lumps. As a result, it hurt less and he didn’t feel so cold. Now he could take a nap for fifteen to twenty minutes. Then he would jump up of the pain and start running for forty minutes and wave his arms. It did hurt! After that he would doze off on the floor pushing his back against the wall for a quarter of an hour... The feeling of reality was gradually disappearing. His body stiffened. Spivak was slowly turning into an inanimate object, his body was hurting and all he felt was a dull, sharp, dragging pain.

Vovka had been kept in the cement crypt first for five days, then another week. Then longer... He would fall into oblivion, jump up, run, lose himself... Sometimes he found it difficult to realize whose body was lying just in front of his eyes on the cement floor. He couldn’t control his body. His thoughts didn’t obey him – they came and went away. When he was beaten up, he felt better. If he felt a sharp pain from an officer’s boot he was happy – firstly, the pain will not remain, it will go gradually, secondly, the pain witnessed him being still alive. It meant nothing less than the papers still not signed.

The blood stains on the grey knobbly walls, which he had been watching for many days, were gradually fusing into one whole thing. Like in a cartoon about a magic artist, he could see some faces, objects in them. In his imagination they could talk to each other, bragging their hats or long beards, picking giants buckets full of grapes from the floor... That one, with rich hair and a long nose like Cyrano de Bergerac's, picked him up, put him across his shoulder and carried him somewhere... Spivak quietly whispered to him, "Leave it..." But the man just waved his sword, laughed and... stayed where he was. "No, that's Bogdanov in a musketeer's robe and a hat... How did I not recognize him? He's got the same nose... No, not really... But he looks like him. And in the corner there someone is lying flattened... in the robe...the robe is waving in the breeze... and his profile... identical to Yurka! Aramis!"

"Why are you here?" Spivak uttered instinctively... There was no answer. He said loudly, "Why are you here?" He paused and answered to himself, "So, Porthos is still not with them."

Vovka was looking and chatting to them for a long time. He was talking to them as Athos, then as Vovka Spivak. He asked them about their school mates and the queen, Alyonka Livanova and the revolution in Cuba. He thought they talked to him. He even argued with them.

"Anyway, where is Porthos?" Spivak thought again. He sniffed the wall and felt it with his fingers. He tried to look at it at different angles. Nothing! He nearly got disappointed in his hopeless search when he noticed a new face right in front of him, with long hair, without a hat or a cloak and a small frame. Not anything like a musketeer. However, there was something peculiar and even familiar in his face. Vovka tried to ask him questions... There was no answer. The wall seemed to have frowned and kept silence. Then it suddenly began to fall on him... Vovka screamed... There was no shout to be heard. He had lost his voice and he didn't even realize that. He was calling for help...

"This little one... Is he Philya? Petka Philippov," it flashed in his eyes as if he had connected two electric wires. He didn't think it was not Porthos and that little one had been quiet before and had not talked with the other wall's dwellers. Vovka suddenly felt it was a pay-off. Just in time...

"One for all," Petka Philippov's shadow whispered slowly and intensely. Bogdanov was silent and Lisochkin stayed where he was, but

he uttered, "I didn't push Vasilyich, I did not. He fell out himself..." Spivak was lying in a dirty puddle, wet and aching, and staring at the image of Philya over the piss-hole. He could clearly see Philip-pov's lips moving, his eyes raising and sparkling...

He didn't know the sparkles came from the dull light bulb, they slipped down the droplets of water on the wall, which were going to fall into a big dirty puddle on the cement floor of the solitary.

Vovka broke down. When they presented him with the paper form next time, he signed it.

In spite of getting his signature, they didn't let him into the camp. He had to spend another week in the cell full of water, wearing just his pants. After that he was moved into a dry cell, but he didn't get any clothes. Only on his third week in prison did he get some dirty work clothes. That way the remains of human spirit were knocked out.

"What's the difference?" Spivak asked himself. Should he have signed that damned paper straight away, he wouldn't have suffered the hell of the concrete cell. On the other hand, he wouldn't have come through the hell. Now he knew what it was. He now knew what was the hell and what was a trifle.

Submariners always descent under the water and execute command "Look around compartments!" To know how much you can take is a universal way for the willing to survive. Having ticked all boxes of the psychological tests of the isolation period, Spivak entered the camp at last.

2.

That day didn't start well for Bogdanov. Early in the morning he was woken up by the telephone. Alyonka was on the other end. He hadn't seen her for about ten years. She was ringing from Vladivostok, he could hardly hear her. He just understood she had got married. The conversation was cut off. After that crazy unexpected phone call his thoughts got confused. "Why did she ring?" Serega thought. "If it was one of the medallists, I could understand, they can't help competing. They get a kick out of it. What does it have to do with me? I was her friend, I really liked her eye lashes. I still do. But what does Vladivostok have to do with it?" He knew something had hap-

pened but he didn't know what. This thought was bothering him. What made it even worse was he was annoyed and dissatisfied with himself after the stupid calls to all district organizations.

At ten all the staff were called into the assembly room. Without any introduction, the assistant secretary began to announce addresses for visits. "What visits? Don't we have enough letters to answer? Every single one of us has about twenty of them. They are all urgent and need attendance," Sokolov whispered loudly enough to be heard. He was worried about the report at the plenary meeting and couldn't imagine all of his instructors and his assistant going somewhere today.

Two days a week they all turned up to work at twelve. Each of them was supervising the building of two nine-storeyed blocks of flats in a new district. In autumn they would wear wellington boots, with their trousers turned up and carrying their clean boots over their shoulders. Their job was to supervise engineers and technicians collecting the carrot crop in their sponsored farms. In spring they would watch them break the ice in the roads and pavements just before the first secretary of the region party committee turned up.

The assistant secretary was stating the task with his monotonous voice. He was crossing out of the table what he had just said punctually. It was about who needed to go where to carry the information to the people.

They had to go to fifteen flats in their district to inform the people about their relatives' death. A plane had a crash outside Leningrad. They couldn't announce it on TV. Then it would have been a published event. So the men had to deliver the news.

It happens all the time. If something doesn't fit standard, something unexpected happens, the district committee is to blame. It means they didn't take everything into account. Ready, set, go!

At the first address where Bogdanov came no one was in. He thought he was lucky and he went to the next address. When he rang the bell, a short middle-aged man opened the door. It was only mid-day but the man was already tipsy. Bogdanov could hear voices from the flat. Several people were sitting at the table having a drink. It was some sort of celebration, they had more bottles than plates on the table.

Sergey called the man, who opened the door, into the kitchen. In there two women were cooking something. Bogdanov could hear someone's voice, "Where have you gone? Come here! Who is that? It must

be the new dad. At last!" But the man could see it was not the new dad.

"What do you want, lad?"

"I am from the district party committee..."

"So? You want to have a drink with us?"

"Hang on. I was sent to you..."

"It's not election time, is it?"

"Does Pyotr Vasilyich Lozhkin live here? I mean, he died today."

The man fell silent. In his head one event was overlapping the other. Celebration and the arrival of that one...

"What are you talking about? What the hell... Where is Petka?"

"His plane had a crash this morning outside Leningrad." Trying to prove he was telling the truth, Bogdanov poked his party committee ticket into his face. "I told you, I am from the district party committee."

Sergey suddenly thought, "So, if I am from the district committee, they should believe in the death of their relative, but if it was from the Council of the people's deputies they wouldn't believe, not in a million years. No, I think any certificate will work here. This is how it works."

"Hang on! Who do you think you are to tell us this?" the man shouted. "Katya, Lena, come here! Quick!! The two young women came up to them and Bogdanov had to repeat everything again. Only now three pairs of eyes were staring at him.

"Here's the phone number you can call. They will answer your questions. Now, excuse me, I've got to go," Sergey mumbled.

The instructor saw his listeners eye lose their joy, then puzzlement. They became scared, faithless and aggressive. The bloke went around Sergey and blocked the front door.

"No, wait a second! I don't get it... What's happening now? You've got to tell us what, why, where we've got to go. You tell THEM," the man pointed at the people sitting at the table. They must have been the parents and young wife of the dead. "I don't need your card. Do you think you can do it just because you're wearing a tie? You came here, dumped a load and now you're going to run!" The man was pushing Bogdanov inside the room with his belly, then snatched his card from him and threw it on the bed. "Klava, look what they are doing! Just look!" the man shouted and pointed at the party card lying on the pillow. "Going around and destroying people's lives."

“Shut up,” the elderly man said quietly and with a menace in his voice. He must have been the father of the dead. “Klava, calm him down.” He lifted himself up, got the card from the bed and headed for Bogdanov. He stopped in front of him and looked at his face without blinking. The old man’s eyes were getting more and more narrow and his low lip was slowly pushing itself against the upper lip. Occasionally he would turn his head to look at the elderly woman, who must have been his wife. She was making a fuss trying to get up and she dropped a couple of bottles on the floor. Next to her there stood Klava. She was howling and screaming.

“Uncle Vasya! Uncle Vasya! Don’t listen to him! They are swines!” she started howling again and waving her fists as if fighting evil spirits. “Auntie Klava. Don’t listen to him. They are scum bags...” she didn’t even look at Bogdanov but was still waving her arms. The old man was holding the lapel of his blazer covered with a stock with medals and orders with his left hand and he was holding Bogdanov’s card with his right hand. Sergey was expecting him to hit him. With the card. It was better to get a blow than to watch them... Bogdanov was thinking who he looked like at the moment, he just shrank into himself instinctively.

“Go away, lad,” the old man said sharply. He pointed at the door. “You don’t even understand how much damage you’ve done. You just came here and...” The man shook his head and waved his hand strongly. “Just go. I don’t know who you are and I don’t want to know. I don’t even understand how people can do it... This is not the way to do it!”

Sergey turned to the front door. There was no sense in saying anything. “Damn!” he remembered about his card. At that very moment the first man kicked him out of the flat. “Go away, scum bag in a tie! We’ll know everything without your help. They will show it on the box. It might be all wrong. Sending the scum bags – it’s out of order!”

Sergey ran down the stairs from the fourth floor and stood downstairs, shaken up. This job looked like a hangman’s. People look at you like you are a hangman. Of course, they do. There was a person and you come and say he has died. It looks you are to blame. Like a postman in the wartime, when he would deliver a death notice. At least a postman had a letter, he had nothing, just words. Those days everyone had the same grief and many saw others being brought dreadful news. Why is it the district party committee? Why not deputies? They

had been elected so they were known at least. It is easier with Afghanistan. People from the military commissariat deal with that. They were the ones to draft, they are the ones to return. But here... It looks like it is the party's fault if the party members visit families and tell them the dreadful news. How can he get his card back? He will be in trouble without it!

The window on the forth floor opened and his card fell on the snow right in front of Sergey. In the last address there was an old woman, the mother of the dead. As soon as she saw Bogdanov in the doorway, crumpling his hat and going to say something, the woman froze on the spot and a few seconds later she started crying quietly.

"I knew, I felt something happened. I couldn't sleep all night. What's the matter with Igoryok? Where is he? Something wrong with the plane?"

Sergey was silent, he lowered his head and thought it was silly to say he was from the party committee. His unexpected visit coincided with what the woman had dreamed of last night. She didn't need anything else. The woman was standing at the doorway and crying. Her next door neighbour peeped out of his door. He was a middle-aged man with long red hair. He looked around, watched the crying woman, then Bogdanov and shut his door.

"He is going to call the militia," Sergey thought, and he had no document of the catastrophe. They could say he was frightening people. The militia men liked to arrest people with cards and certificates, especially if someone was waving with them.

Suddenly the woman turned around and went into a room. She took a black knitted scarf and covered the mirror in the hallway with it. She looked around indifferently at the self-made radio on the window sill, the photo of her son and daughter-in-law on the chest of drawers. She came back and took the scarf from the mirror. Then she sat on the chair and without a word took the kettle, filled two cups with hot water, moved a little glass vase with three chocolates "Bear in the North" into the middle of the table and said quietly, "Sit with me".

Sergey took his hat off, sat on the edge of the chair and drank the boiling water which burnt his lips. They had been sitting like this for half an hour. The militia did not turn up. "Do you know for sure what happened to Igoryok? Did you see it? It might be alright after all," the woman said quickly.

The woman told him that in the early thirties her husband, an engineer, was arrested, and she survived on her own during the siege of Leningrad and after the war, in the fifties, she adopted a boy from an orphanage...

"This is it, isn't it?"

Sergey closed his eyes and nodded.

After such visits Bogdanov didn't feel like thinking about factories developing, party work perfection or executing the decisions of the Central Committee plenum. By the evening everybody had returned to the district committee. No one asked them how they felt or how the people they had visited felt. No one needed reports about the work done. They knew one of the instructors of the Organizing Committee was taken into hospital; the relatives of the dead were all right, but she was not. Another instructor was nearly arrested but he managed to cope.

The work day continued.

An elderly woman with grey smooth hair, in thin-framed glasses and a small brief-case on her lap had been sitting on a chair in the corridor of the district party committee. She was a professor, a doctor of science and a party member. She was waiting for the person in charge for her speech at the plenum. Bogdanov was a PhD in geography, so he was in charge of all scientists speeches.

Sergey hastily opened the door, greeted the woman and apologized for being late. He let her come in and sit down. He took her typewritten speech. For her it was a usual procedure, it was always better if someone from the district committee would look through her speech, it was safer. "I have mentioned Brezhnev in the beginning, named all his posts," the professor said.

"Oh, yes, thank you," Bogdanov mumbled, realizing how silly it was to thank her. He saw Brezhnev being mentioned only once and he tensed up. His name needed to be mentioned twice. At the beginning and at the end of the speech. The regalia had to be mentioned once. Still...

Sergey knew the most skilful experts in the town committee managed to mention Brezhnev three times in a five-minute speech. They did it so cleverly, no one even noticed it. That's how good the text was. They didn't just say, "As the General Secretary, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev

said..." followed by what he said. No, they did it skilfully and elegantly. First they would say what was needed, then "This is how the party and its general secretary teach us..." It sounded soft and subtle, as if those were not his words. The rest of the speech usually didn't interest anyone.

"That's a big error," Sergey thought, "I won't be able to get away with it later."

The assistant manager was sitting at his table and looking at the known scientist. She was talking about science, her institute, her speech... He could hardly hear her. His head was full of today's visits to people's homes, all that nonsense of the staff and ideological subterfuges. And why did Alyonka ring? He had spent all the reserves of his mind to struggle with negative emotions. His feelings were beginning to come out, he was finding it difficult to hold them inside.

To tell the elderly woman the rules of behaviour at the plenum, all tricks and dodgy games of "organizers" and "ideologists" was absurd and shameful. Especially when she looked like the woman he had recently been sitting and silently drinking "tea" with.

3.

The criminal mode in the camp looked formalized, tough and die-hard. Even though it was an integral component of the cultural community called "the Soviet people", it differed from what that phrase really meant.

The highest level after the administration was the "thieves", that is to say any criminals of the great rate, not only the people who committed theft, but also bandits, robbers and murderers. They didn't work. They were the guardians of the thievish law. The next level was "blokes", which were accidental criminals working both for themselves and "thieves". The lowest level was "chushok", or the offended, a group of slaves, outlaws and the rejected. It was a group of cowards, jerks or very intellectual people, it was also a group of criminals who got into the camp for sexual crimes, but anyone could find themselves in the lowest level for a serious offence of the thievish morality. "Chushoks" were subject to any humiliation, bullying and beating up. As slaves, they had to serve "thieves", rolling over for them. A "chushok" is obedient

and invisible like a ghost, covered with bruises, pale, with eyes full of terror. There were more and more of them. The camp life marked them. Inside their own group they immediately imitated the same system of the camp hierarchy – its own “thieves”, “blokes” and “chushoks”...

All three categories of prisoners were different not only in their behaviour and rights. They wore different clothes. God forbid to mix up! If a “bloke” put on black clothes and heeled shoes instead of blue work clothes, a “militia man” would turn up straight away and, as it happened in Nevsky, plant a matchbox and think what to do with you. There would be hell to pay. The rules were severe. All sorts of penalties had been thought of before. The simplest and dumbest was status punishment. They would change your clothes, shoes and colour. You would have to wear grey rags and become a “chushok”. This sort of punishment would be both economical and political.

In general, prisoners tried to roughly create what they had lost – a model of the society they were withdrawn from. Their society of course didn’t invent a bike and didn’t think of the model of laws. It just copied the relations respected or dishonoured, but acknowledged in free life. They did it in a tough way in prison, though.

In his first camp outside Leningrad, Spivak was really lucky. Being known as intelligent, he was taken to work in the library. They didn’t beat anyone up there. He could meditate there. Why did the power in prison belong to “thieves”? The answer was clear and, what was more important, pleasant to Spivak – because they are all united and tied by the same tough discipline and thievish law. The further conclusion suggested them copying the ruling party with its hierarchic structure, its discipline and code, with the rights and duties resulted from the membership. That’s right. In his reasoning, under-age godfathers-to-be, were some kind of Komsomol, talent foundry. “Blokes” must work hard. They had to pay tax. After they had done so, they could live with confidence, no one would hurt them and even if someone did they could seek for help from “thieves” as authority...

It is worth mentioning that “thieves” had their own simple ideology. If a “thief” took some clobber or a parcel from a “bloke”, it was considered right. This is how it should be. However, if he also took his bread ration, he could be transferred into “chushoks” for this. The way of existence in a prison was explained simply as “Everyone steals”. According to all accounts, the society is founded on theft and through

good connections. So Spivak was right here. If you need help you had to crawl to them. To the “thieves”.

For some reason Spivak imagined the girls in his form crying if they got a “four”. They got really nervous in Year 1 when the teacher handed out their workbooks. In any subject, whether it was Arithmetic or Writing. If the teacher had not attached a foil star to the workbook, that was it! The end of the world. He was feeling sorry and bitter towards them, not to himself, being beaten up, covered in bruises.

“What’s it to you, Vovka?” he could hear his inner voice. “They will not live here, will they? They moved away long ago. Some to Cuba, some to France, some to Syria. Even Marinka, who was noticed by no one, married an Englishman. That is how knowledge of a foreign language helped. Luckily there were not many schools like his. Their parents were right when they didn’t want their off-springs to go to that school, “They will leave for a foreign land, they will!” They did indeed. Only you, idiot, are here...”

There were exactly six barracks in No.6. The relationship between them was settled by the Supervisor. If it hadn’t been, the barracks would have looked like separate con clans and not one whole criminal machine. As a rule, the leader was the most strong-willed and respected prisoner. You could recognize such people straight away. It was the fairest prisoner who had passed true life tests. His word had authority with everyone. It was him who drew a line in the most complicated problems in the camp, whether it was with a godfather or ordinary prisoners. He even dealt with the camp administration. Especially if the staff “found” drugs or prohibited items in the parcels too often.

For instance, a week ago the morning check-up lasted too long. The newcomers, who had recently passed the isolation period, broke the fence and without command went into the barrack. After that incident, at the meeting it was decided the supervisor would punish the isolation superintendent, who had not taught the newcomers the right things to do, had not found out who was a decent person, who was red or offended, had allowed absolute idiots to go into the camp. What was he given three weeks for? Now he was questioned. They did punish him but didn’t decide who to substitute him with. So the administration could do whatever they wanted in the isolation zone. There was no fair control!

When Spivak found out about that, he understood what the guard meant. That was it. Shift changes. Going from the isolation zone into the camp didn't mean coming home. It was a loyalty test, its existence laws. As it was Spivak's first sentence, everyone was trying to check how strong he was. Troublemakers started. They would provoke him for an argument, ask him tricky questions and would want conventional answers. One prisoner politely tried to make him wash his clothes, another wanted him to make his bunk-bed, one more asked him to swap places. All this was followed by being beaten up, which was called "registration". It was assumed, however, the beating was light, without leaning on the bunk-bed. The barrack supervisor normally didn't interfere but was always watching that important thing. Because it was easy to kick someone leaning on something, even an idiot could do that. The group leader was not an enemy to himself, even though he was the staff. He was meant to explain how harmful smoking and drinking were and how to avoid outrageous behaviour. In fact, he only did paper work for conditional early release, because he loved to do it for money.

This straightforward line of events was gradually turning into the geometrical progression, which was leading Vovka to the most saint place in the camp – a medical unit. Of course, if he was dying and doing everything according to the rules, he would be looked after by the quarantine, group and isolation ward supervisors. He was only asked to do their washing and he got wound up and was rude to them. That was not right. He had to preserve an equal mind. Patience was something that Spivak lacked in his life. He was too sensitive and proud. Prison was a place for those who had no facial expression and could sow gloves every day and manage to specify their own pattern, even if it was tiny... Spivak was not like that. Even his monologue of Figaro from Bomarshe could be understood without any translation, just by his mimics and intonation. These kinds of people wouldn't survive. Other people were consistent and it saved them, as well as being resistant to the dull and monotonous way of life.

Spivak, bruised, with a broken rib and collarbone and missing upper front teeth and his neck cut, was put into the medical unit at last. You had to try really hard to get there. Sometimes a weak prisoner had to swallow some repellent stuff to be taken out from his brigade in the camp, even for a couple of days.

Vovka was lying on a white sheet without moving. But the sheet was gradually becoming reddish brown from his blood stains. It was extremely painful to move, even though he had not been beaten for five hours. He was staring at the ceiling, at the white painted metal mounts and couldn't believe it. He didn't believe the reality. "They want to hang me. On those mounts... That's it! This one wants to hang me," Spivak thought when a nurse came in. He instinctively cringed. The sharp pain stabbed his stomach, then it went in his side and died.

The nurse, a macho in a robe of odd colour, was holding a wet cloth dripping with stinky yellow liquid. He took three tablets out of his pocket and put them on the bedside cabinet, then he put the cloth on Spivak's throat near his collarbone. The sticky liquid flowed all over his body.

"What's this for? It won't help the rib or the collarbone," Spivak thought when the sharp carbolic smell filled the room. When he realized he could still think straight, he got really happy.

He remembered his childhood, his first stay in a hospital after he got food poisoning from mushrooms. He was then given a little plate with sugar and a lump of butter. He didn't know he would need them for his tea and bread, so he thought that was his breakfast and forced himself to eat them. Unforgettable experience... At that very time his schoolmates were visiting a dentist and waiting for their turn...

Now he would crawl on the floor to see a dentist, as long as there was one. "Where is that one?" Vovka was terrified of the nurse. "He must be waiting somewhere here... Waiting for me to drop off... Where's he?" There was no one around. Spivak was looking around but couldn't see anyone. He was lying motionlessly on his medical bed, alone in the cell.

Vovka Spivak relaxed and tears appeared in his eyes. My god! Is it the price of justice? He had no other thoughts. For the last few months his life had changed so much and now it was breaking his nature, planting new values and motivation, strengthening fresh reflex. No, his intolerance had not disappeared. It was still feeding his behaviour. Only now this feeling was deeply hidden. Even the tears in his eyes didn't fall down his hollow cheeks but stayed where they were. Some new unknown powerful force was resisting the gravity and didn't let them go down.

A moment later the nurse came back. Now he had a man with him. The man was small, crooked, with his grey face all puckered up, he

was very ill and had difficulty climbing on his bed. With a moan, he lay down clumsily on his side, his back to Spivak. Two prisoners who helped the nurse with the man, put a bottle with a label "Stolichnaya vodka" and two pieces of processed cheese on his bedside cabinet.

"Petro Ignatyich, here's some... whatsit... broth for you. It's the chicken broth, no fat," the prisoners babbled. "Tomorrow we'll get you some more. Whatever you need, we'll find it. Maybe, some medicine for your stomach..."

The young supervisor was quietly standing at some distance, looking indifferently at all the fuss.

"Ok, all right," the patient said, then he turned to the tall bald man with his arms and neck covered with tattoos and added, "You can go now, I'll be fine. Any problems – come and see me straight away! Don't think I am ill. I will be fine in a couple of days, I know."

The nurse gave him an injection. Everyone disappeared. The man screwed up his face, groaned and calmed down. A moment later he was snoring. Spivak was lying without moving. He didn't look around and he didn't see anyone. He didn't have any thoughts. It was silent calmness of an alive creature being awake.

Now the medical unit supervisor came in. Everyone knew him. He was the favourite person of all people and times. His nickname was "Stalin". He crinkled his face from the smell of Vovka's cloth, then he examined his neighbour's bed, tucked the blanket and put some ampoules into the bedside cabinet. When leaving, he looked at Spivak, saw his opened eyes, stopped and said, "Watch out, you, so-and-so! Don't you dare! I can move you to another cell and won't give you aspirin. You've been lucky so far. If something is wrong with him, give us a shout immediately. Understand?"

Vovka sighed deeply twice, as they do in the army line before the treble plangent "Hooray!", pulled his face painfully and quietly, as if he was dying, breathed out, "Yeah..."

He was still lying on his back and didn't have a clue that the snoring man lying next to him could easily change his life at a glance. For better or for worse. Vovka knew the fundamentals of the prison hierarchy but he couldn't even imagine the man lying next to him was the prison camp supervisor.

That was the head prisoner in the camp. Not a godfather, no! Godfathers feel at home out of prison. In prison he was the main person.

He was the most respectable person, that's for sure. Everyone knew about his life in No.6 and was reciting it. Spivak didn't have time to learn anything of his life. When you are being beaten all the time, you don't have a chance to absorb any other information apart from the thoughts of escaping from a blow.

Petro Ignatyich, as other prisoners called him, got into the camp in Chusovaya seven years ago. No one knew what for. Or where from. Had he been in prison before? Had he been moved here from another camp? They didn't know anything. He didn't have the wrong tail following him. The staff didn't gossip about his past. There was enough of his own authority.

Everyone knew that while on the isolation period he had not just been beaten up, they had tried to kill him. Because according to his file he was severe negative, which meant he would not confess anything or betray anyone. He was suffering down to the limit and knew he could go to the extreme measures only as a last resort. So when he could not realize where he was and what was happening to him, and his ears, nose and mouth were bleeding heavily, his intuition suggested that that was the moment. The future leader of No.6 felt the hidden razor with his tongue, ran to the window and jumped out. He smashed the glass and fell on the ground. All his body was cut through with the shards of glass, but he jumped up and cut the veins on his both hands. The staff of the quarantine didn't care about him but they didn't want to take responsibility for his death. So they stopped his beatings, stitched up his wounds and carried him to the medical unit on the stretcher. It was in the medical unit that they found out he had a gastric ulcer, which would now and again burst, become infected, inflame and turn into other things incompatible with life in general and especially in the camp in Chusovaya.

But this withy shrunk man survived. He survived in any conditions. His patience and self-consistence founded in his childhood had always saved him and later made other people respect him everywhere, in No.6, earlier in Nizhniy Tagil and before that in Rostov camp, No.12, as well as in the juvenile camp outside Leningrad.

In an hour a morning formation was starting. But it had nothing to do with those two. They were quietly lying on their beds. One was lying crooked and sleeping. The other was staring at the ceiling and waiting for something...

After having worked for three years, Bogdanov became aware that everything around him in the staff community was his unfriendly environment and everyone around him were almost his enemies. Not a single person would come and say, "Serega, here's the text for your report," or "Take new figures on the factories, mate"... No one would rush to run messages with him, even if their name was in the list of providers. Any person would soon realize that the person responsible for any problem would be the one whose name was first in the list, the rest of them were there just for convenience.

He could expect only the worst from everyone. He expected another letter from a caller, another complaint from neighbours, competition from his colleague, a lot of work from his boss, loads of mistakes from the secretary of the party organization and a letter from the district KGB about him preventing counter intelligence measures from the company directors.

So the first things formed in Bogdanov's mind were subtle senses of danger and ability to feel it by the slightest shades of people's behaviour, their mimics, smells and sounds, everything that could move and change. And the main thing was not to interfere and cross the street the other way.

"Don't stand out!" Sokolov would shout at the slow-witted newcomers. "Don't ever stick out! If you make a mistake, you've got to become "transparent" immediately! Otherwise it's being "impudent". Well, who are you?" the boss would ask, imitating Chapayev. You are not a communist leader, just an instructor. You have no power. You can not order or decide anything. You can only advise or control. Advise and control, nothing else. But do you know what the amusing thing is? What the mystery and joy of our existence is? The mystery is that this very power is born out of nothing as soon as your paper is signed by someone who has this power. This is the moment of truth! And another question is whether you will be able to keep your human qualities when you are in this environment or not.

To be able to understand that, it took people different amounts of time. Some were taking their time, some were quick. Retardation was compensated quickly – the person was fired quickly, like a cork out of a bottle of champagne. The responsible people from the Organizing

department would hold it with their hands to reduce the sound of it, they didn't want their personnel mistakes to be identified. But the unpleasant and muffled pop would remain in the memory of those who was nearby.

Who, when and what will become? It is known almost immediately. Not to everyone, to the authorities. It depends on the set of personal qualities, biography and lack of records. Take Sokolov, for instance. He could have become the member of the Political Bureau. But he is wearing the wrong shirts.

"Clearness is worth everything," the boss used to say because nearly everyone always wanted to know everything about everyone and about yourself. "At the moment you shouldn't know anything about it!" Sokolov used to say, finalizing the subject about the future. "Apart from the fact that you shouldn't know anything!" He liked to quote Weiss – Belov from the film "The Shield and the Sword".

Not to have screw ups, you shouldn't fuss but should fulfil an assignment, just what was requested, at any post. You get a new post only to realize the idea of "distribution". Wherever the "distribution" took place, it was important to become "isotropic", which meant being versatile and quick to learn. Then you could be built in the complicated configuration of the next level of the hierarchy line.

In each step of your growth there are ever present ideological and organizational departments. They record and analyse your actions and mistakes, display anything unusual and strange. Their job doesn't look difficult, but how can you guess, for instance, how wide a black mourning ribbon on a crystal chandelier should be, or how small the white letters on a red billboard can be. A narrow ribbon shows disrespect towards an eminent figure. Even if he is not outstanding, but just eminent. It doesn't matter! Letters which are too small are a nightmare. They mean disrespect because no one would be able to read them, they mean indirect acknowledgement of the communist party leadership lack, they also mean detraction of the latest Plenary session decrees.

Later Bogdanov would understand that all this seemliness works only in the centre. How it works in provinces, he had not seen or even guessed yet.

In the gigantic live system called State its own game was being played. An outstanding figure had left, a new one, being just eminent, had appeared. The new one started with the discipline, particularly with the party enrolment into the KGB. As it happened ages ago, after Lenin's death, communists from towns, from factories were sent to the countryside.

They sent a job quota to district committees. They were taking Bogdanov. Firstly, because he was an assistant manager. It was more difficult to find someone from another level, they would have to look for a post in apparatus relevant to the job list. Secondly, he was an MPhil, and his first speciality was connected with nuclear science and radiochemistry. What was more, he knew a foreign language.

But as it always happens, there is always a weak point in security ministries, when one little thing can change everything.

"Do you agree to come and work for us?" a chubby man in the uniform with shoulder boards asked Bogdanov.

"Yes! Of course! It's a great honour and... trust."

"Do you realize it's a different type of work and you'll have to learn?"

"Yes, I understand. I am ready!"

"How is your health?"

"Yes!.. I mean, it's fine..."

The general lifted his eyes at last and looked closely at the member of the district committee, then at the Captain who was standing next to him and said, "Show him the way to our doctors."

One of Serega's eyes was a little bit weaker than the other. Just a bit, half a dioptre. But it must have been the eye he needed to aim. That was it! All the plans for jobs and posts cracked. They had to send a request to Moscow asking if they could break the instruction on the eyes of their future agents.

While they were sending a request and waiting for the answer, life couldn't wait. Bogdanov was sent on a duty journey. To Afghanistan. As a Counsellor party assistant. It was a three-month trip. Three weeks training in Moscow and two months in Afghanistan. In Kabul the authority was not too soft. The mushaver-advisers held an interview with him, instructed him, explained the safety rules. In the Central Committee of the People's Democratic party of Afghanistan, Sergey was

introduced to his boss, a former first secretary of a Moscow district committee and shown the documents. He was handed a “kalashnikov”, a “makarov”, loads of propaganda literature in Russian. And, of course, they set high-priority tasks...

Then they put him, his boss and his luggage into an air stream propeller and two or three hours later they were in a local airport thirty kilometres from Kandahar. In the outskirts of that town they were supposed to spend two whole months in one of the houses.

Mujahidins were hardly at war there, they just wasted American money. In the day they would work in the fields, raising the earth around poppy flowers, and at night they would start shooting. Sometimes they would shoot in the day, but not spitefully, without aiming to kill everyone, otherwise they wouldn't get their wages.

The counsellor and his assistant were lucky. Where they lived, they could only stop a bullet or get a shell through the window from “their friends” – extreme radical representatives of another group of the People's Democratic party – “Halk” (Pashtuns). That happened every time when the local committee took the wrong decision. In the committee most people were from another group – “Parcham”.

Sergey and his boss lived in a small plain stone house with only one room, one exit and two windows. That was the counsellor's decision. “The key is not to live in a hotel. We don't want to be quickly found by everyone who wants or doesn't want us.” The house door was nailed up and covered with sand sacks from the inside. The windows were sheltered with iron sheets. Only one window could open. The heat was worse than in a ship cabin during a storm. However, unlike an expedition to the Chukchee sea, no one smoked or poked any folk patterns on walrus tusk. The counsellor would burn some documents on the floor once a week. While he was doing this, they would carefully open the window. Bogdanov then would look through the crack in the door if anyone could see the plume of smoke from under the roof of their plain house.

The door was also used for the counsellor to come out, straight into an armoured car coming to grips with the window. Bogdanov would stay inside to type his documents on the typewriter “Aurika” and to draw a nonsense. They had a small supply of paper. The counsellor would renew it every day. The paper sheets were very thin, nearly transparent, and they also had a lot of carbon paper. He could make

five or six copies at a time. He had never wasted so much paper all his life. For Sergey it meant only one thing – his papers were meant to make other people live a new way.

Not far away there were extremely challenging areas. There were cases of heroism, how can you do without it? The most difficult thing for Bogdanov and his boss was the daily life. The toilet was inside the house – it was a hole in the floor. There was no escape from the heat and the smell. The counsellor had a chance of getting into big rooms with air-conditioning, but in the house it was impossible to live. They hardly had any clean water. Just enough to drink. The water for a wash was different, the colour of khaki. They also had lice and fleas... Drinking vodka didn't help on the inside or outside.

The new life in a new place for Sergey started when he was told, "Don't go outside. You don't need that!" He needed to work for a few months here and help the counsellor to prepare his presentations and speeches for the local leader of the party, to fill in the forms, to draw the structure of the party organization in the local centre, to write instructions and to send reports back to Moscow. He could only communicate with the interpreter, the party organization leader and his assistant.

It was better not to meet any Soviet army officers. They didn't like counsellors and they didn't really distinguish between military and political counsellors.

Late in the evening the counsellor would return home and enter the house the same way – through the window. He would bring food, paper and drinking water. They were the main things. They would look through the documents Bogdanov had prepared. The counsellor would put them into his iron briefcase. Then they would have dinner. Before he went to bed, gradually trying to relax, his boss would be telling Sergey about the tricks of their work.

As far as Bogdanov understood from their night conversations, the problem was that there was not really a communist party in Afghanistan. It had never really existed. After it had been founded in the sixties, it was split up into two, except that neither of the groups managed to build up the foundation among the Muslim population.

"When our troops entered here, there appeared a lot of different counsellors," the former district committee secretary told him. "And recently specialists in party building have been coming to Kabul, kind of helping to make the party."

"Our first secretary was transferred to Uzbekistan. We thought, he would take all his staff with him, but he just took the judge, prosecutor and military commissar."

"It is hard there as well. It will last long and there is a risk of being killed," the counsellor answered and continued, "Well, at least there you have your own people. In here they have never even had any regulations. Some party! No rules, no instructions, no principles. By the way, don't forget to give me the paperwork instruction before I go tomorrow."

"Of course, I will do it!" Sergey understood the polite order to work all night.

"All I know," the counsellor went on, "is that we can't establish power in here. We might do in the centre. But in the provinces there is a mess," the counsellor shook his head and mumbled something. Sergey thought he heard him swear.

"So a lot depends on you..."

"What does? Does a lot depend on you in your district?" the counsellor didn't expect him to answer. "It's all up to the authorities. Nothing depends on me. You were taught to say the only phrase, "Safarate shooravi – Soviet Embassy". That's the main thing. There you are..."

The counsellor showed Sergey a photo. "Look, here is me and one of the people I mentor. Intellect symptoms are close to zero, the same as heroism..."

The tired and wound up district committee secretary was telling Bogdanov about all pain points he had come across while he was here, on the other side of the Amu-Darya. He was really frank with Sergey. His everyday dangers must have made him less cautious, unlike all the politicians from his country. After the counsellor dropped off, Bogdanov was thinking a lot about his words before he started working on his paperwork instruction.

Behind the house wall there was a sound of the thud of hoofs and dim voices in Pushto. Sergey immediately covered the stool and the oil lamp on it with a cloth. He jumped up and rushed to the window. He moved the iron sheet away a bit and looked outside through the little crack. It was dark, but by the loud breath of the horses and clank of the weapon he understood there were mujahidins a hundred metres from their house, about forty of them. In that place there was a hotel where local party organization heads, a few military counsellors and

guests from the capital lived. Bogdanov could see bright shot flashes and later he heard gun shots.

The counsellor was standing next to him. As soon as he heard the shots he woke up and took his place by the window, near Sergey. Here they kept two guns and four shells.

“Well, have you written the instruction?” the boss asked unexpectedly watching the people through the crack in the window. The mujahidins were still shooting the hotel windows but didn’t dare go inside.

“What instruction?”

“The document flow instruction...”

The counsellor laughed and started searching for his iron briefcase on the floor. At last he found it, opened and took out a space communications telephone and an aerial.

“Is that the Consulate? Duty operator? This is number fifteen. We’ve got an attack on the hotel here... We are fine... Yes... No, they didn’t... Waiting.” The counsellor folded up the telephone and left it near the briefcase.

“That’s why it is iron,” Sergey grasped, “I thought it was for my papers not to burn...” They were lying on the floor and waiting. They were completely wet. Wet from the heat or fear. Even though Bogdanov had been psychologically preparing himself for similar situations, he didn’t take it seriously.

He just couldn’t believe it was happening in real life. To him! He had not left the house, as he was ordered, had not shot anyone and he had only seen the war in the pictures.

They were lying with their heads on the guns and waiting for what was going to happen. There could be a fight or the mujahidins could fire for a while and leave. They were waiting for their people and tried not to think they could be spotted or their “fortress” could be already known. The mujahidins could just finish with the hotel and move over to them... What is two guns against the pack of armed and gowed up warriors?

But the fight started. The firing increased. The left part of the hotel was already burning. The lodgers of the hotel were jumping out of the windows. The people were running in different directions, about five of them fell and didn’t get up. The mujahidins began shooting from a machine-gun. They must have enjoyed it. To the left of the wall of a nearby house lit up by the fire, Bogdanov could see two shadows

pass. Two people were running towards their house bending low and not shooting. A shell flash illuminated them. Bogdanov thought they were Russians, without hats and wearing the same dark jackets. "Why are the jackets the same?" Sergey thought. He concentrated on those two coming nearer.

Without asking his boss, Bogdanov moved away the iron sheet from the window and shouted into the darkness, "Come here! Quick!

"Don't even think of shooting," said the counsellor and put his hand on Serega's gun. A second later the two people found themselves inside their hiding-place.

"It stinks in here!" these were the first words Bogdanov and his boss heard in Russian, and then, "Who are you?"

"And who are you?" the counsellor asked.

6.

The battle of KGB for the third-world countries was gradually finishing. The investments into the countries of the socialist orientation were back-breaking for the Soviet economy and they were disappearing into the black hole. Some loyal friends were swept by the military coups, as it happened in Chile, Bolivia, Sudan, Indonesia and Algeria... Other friends turned out unreliable allies who learned to dilute cheatable Moscow ideologists with their talks of socialism and "anti-imperialism".

In the Middle East, having changed three countries in just under nine years, Yurka Lisochkin served until getting the rank of a Major. He was good looking, with a moustache as black as tar. He looked like Saddam Hussein in his youth. He was awarded a rank in advance.

A year ago he was transferred into the reserve force, home. With his wife, of course. But when a month later Lisochkin was transferred from Leningrad to Vladivostok, they got divorced. They got married casually and then got divorced casually. Sometimes he was sent on short business trips into different places, as were many secret service officers... To keep the form...

"We are from the hotel," said one of the visitors pompously, he was taller than the other one and had a moustache. He seemed to be in charge, As soon as he came inside, he lay on the ground to the left

from the window, ran an eye over the humble habitation, saw packs of paper on the crooked table, a typewriter and now he was staring at the hosts of their accidental hiding-place. He didn't have any weapons, neither did the second man.

"You must be political people," the man in charge summed up. "I always feel the dear party breathe behind my back." Then he remembered something important and sharply turned his head towards his mate, "Sanya, keep looking. They should give it a rest soon."

The one who was called Sanya was lying on the other side of the window, next to Bogdanov. He was looking at the square in front of the hotel anyway and he let his boss do the talking with the hosts. The boss saw the communication device and reached out to get it...

"Come off it, comrade!" the counsellor uttered at last.

"I've got to inform," the man with a moustache made an excuse.

Without saying a word, Bogdanov was exchanging glances with the counsellor and thinking to himself, "In terms of habits, impudent behaviour and confidence they look like military men. They probably didn't have time to put their uniform on... But they did put their suits on... They don't belong to us, that's for sure. The counsellor would have known them. Fancy that – they have no weapons... Maybe, they are secret agents from the station. Or visiting. All the same – KGB men."

It didn't take them long to figure out each other. Experience. And a burning sense of danger. Unlike anything else, it pushes the idea along all the curves of the brain and gives the result.

"We have already informed them. Waiting," Bogdanov butted in. He got up and made a move towards the impudent visitor. The counsellor decided to put the telephone into the briefcase. The partner of the man with a moustache, having listened to their conversation and staring through the crack in the window, understood they were their friends. The only thing that he couldn't understand was why it smelt of crap and rot in that accidental fortress, and he was wrinkling his nose and twisting his head as if he were trying to look away...

After five minutes, even though it felt it had passed at least half an hour, the fight behind the iron sheet died away. Through the crack, they could see the mujahidins leaving and going away. They had done what they needed to do, they had earned their money and they had worked with a good result. Now they could relax. The man near the window turned to the oil lamp, stretched and even yawned. He

was probably nervous. The dim lamp covered with a cloth beamed at Sergey, approaching the main visitor.

"Hang on a second. Let me guess," the man with a moustache fixed his eyes on Bogdanov and was watching him closely now. The sides of his moustache raised up and his immaculate white teeth shone in the dark room.

"You are Serega, for instance... I even know your surname..."

"Lisa! You idiot!" now Sergey remembered where he had seen that moustache. Not on Hussein, surely!

"Why idiot?"

"Because you hang about where you shouldn't."

"On the contrary! Where I should! Hang on a minute. How do you say it? If people walk along the highway and not lurking paths..."

"...they will definitely meet... Hey, you!" Serega said and they embraced each other. Then they laughed quietly and in a moment suddenly whistled the famous tune from the film "Professional Volunteers".

"Ok, friends," the counsellor suddenly remembered he was the first secretary of the district party committee, and not just a serviceman or a chief of the KGB district administration. "As far as I understand, they have finished it outside. So you can have five minutes for a chat and then we go different ways." He got up and authoritatively picked up the gun. "We haven't seen you, you haven't seen us. We've got our instructions. And yours... They are even worse... The help will arrive any time now... We'll be in trouble."

Lisochkin looked at the counsellor with understanding, then turned to his friend Sanya, raised his forefinger and shook it with a smile. Something like, the party is always right. It's true!

Yurka and Serega were squatting like Afghans and were going down the memory lane without seeing anything. They were talking at the same time but were able to hear and understand each other. Second nature. They used to do it at birthday parties. They remembered everyone, quickly, without emotions, as if they were doing a job. It took them five minutes. They didn't talk about Alyonka. Neither of them. They didn't forget about their last conversation ten years before.

Five minutes later the unexpected visitors got up, said goodbye reservedly and shook the hosts' hands. Lisa softly pushed Serega's shoulder with his fist, looked at him once more, hesitated as if he wanted to say something, something different...

“Good luck, Sery!” Yurka sharply turned as he was following the order “About face!”, then his assistant moved the iron sheet and they both disappeared into the dark.

“He showed off in front of my boss,” Sergey thought when Lisochkin left so gallantly. “Well, isn’t my first secretary clever? Brainy! He didn’t listen to anyone and was always saying in Kabul we wouldn’t live in a hotel, we would live separately, in an old abandoned house, even in the rubbish skip.”

“Why did you mention the instructions?” suddenly thought Sergey when he was praising his boss in his mind.

“Well, just in case... It is our dear party weapon of war. They’ve done so much with the paper. They thought of doing things quicker, but they forgot the main thing – when you put preparations and control together, then you can expect small interruptions first, then corruption and a crisis in the end. What can you do? Since the twenties everything had been turned upside down in the party code.” The counsellor could be talking of that for ages but he stopped, pointed at the window and asked, “Did you go to school with him? He is quite impudent.”

“The same playground. The same form,” Bogdanov answered. “But our destinies...” he remembered what Yurka had just told him about Vovka Spivak and shut his mouth.

The help didn’t come that night. The hotel burned. The local police picked up the bodies. In the morning the servicemen from the station came in a Jeep. Two people got out of the car, had a look around, didn’t say anything and left. In the place where the hotel used to be, the local children were hanging around for a long time.

The following day the counsellor was picked up by the armoured vehicle as usual. After his boss left, Sergey thought about his words, “They say, if you want to come to know a strange country, try to dissolve yourself in it. It’s easy to say. How can we do it if you are stuck in a nailed up house and I am in an armoured vehicle?”

Bogdanov had enough of two months imprisonment with just one measuring probe sensing the outside world as a tired and disappointed counsellor. Quite enough to make conclusions for himself.

We used to think, or rather it appeared to us, that we were joining a backward country to civilization. However, we never thought about in which way Afghanistan influenced us. Us, thousands of Soviet sol-

diers, officers, party and military counsellors... Or people like Lisochkin...It's hard to say what we taught Afghanistan. It's much easier to see the changes in people who went there to fight or work. At one stroke they were thrown into the country where bribery, profiteering and drugs were more familiar than queues in our country. And those infectious diseases were far too dangerous...

Those were the thoughts of Bogdanov on his way back to Leningrad. He must have helped the counsellor. He wanted to think he had done. He helped by listening, by a psychotherapeutic effect of his presence. He got different sorts of emotions, acquired new experience in comprehending the outside environment in a non-contact way, just by his boss's mood, mimic and words, and also sitting next to the Jeep driver and listening to his tales... He learned new things about his childhood friends...

The main thing was he met Lisochkin! "If people are walking along the highway and not lurking paths..." "If we met in Leningrad..." Honestly, no emotions... But here! There was something in it! Different feelings. Not the feelings familiar after the film "Professional Volunteers". Or not just those feelings. We are not exactly volunteers. By the way, he, with his blue shoulder boards, should walk those lurking paths."

It didn't occur to Bogdanov that his short business trip and meeting his school friend accidentally let him look at his life and at what he and his colleagues were doing in a different way, from a common position and see the reason of the events, and not the consequence, looking at everything from the outside, and not from the inside, as he normally did. He had a feeling he was on a captain bridge of a small vessel being thrown about by the storm in the Chuckchee sea...

Later those impressions became permanent and turned into a force which would be able to change the course of events.

Chapter 4

I.

After his business trip to Afghan he had to get a higher post, of course. Up the career ladder... "Miss, can I talk to the Smolny, please?" You could imagine a man with a gun in an old uniform jacket and with a kettle, sailors, machine guns and sailors again. No, not like that! They were standing at the entrance, looking neat, with the same blue shoulder boards like Yurka's, and a metal detector. Behind them there were people who looked the same. Like in the district committees. The ladies were a bit different. Different dress colours and different skirt lengths. The men looked the same. A suit, a white shirt and a tie... All the ties were stripy. One of the stripes was red or burgundy. It must have meant the democracy was approaching. A lot of canteens. They all ranged for different people. You could never get into the ones that were the furthest from the entrance. Toilets! They were like the ones the first secretary had. And the cleaning ladies... They were pushing trolleys with a bucket and a mop with auto-squeeze... On the door of his room there was a sign with his name. Regional party committee instructor. That was quick! That was what the power meant.

He was given holiday time straight away. The first time in three years. A full holiday leave – thirty days! It was only possible if you had the town and district committees underneath, staff and no specific work. It could happen only if there were no red stamps on the documents telling you to execute them urgently, if there were no documents at all with your name on them apart from the sign on your room door...

"I can go somewhere with the family now... All of them... Go somewhere. Where?" His dreams didn't move anywhere further than that. Something was in their way. He had an anxious thought. In spite of everything, the thought was dwelling somewhere in his conscience and restraining the demonstration of fully forgotten human joy. "How

can the documents wait for me in the reception for thirty days? It can't happen..." Being a party careerist, he couldn't comprehend that. It was beyond comprehension, like a round square.

Nevertheless, Bogdanov managed to fight off those ideas. He started to think about his holiday and suddenly realized it was the first time in several years he was thinking about his family. He wasn't thinking about the domestic front, as it was often called, and not about the things the Control Committee was interested in. He had not gone to the theatre with his wife for several years, he had not gone to the countryside with his son... He did know how well his son was doing at school but he had no idea what his son's teachers were called. All that time Sergey had been at school just once. At the parents voluntary Sunday work. There he accidentally broke a window and he was never called to come to school again. He had not been to his own school for ages and had not met any of his friends. Apart from Lisochkin...

Certain fragments of his family life kept coming from the distant areas of his memory and quickly slipped past him. He remembered visiting his family in the country on Sundays four years ago. He would teach his wife French and she managed to teach their son in the week. Their boy was to move to a French specialized school and he had to take a difficult test.

Every Monday at six o'clock the Deputy director of the party district committee, wearing a smart suit, a white shirt and a tie, with a big bag on a bike rack full of jars with strawberry jam, was riding a child bike for five kilometres to a bus stop.

Bogdanov tried to remember what the district committee department chief's or his former assistant's wives looked like. But he soon realized he had never met them, nor had he heard anything about them or their children.

The successful party careerist Bogdanov had gradually gathered strange for him emotions. As if he had lost something or made a mistake. He got surprised with himself and said aloud, "As if a layer of life has been cut off with a knife."

Sergey suddenly trembled. A significant idea woke his parent instincts and shook simple human feelings. It made him realize his own guilt and think of the sinister reality of living in the "system"... A second or two passed and his reflexes placed him back into the surrogate staff world.

Two days later he was called back to work. Another General Secretary died.

Long-term lack of factual electivity in the party and in the state was gradually and irreversibly moving the society to the election of everything and everybody. Higher up they started to appreciate a fresh opinion. It hadn't sounded yet but was already appreciated.

"Fresh opinion. I wonder where it could come from," Bogdanov asked himself. "Must be from somewhere far away, from the inside of science and progressive technologies," he answered to himself. "It's where the best scientific brains studied knotted footsteps of developed socialism and the others tried to operate automatically the decent national production and couldn't specify the difference between a robot and a manipulator."

At the same time the people above dreamed of some new, strong and educated people who would change everything. The stagnation would stop and the acceleration would start. To have a look at those new and educated people who were just hatching out of their shells, you just needed a few little things – to open the curtains and have a proper look at the depth of the poor but at the same time progressive Soviet science. You had to go behind the curtains and return to the time when an epic play was being performed all over the country, and it was called "developed socialism".

No one could do that.

There is a wonderful word "Let". It is used quite often when they don't know how and who must make changes. They have tried different ways. Went wrong. The changes are needed desperately. The machine could get rusted and the controlled system would fall off the basis dropping everything built on it for the latest tens of years.

At that very time but in another dimension, somewhere where the rest of the country lived, the home sociology was born. After the first rain of openness through the solid pavement of the public opinion the first informal unions came through. Over there sociology was blossoming, but here it had just woken up in the presence of the new general secretary. What an awful thing to happen when there was an old first secretary of the regional committee. Feeling deep down it was a riot, the district committees were punishing scientists unmercifully. And the regional committee was pushing them into disrooting the sociological filth.

There were not really any sociologists at the time. There were psychologists, philosophers, mathematicians and physicists. Those were up to everything. Nearly every day district committees received letters from scientists with suggestions, and the resolutions on them were, "When will we stop this semidynamics? Report within three days." Watchful reviewer-"specialists" accused those theory new ways of self-organization of natural systems in attempts on Marxist-Leninist dialectics. Indeed, even a simple combination of these words "self-organization of natural systems" sounds like a riot. What happened to the party role? What does "natural" mean? Only physiological needs function can be natural.

Scientific seminars participants were not allowed to teach because of harmful influence on the immature young souls. They got rid of universities if their party committees were weak. At the university which Bogdanov supervised they were going to move them to the Institute of Complex Social Research, where they dealt only with science and they didn't really have any teaching. Science was always needed. Even rebellious science. In restricted form, of course. For official use only. To know enemies by sight.

The regional committee instructor had a feeling he was adjusting a sentenced scientist's shirt on a scaffold, apologizing sincerely and trying to move him away from the chopping block. He might succeed! Like in Nabokov's book "Invitation to a Beheading". Only the book was a fantasy, and here was reality.

Working in the party apparatus, everyone knows that any action dies without a document, or simply without an instruction on its execution order. In many departments of the town and regional committees they had books "Seventeen moments of Spring" or "Maria Stuart" by Schiller marked all over. Budding practical sociology was full of dumb questionnaires answering any spastic question immediately.

There was a need to organize a party as it had already started. They had to think of how to include the sociological association, what documents to write to regulate a chaotic and sometimes ignorant stream of surveys. Then a lot of different scientists were invited. They took their time discussing and inventing things. Bogdanov prepared a resolution of the regional committee bureau, coordinated it with the ideological secretary, backed it everywhere and handed it in.

A meeting of the bureau took place. The next day the newspaper "Leningrad pravda" published an article on the first page quoting most

of the resolution. The department director said, "All is good, they haven't changed anything in the text. Well done!"

A couple of days later the resolution needed to be sent to the Central Committee. Sergey put all the documents on the resolution into his briefcase, entered the special corridor, then the room of the General department sector director to take the draft of the document and have it signed by everyone after discussing it at the Bureau in due order.

"Don't you understand?" the director shouted at him, narrowing his eyes, as if Sergey was a spy or at least a diversionist. "Are you standing with... her... Zalesskaya?" The director meant professor Zalesskaya. "We all know who is paying her... What's this stupid system of questionnaires? There is no concept of "public opinion". Do it all over again! The system is only district committees can give a permission for a questionnaire! Be short. Just one paragraph. Do you get it?"

Sergey was more than surprised. He was shocked. How did it happen? The regional committee secretary in ideology held a conference, talked to scientists and specialists. His department director said everything had gone fine at the regional committee bureau. And in the newspaper everything was exactly how he had it in his resolution draft. What did "there is no concept" mean? Had his director gone mad?

Without understanding what to do, Sergey was standing with his briefcase behind his back in front of his severe boss. It looked like the painting "Another F?" Only instead of the suffering mother he was stared at with the squinting colourless eyes of the General department director and the prosecuting eye of the pioneer-sister was dignified with the latest General secretary's portrait hanging on the wall.

"What's wrong? It has been discussed at the bureau... It has been approved..."

"I can see you are just an idiot. Do you work in the regional committee or... What are you looking at? If you don't understand I will explain," the director was nastily polite with the instructor who was confused. He got off the table, went to the door and peeped into the corridor. Sergey could see him looking at the security post.

"It's a delirium," Bogdanov couldn't comprehend that. "He doesn't care. As if there is no one else except him. As if no one reads papers... In a week they will all understand it. Damn! What confidence! Impunity! Only the first secretary could have blurted it out. And this one is

repeating. With his cheap emotions. It's not even funny. He is going to call the security... He can tell him I was misbehaving in his room or even threatening the first secretary. Complete insanity!"

"I got it. Can I take the documents?"

"Surely not!" the boss said quietly and decisively. "They have too many interesting signatures. They will come in handy. I am sure you will be able to remember just one paragraph. Short and no tricks. Understand?"

"I understand very, very well," Bogdanov pronounced considerably trying to please the "patient" and left "hospital room No.6".

Sergey typed a short paragraph with the text of the resolution and walked to the ideological secretaries straight away, thinking, "Are they also idiots?"

He saw around twenty honoured workers and innovators leave the office of the main "ideologist" of the city of three revolutions and Leningrad region. Bogdanov thought they must have talked about how to fight alcoholism and absence at work and how to raise productivity of labour.

The boss was sitting at the big round table. If there are many people there it is difficult to say who the head is. He was looking at the window thoughtfully. He was smoking holding a roll-up cigarette between his thumb and finger. His elbow was leaning on the table. His other arm was stretched on the side of the table.

"He looks like Lenin, the only difference is a cigarette," Sergey thought when he entered the big room. He is still playing his latest role and the new one is already here. The "ideologist" startled, his thoughts were far away. He looked at the short text of the resolution and without raising his eyes said only one word, "Who?"

"General department."

The party leader waited a second, then put the cigarette into his other hand and signed the new paper. He put the cigarette out and laid his hands on the table in front of him with his palms down. "He looks like a bunny," Bogdanov thought. At last the owner of the office looked at the instructor and pointed at the bottom left corner of the document where the person responsible for the preparation of this question had to sign it.

Sergey took his time showing off, then he bent over, took a pen and signed the double Dutch paragraph.

“You haven’t got used to it, have you?” suddenly his boss asked.

“Haven’t got used to what?” the instructor answered with a question. He wanted to tell his boss a famous anecdote. “We say “Lenin”, but mean “party”. We say “party”, but mean “Lenin”. It’s always like this – we say one thing but mean another.” But their dialogue was interrupted by the phone ringing.

“He will definitely instruct them on how to raise the labour productivity with simple peasant methods,” Bogdanov thought when he was leaving the office of the main “ideologist”. He was walking down the marble staircase covered with the wide red carpet woven out of saved materials, recalling similar district committee interiors and comparing and thinking.

In the district committee a new action is started by one person and finished by another so that life was not too sweet. In the regional committee they kept you a long time so that you could begin and finish things. But the result was the same – to cancel or to remake. “It is almost impossible to please everyone above”, thought Bogdanov. A strong Russian principle would work – no one would do anything! Never!

Bogdanov remembered the leader of the world proletariat, “Administration is crap, decrees are crap...”

To make certain it was true you had to either climb down, near the ground, or go to that place behind the river, but not to stay in a stone house or look at everything out of the iron Jeep.

After the trouble with the latest resolution Bogdanov got an urgent promotion and he became a divisional manager. A peculiar pay off for all his sufferings. To treat the instructor from the emotional heat the next day after his assignment he was sent far away from the regional committee... Outside Leningrad, into one of the furthest regions to the celebrations of the anniversary of the Great October revolution.

That decision abruptly changed the course of history... Bogdanov’s history.

3.

The camp supervisor got up early, as he should do. It had become a habit. It didn’t matter if he was ill. He gave himself an injection and

now he was sitting on the edge of his bed staring at his neighbour and waiting for him to stop moaning in his sleep and to wake up. His neighbour's eyelids flinched and his eyes opened. Spivak sighed deeply and his body trembled of deep dry cough. He tried to get up but a sharp pain passed through his body from his head to his feet. Spivak woke up completely and stared at the ceiling with white marble bars.

"You haven't changed at all, Vovka," his neighbour said quietly as if he was talking to himself. Spivak heard him.

"...o you know ...e?" Spivak asked having a trouble pronouncing words.

"Yes, I do. You are easy to recognize, I am telling you. You haven't changed. It happens... when you have an easy life. But you won't recognize me."

Vovka strained himself and trying to overcome a dull pain in his body raised his hands and grabbed the iron tubes connecting the beds. He turned his face towards his neighbour, "...o, I ...on't know ...ou."

"Sure. You've all forgotten me. Shall I recite Cid's monologue in French? Or something from "Neznaika in the Sunny Town"?

"...ilya? How's the...?" Spivak didn't recognize him but he understood it was Petka Philippov in front of him. Alive Philya... He didn't look like him though. As if a different person had learned about their school life and was now trying to pass as Philippov. But why?

Philya. Was that the frail clumsy boy with a big white collar over his shirt and with mustard in his mouth? Yes, it was. But his face was different. It was grey, covered in scars, one eyelid was drooping and half-covering his left eye. The nose... Petka had a long thin nose. This person had a flat nose with a curved bridge. No, it must be him! The same squint of eyes. Like Lenin's. The main thief of "Number Six". The most respectable prisoner in the camp.

"Phi-i-ilya," Vovka didn't say but whispered. Then he got ready and said in French, "Comment ca va?" His mouth now opened showing empty upper gums, his thin reddish-blue lips with splits on them were now moving. First the upper lip, then the right side of the bottom lip and in the end the left part of it shaped something like a smile.

Petka stood up, slowly came up to Vovka and sat on his bed. He took his right hand and without saying anything squeezed it. On Vovka's shoulder and near the elbow there were fresh razor cuts.

"It's all right. The veins are fine – you'll survive."

Vovka started crying – second time that day. This time tears were pouring and there was no stopping them. He was lying on his back and squeezing Petka's hand, he was staring at the ceiling, at the white bars, then at Philippov. He felt calm. First time in four months. For some reason he imagined a giant coloured photo of a school football team. Only all the prisoners of the camp "No.6" were in it. At the front there was Philya sitting in the armchair. He was wearing a black school uniform with a big white collar and a foil Octobrist badge. At his feet there was his escort. He, Vovka, was also here, on the floor, his head leaning on his hand, in a long yellow shirt and dirty ski boots. A little bit further, in the first row, were sat daddies – leaders and supervisors. They were all wearing black trousers and polished boots. Behind them there were other thieves, but they couldn't be seen. And near the wall there was a crowd of "blokes" in ragged blue robes. Grey "chushoks" were looking shyly through the doors.

Those were emotional tears.

That day they had been talking for nearly five hours. Philippov, for the first time of his criminal career, told Vovka about his life after he had found himself among the geek youngsters. He told him of being killed, cut, raped, thrown out of the window in a bedside cabinet, made to swallow a "hedgehog"... He told him about how he had managed to survive in spite of everything, even the doctor's verdict. He told him about getting above himself. But he didn't say a word about his business or partners. He just said he had not taken that ill fated golden pen from the staff room. And he had not touched their favourite Vasilych. On the contrary, he had tried to help him.

Now he was sitting near Vovka, on his bed, he was different, reserved, considerable, like millstone. For Spivak Philya was again a plain boy who could expressively recite "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" in front of the class. He got the same feeling of admiration and astonishment, like it had been at school. No one else could do it, but that small boy in a long shirt. The main thief of the camp.

Everything Vovka Spivak tried to tell about himself didn't interest Philippov. It felt like holding up a bank and then waiting calmly for militia to say, "Here I am, arrest me. I am fighting for the truth." For some reason it was the holding up a bank that Philippov identified with what dissidents did. "The bank belongs to the state," the main thief of the camp thought. "To take money from it is a law of the na-

ture. These people are trying to make one stream of money into many. Now we've only got one stream, for the authority. They want money for everyone. This is wrong. They should take everything from everyone, leaving just the last ration. Only the last one. Because there is nothing to kill for. What they want was what Lenin wanted. And what happened?"

Two weeks later Vovka Spivak was transferred from the medical unit to prison "Perm-33". Maybe because his documents arrived or because Philya arranged it for his friend. They didn't meet in the camp after that.

Three years were very useful for Spivak. In the "political" prison he learned a lot and met many people like him. He met some famous people in dissident circles.

A year later "educated" and wise Vovka, mature, with greyish hair and fake front teeth, was confidently walking to the passport check point in the port of Odessa. In his pocket he had an international passport with a different name and a tourist voucher for the Mediterranean cruise.

4.

Autumn that year was warm and late. The woods were yellow and scarlet with leaves still in the trees. There was no rain. Beautiful! Along the cliff there ran a dusty country road. On the very edge there grew thin birch-trees and fir-trees. Underneath the woodland looked like a dark green carpet. Near the road next to the woods, on the narrow spot of land between the road and the cliff, there stood a freshly made wooden platform. Early in the morning three people climbed its narrow metal stairs with rails like on a scaffold – the first secretary of the district committee, a district executive committee chairman and a new regional committee divisional manager.

There was no one around them. It looked like there was no one alive hundreds of kilometres around them. Endless woods, a cliff, an uneven road and from the other side there were small wooden houses and a recreation centre.

Half an hour passed. "Where are the people?" Sergey was puzzled looking around. He felt uncomfortable. He just happened to ask the first

secretary whispering into his ear, "Where are the marchers?" "They will be here," the secretary said through his teeth. In a moment he added, "They'll come."

The last words of the secretary were drowned in a sonorous voice, "Dear comrades, congratulations on the day!" The first secretary was standing near them and continued smoking. He was glancing round and enjoying his correct speech coming from the loudspeakers. There was still no one there. The tape-recorder standing next to them on a stool was working through the microphone all over the town. The speech lasted ten minutes. Then they turned the tape-recorder off. From the left, about three hundred metres from the platform, they saw some dots. Those were people! Another ten minutes – and a dark narrow strip flew in their direction. The people were coming in rare pairs, like in kindergarten. Between the pairs there were a couple of metres, no less. Those spaces were filled with stray local cats and dogs. No placards, no flowers. No portraits. A man passing by the platform was holding a red balloon in his hand. Another one had a paper flower of odd colour... He was walking on his own. His festive accessories were emphasizing the abnormality of the whole thing. You wouldn't want to dream of that. There was no one to smooth over the event.

Almost every passer-by would stop in front of the platform and discuss the heads as if they were on the telly and couldn't hear them, "Who is that, on the right? No, on the right! That's a new one..."

The authorities were standing in a row, like on the Mausoleum, and were smiling and bowing. They had enough sense not to wave their hands. "These people wouldn't understand us. We are not in the capital or the city of three revolutions," thought Bogdanov suddenly. "What a situation – come and throw everyone off the cliff." He got frightened because he didn't know whether he had said it aloud or just thought it.

In the evening, before he left, Sergey came back to the cliff. He just felt like it. He wanted to make sure it could happen. The sun was going down fast. Against the background of the bright orange circle the white birch-tree looked completely black and the last red gleams were travelling through the young fir-trees. It looked like someone had forgotten to put out the fire...

In Leningrad Bogdanov tried to share his fresh impressions with his bosses. That's why they sent him there, isn't it? To get a response from reality. But, no! No one cared. The same thing that happened in

the district committee after visiting relatives of the people who had died in a plane crash. Again a bustle, an urgent business trip. Whether he wanted or not, he needed to escort a tourist group to capital countries. The group had a leader, but he was sent urgently somewhere else.

What trust in Bogdanov! That's crazy! He was being pulled up and pushed down at the same time. They were even giving him forty dollars at the tourists' cost. But if one of them left, stayed abroad, that was the end.

This was especially real if there were individuals of creative specialities or with point five. There was one in the group – a producer. That meant someone from the KGB would join the group. They would also send him on this tour as a compensation for something. Bogdanov was told that the officer would be in charge only of the producer. He would even live with him in the same luxurious room. He was lucky!

How nice – to count the group several times a day in different places. In a cave, museum, cafe, on the bus, ship, in a hotel room... In Istanbul at the market "Grand Bazaar". It was amusing to count the rows of tourists when they were turning around the corner.

The main things were passports. He needed to keep all forty of them close to his heart. The currency would be better to hand in straight away. They wouldn't be able to do without it. They were all going abroad for it. He was not going to give each of them the money every time they bought something.

At last, the day before the departure, the KGB officer came to the Smolny to meet Bogdanov. They had to meet before they left.

The door creaked open. People didn't usually knock.

"Bogda-a-nov," someone sounded from behind the door. There was no one in the passage. Sergey stood up and went towards the visitor. "It's me-e-e."

In front of Bogdanov, as if from under the earth, grew Lisochkin. He was walking in little careful steps and bent his head aside but was looking at him and smiling broadly.

"Damn! Yurka, idiot, it's you again!"

"Not again, but over and over! All secret paths lead to... the district committee!"

"You've become a frequent visitor, comrade Lisochkin. Do you want me to start working for you? Are you preparing a special forces raid? With me? Secretly?"

Lisochkin blushed for a second and then blurted out, "Of co-o-ourse!"

They embraced, then stared at each other to see if they had changed after their last meeting four years before. Bogdanov knew they would travel down the memory lane so he grabbed Yurka's arm firmly and pulled him into the corridor.

"Oh, really?" Lisochkin asked quietly.

"Yes, inde-e-ed," Sergey imitated Yurka. "You are not the only clever one."

They stood near the window where they could see the park near the Smolny. The leaves had already fallen, the trees were naked, hardly anyone was walking along the paths. Here and there you could see puddles with the dull grey sky reflecting in them. The gloomy scenery made everyone feel bored and nearly killed the joy of seeing old friends.

"I am now a Lieutenant Colonel in the Foreign students Council." Lisochkin began, "As far as I know, you are leading them as the party and I am as the Soviet power. I am doing the community affair. We are going to work together. The people above have decided who to send as escort.

"I see... How did you do... after that? Was it all right?" Bogdanov asked him winding his head round.

"Sanya and I just did a runner into their capital. They didn't catch the sight of us. Finished our business and goodbye... We didn't even have to report anything. What about you?"

"No one turned up that night. In the morning there was a van. They sniffed and disappeared. Your hotel burnt down..."

"Damn it, the hotel!"

"You wanted to say something then, didn't you?"

"The situation was not good. And your boss..."

"What about now? Come on, how are things at home? How is Smolina? Still a doctor?"

"Yes, she is," Lisochkin would always stop, think for a long time and then spill the beans. As if he was an "anti-journalist". "I have divorced. After Syria we had two more countries. When we returned from the Far East, that was it. To be exact, after I was sent to Vladivostok."

"Why?"

"I don't know. We didn't have children. As quickly as we got together, we divorced. I was going to tell you... Maybe, not here..."

"Tell me what? Stop! When did they send you to Vladivostok?"

"Five years ago. I've just returned recently and they set me to escort the producer..."

"Five years..."

"Oh yes. I had just married and we left. Married to Alyonka."

At last Bogdanov understood everything. It had taken a long time. He understood Alyonka's morning phone call from Vladivostok, he understood what Lisochkin had tried to tell him in Afghan.

"You, bastard! You always grab everything you see!"

"What do you mean? As far as I know, you are married. Do I need to ask for your permission to get married? Plus..." Lisochkin wanted to add something but kept silent.

"Don't, Yurka. You know what I mean. You could have told me."

"I was going to, but I couldn't. And... Sery, she loves me... She always did. I am telling you! And you are "nice" and "good" for her. That's it! So... You'd better come and see us. After the cruise, ok? Alyonka will make cabbage pies and sweet cheese for you. She knows what you like. You'll see how we live, what..." Yurka stumbled and changed the subject, "we'll have a reminiscences party. OK?"

They were standing near the window for another ten minutes. As it was in Kandahar, Lisochkin was professionally getting information from Bogdanov. First about all the girls from their form, then about his work and in the end about their trip.

"You know, I have only got one goal and that is the producer. All the rest doesn't bother me. We have checked the group. Nothing special, apart from that creative one. By the way, he has made some good films."

"What films?"

"Well, I don't remember now. Not after your harassment, anyway."

"What are you talking about? The leopard can't change his moustache."

"You are wrong!"

"So, anyone else in the group? Let's talk about business. The guide from "Intourist" will bring the group to Odessa on the train. You'll be with them. I am leaving the day after tomorrow. We are meeting at the port 2 hours before our departure. Gathering the group together, meeting everyone..."

"Without me. What do you mean "meeting"? I will be sitting with everyone else, next to the producer."

“Well, are you going to count them sometimes? I can’t do it all the time. See what people they are.”

“OK, I will count them. Sometimes. On the train, canteen and cafe, OK?”

They went different ways. Bogdanov went to the General Department to get the group list and Lisochkin to his new friend – producer. To drink, smoke, muck around. To “make friends”, to be short!

5.

Bogdanov came to the building of the port beforehand. He was looking at the group list, thinking how many men, women, elderly people, who was with children – God forbid! He was waiting for everyone to turn up and for Lisochkin to come with his new friend. At last everyone got housed. Yurka was fussing and trying to say something to Bogdanov, but there was no opportunity. Sergey introduced himself, sat a pretty girl next to him, she was a guide from “Intourist”, then he began to register the group. Number five was an engineer Glinternik Lev Borisovich. Sergey pointed him out. He was a middle-aged man with a short black beard. The man sat up, wound his head round and sat down again. The “Intourist” representative gave him the passport and forty US dollars. Then another thirty five people sat up. Two of them stuck in his memory – the producer and a middle-aged woman in a wig. He had a professional feeling – to feel danger. And the danger came from those two. The rest of them looked the same to Bogdanov. Just an individual with a passport and money.

The whole procedure of meeting and handing in documents lasted forty minutes. After that the whole crowd moved to the passport control. There were no problems at the customs. Everyone boarded on the ship, got accommodated and started getting ready for lunch. An hour later a gigantic beautiful liner cleared the land and headed on the Mediterranean cruise through the Bosphorus.

“Have you seen that Jewish guy?” Lisochkin asked Bogdanov when he met him on deck near lifeboats hanging on the davits.

“We have five of them. Properly. With your Fellini.”

“I am talking about Glinternik. On the train it suddenly struck me. He looks like Spivak. Didn’t you notice?”

“He can’t do! Nonsense! It’s been seventeen years.”

"I am telling you! Only different hair and an intellectual beard. Don't you think so? We've got to chat with him. Carefully."

"Go ahead. No one's stopping you."

"Maybe you will talk to him! It says on my face I am from over there." Lisochkin wound his head round.

"And I am not?" Bogdanov wound his head round as well. "Listen, if there is a problem here, it's yours. I just need to bring everyone back safe and sound..."

"And my main problem is the producer."

"So do you want to say that Vovka Spivak escaped from the prison, changed his passport, bought a tour and has just crossed the frontier illegally?"

"Article sixty four. Betrayal of Motherland. Clause A – escape abroad or refusal to return from abroad. From ten to fifteen years or death penalty."

"Do you actually realize what you are saying?" Bogdanov paused and without waiting for the answer said, "Even if... He crossed the frontier, do you understand? That is it! I am not a lie detector, am I? Neither are you. "We can not know anything apart from that we don't need to know a-ny-thing..." That's a bad habit, Lisa! You blurted out and everything else can go to hell. You shared your responsibility. You have said nothing to me, comrade! You won't be able to prove the contrary. Will you send a radiogram or report to the captain of the foreign ship? You are the boss here, aren't you? You can make people marry, you can arrest people. You can even throw someone overboard. When did you get suspicious, let me ask you. Why did you keep silent? We are not law-enforcement authorities. I can't even imagine what I've got to do if this is all true. Haven't got a clue!"

"I also feel it's worse to expose the situation than to let things slide. Deliberate crossing the frontier without legal documents is up to two years. In collision with a group – up to five years. My problem is the producer. I have got specific work. It's you who is the boss here."

"Did you think we could... Even if it's him... we could turn him in that easily? He is our childhood friend after all. He is one of those human right activists. You told me about him, didn't you? If he's got an illegal passport he wants to escape."

"I don't think he would escape from a prison. This sort of people don't do that. They can't be arsed," Lisochkin concluded competently.

“Calm down. Has it been five years since he left his post in that secret company?”

“At least five!”

“That’s good! We shouldn’t worry about all the secrecy then. All his knowledge isn’t worth anything. That’s the main thing!”

“I don’t think there is anything left from his knowledge,” Lisochkin said thoughtfully.

“You’re right. In prison they beat out all the knowledge and soul!” Bogdanov said it with confidence because the counsellor in Afghanistan had told him nasty stories about camps, prisons and isolation wards. Both in the Soviet Union and Afghanistan.

“I should imagine, cons would have tried their best, especially with a specimen like him.”

“Not just the cons. Anyway, he wouldn’t be able to harm the country... We are not participating in this treason. Do you agree?” Yurka kept quiet. “Say something! You are a lawyer!”

“We have wound ourselves up,” Yurka uttered. “We don’t know anything yet but are already thinking of our statements.”

“I agree. We’ll see... If we have a chance, we’ll talk to him.”

“Fine!”

As soon as they arrived in Pisa, two ladies lost their passports. They came up to the group leader and burst out crying like little children. They were first to get out of the bus and had started climbing the Leaning Tower. They had climbed down, gone for a cup of coffee in a cafe where Galilee had lived and found out they had no passports. Later they found them on the bus floor, when the drivers came back from the petrol station.

In Florence, in Uffizi gallery, the group from Leningrad enjoyed the sight of the group leader from Novgorod. He was standing in the middle of the room lifting his hands in dismay as if it were before the execution. His face colour was indefinite, unhuman, greenish, his mouth was open and eyes shut. The rest was fine – he had a white shirt, a tie, and a dark suit... Everyone knew – his briefcase with all the passports and money had disappeared... How could the great Italian painters be compared to that masterpiece of the socialist realism?

Bogdanov had been spying the engineer Glinternik for three days. Every day he had to agree more and more with Lisochkin. Yes! It was Vovka Spivak. His gestures, mimic, even his voice. He was hunching

and had got grey, but was still fidgety and impulsive. He hardly talked to anyone and his room-mate was also an engineer, who was also a Jew. He couldn't be there for sightseeing after prison!

Sergey wanted to understand one thing. If Glinternik was Spivak, he must have recognized him and Lisochkin... They hadn't changed their names... Why wasn't he trying to talk to them? And why was he not looking uneasy or worried? He didn't turn a hair. Any way, if our guesses were right, Spivak was planning to run away. Really he should run away from the country as far as possible. Especially when all his family were already in Israel.

"But if he is planning to run," Bogdanov thought, "it will cause a lot of troubles for me. From the authorities. If my school friend has a passport with a different name, it's not my business. As long as he doesn't run away from me. Or it will be my problem."

So instead of counting his group Bogdanov was reasoning all day. All his thoughts and attention were about the engineer. They had set the wolf to keep the sheep. He forgot everything else. Who could he talk to, who could he ask for advice from? No one. Yurka was no good. Too light-minded.

"On the other hand, is there anything good in the situation?" Sergey went on reasoning. "Yes, there is. If they sack me, maybe it'll be for the best. They wouldn't just let me go if I wanted. The same as Yurka," Segrey thought of Lisochkin. "I should think it over. About my family, son. My lost profession, surrogate joy of existence in the administration. What joy are we talking about? Everything is gone, I am doing things from the force of habit. After that regional committee bureau and the trip to Leningrad region something cracked inside me. Like a string which used to hold something. Just burst."

Bogdanov was sitting in his cabin. The big liner was slightly rocking and he was thinking about the Arctic, his first expedition, their small ship and hydrochemical laboratory. They would suck in a liquid through a glass-dropper and a second later spit out a completely different one into a bucket. If this was happening for a long time, their eyes would stop identifying the crossing green sectors of a photo-colorimeter.

"What can I do?" Bogdanov asked himself. "I've got to leave. I am just wasting my time at this work. Am I? I am already a divisional manager. Another year – I could become a department assistant man-

ager in the Central Committee... What's there, in civvy street? I am nearly forty. Forgot my science, can't really do anything. The ex-divisional manager has already got his own cooperative society and scooping up money on his chocolates.

"What shall I be?" the thought hit his heart. "I am like a baby... Mayakovsky wrote in his poem, "I am growing and soon I will be... forty, where shall I work and what shall I be?" Sergey pulled separate quotes from his memory and they all reminded him of something familiar, "I have sailed this summer, conquering the oceans... Give up, the South Pole, and the North Pole..." It's always like this. I would love to be on the Pole, change river currents and move high mountains... But many people think it's important not to let others do it. Spivak, for instance. He'd like to float on a raft on the rivers, to climb the mountains... That's the end of it."

Sergey turned his thoughts into the stormy Chukchee sea. High waves. The broad solid foams in the wind. The tops of the waves overturned and fell into pieces. A small white ship heading for the north was struggling helplessly and continuing to use all its forces. It was staying in the same place, it couldn't turn around and leave the seventieth parallel somewhere over the Chukot Peninsula.

...Bogdanov was on the captain's bridge looking straight ahead of him at the slowly approaching waves. They all looked different to him. Which one of them was five metres high? In his cabin he could only feel consequences. But here he found himself inside the reason, he could see it from all sides. And also from above and below. It was much easier.

In his conscience something had changed again. The captain's bridge had disappeared. In front of his eyes a small polar plane sharply took off and also disappeared into the Arctic sky, because the pilot who was spinning around Bogdanov on the ice could suddenly see a high pile of water coming from an ice-hole and flew up leaving him on his own.

Should he stay where he was? But that would be it. The return point would be got over. After it you... Like that instructor from the organization department. She didn't care. As long as it was "one to six"! Like a warehouseman in his favourite stockroom. Only he knew where to find a grater, how to write off a resolution or a letter. What did you want? You didn't think of the "poetics" of your work when you were writing off one Central committee resolution after another. So when

you get the same reaction about yourself you don't like it, do you? Was it being greedy? It had taken a few years of this trash, very loved at first, interesting and capturing all of you. From the other side, it had been good-for-nothing very often and senseless. The same thing as a military "tour" around Afghanistan.

Someone once said that victorious wars strengthen total regimes and lost wars ruin them, We'll see.

"Nearby there is a lot of rubbish and nonsense!" Sergey recited Mayakovsky again and hit the battened illuminator with his hand clasped in a crushing fist. That rubbish was overfilling him. He was on his own. Like many years ago, on the ice in the middle of the cold, hostile and vast Arctic. He had a rifle behind his back then. Now he only had a bottle of vodka... He couldn't drink it now, especially being at work.

"An ass with a human face." Bogdanov suddenly imagined a miracle – a defeated face of a current general secretary. It was hard. His inner system had crashed. Irreversibly...

"Go to hell, all this!" Sergey exclaimed.

He suddenly felt light and calm from his shout or his formulated thought. No logic would work here. Bogdanov had nowhere to go. The idea of leaving his job was more an emotional splash rather than his decision. Where could he go? Everyone would go. They would get the money, a flat, a job, maybe they would open an institute... It was not that simple. No one left the administration easily. To leave it you had to be transferred somewhere else or thrown out.

Sergey took a piece of paper and started writing. When he was overwhelmed with emotions he always took a notebook and started writing. Like a robot. He did what he could. He would write a logic reasonable document analysing all the pros and cons in a crisis situation. It helped a lot. His irregular heap of emotions would form a stream of words, structured and definite.

As a suicidal person writes his last letter about not blaming anyone in his death, Bogdanov suddenly started thinking of all the documents to come to a decision of sacking him. Not a notice of resignation, but the documentation set of a note and resolution draft. Even in this case the administration had different rules. He wrote two notes about himself. Then he signed it in the left bottom corner and put "confidential" in the top right corner. In both corners.

There it was! Ill-fated Malta. A square in the centre of the town. In the square there were coaches with tourists. The coaches didn't have toilets. The square was surrounded with thorny bushes full of red and yellow flowers. The smell was divine! In the right corner of the square there was a row of mobile toilets. Behind the bushes there was a broad asphalt road and an embassy of some country. Of the USA! It was the US Embassy they were talking about at the meeting at the cruise leader yesterday.

Sergey came out of the coach first and had a look around. People were rushing out of the tens of coaches. It was practically impossible to count them, in the first place. Secondly, all the group leaders rushed straight into the bushes to prevent any unlucky egghead from using the bushes as a toilet. Bogdanov was going to get into the bushes but he got scratched and returned to the coach. It did look strange. It looked as though some of them had decided to ease themselves in the bushes in the middle of the town and the rest of them were supposed to queue at the toilets.

Engineer Glinternik was standing aside, watching the leader and looking around. Lisochkin was nowhere to be seen. He was still on the coach playing travel chess with the producer.

For the first time Bogdanov saw how worried the engineer was. He was fidgeting and walking around. He had no suitcase or bag. Sergey came up to him and stared into his eyes. He saw very familiar brown eyes, tired and not childish any more, but those eyes were looking for the answer for the main question.

Similar to how the moments of your life appear in front of you before death, Bogdanov saw himself and his two friends walking in their yard with their arms on each other's shoulders and singing, "Three tankmen, three merry mates..." Yurka, Vovka and him. Then he saw Spivak step towards the teachers and parents and say for Philya, "I will draw a horse..." Those were his words, "That's not fair." Then he saw a bright blue flower pot under Lenin's portrait.

"Go, Vovka!" Bogdanov said quietly but distinctly.

The Smolny met Sergey with fresh fir tree branches, laid neatly around Lenin's monument. He saw the light in his office on the third floor next to the last right pillar on the facade of the building. Having shown his ID, like Stierlitz from "Seventeen Moments of Spring",

Sergey passed the security post, went up two sets of stairs and stopped in front of the half-opened door of his office. "What the hell? It shouldn't be like that!" he thought to himself. The doors should be locked. And the person whose name was on the door sign should keep the key.

If five minutes ago you were nominated to a post at a region committee meeting, then by the time you got to your office the sign with your name would be on the door. But if you were sacked, the sign on the door would be empty or even worse, a new name would shine on the door sign.

Without touching the door handle, Bogdanov looked up instinctively and said to himself, "I thought so. No sign. They didn't even need any notes from me."

Epilogue

The summer was nearly over. Dandelion feathers flew away, ash-berry clusters were getting ripe. Only birch-trees were keeping their green leaves, although their brown aglets had already fallen off the trees.

The party, “a directing and leading force”, didn’t exist any more, as soon as the sixth article of the Constitution was taken away from it. It just entirely disappeared under Tchaikovsky’s music, with its fees and printing offices, palaces and health farms, regional and district party committee buildings. All annoying artificial structures and superstructures, gigantic luminant letters on the buildings, freshly built platforms, faded empty posters for the socialist obligations and the portraits of the Political bureau members – everything was thrown off.

The administration was corrupting of the party intrigues and was gradually turning into the “blokes” in prison, into a heap of spiders, covering all the leading “vertical” with their secretion. Item “a” of article 64, which was escape abroad or refusal to come back from abroad as a form of treason, was recognized out of keeping with the Constitution.

The leaders – both of dissidents and the party of communists – were lost somewhere in the muddle of changes. Nothing more or less ideologic could survive on a podium of free and open market of the era of original accumulation of lawless capital. Penal zone with its concepts filled the country. There were not any other laws. Someone had to invent, take and execute them. But who?

Philippov, being in prison for the fifth time, knew very well that there was no bigger disappointment in life than a release. In prison he was the boss and a respected person. Over there... He also knew he could never stay out of prison for longer than a year. Because the reasons that drove him into prison the first time would also do the second and third times.

The elder authoritative mates calmed him, they explained that there had been a lot of changes at the top. Everything was different now. And skilful and clever people who had been tree-cutting were sought-after. They had to know how to saw, carve up and manage “blokes”. Yamalo-Nenets oil scene needed a top personnel manager. And a part-time formal co-owner. Who else but Petro Ignatyich Philippov!

There were no laws. Yes, the Department of Combating the Theft of Socialist Property was still working and checking the book-keeping. But at the same time the leader of the largest company in the country evaluated and united the state property with the private five roubles of some rabble. It led to some funny mixed property and it was convenient for everyone apart from the state.

It was at that time, when there was a need of the order imitation, that the main thief of No.6 was released and stayed in the North. But on the other side of the Urals. He was given a small but very sweet piece from the gigantic oil and gas complex of the country.

The new power was playing its games and producing and setting its wise pupils. Hungry and exhausted young liberals, like encephalitic mites, were drinking to the full from the budget stream, “cashflow”, and left the country. Other people, wild and decisive, were placed into the power. They would look for the party money but they couldn’t find it. But after the search they would close all criminal cases on that burning problem with a pleasure seen with the naked eye.

Vovka Spivak moved from the States to Israel and lived with his family and parents. He had been looking for a job for two years in that free world in the land of the Covenant. Until the job found him. A miracle happened. “The wonderful wizard of Oz” made him the main keeper of the secret of cashflows and closed accounts. Without leaving his home, Spivak thought of some clever ways of dodge taxes and estimated financial risk models. He was occupied with his favourite maths. And he was being paid good money for that.

Lisochkin, like Petka Philippov, was not from a pioneer camp. There was no ideology, respect for rank or moral in his work. But there was cold calculation and a specific goal. That’s what he had been taught. That was his life. Like many other people’s from his department. He had already retired and was living in Leningrad with Alyonka and their son.

But once Philya came to Leningrad. He found Lisochkin in Livanova’s flat, still unemployed but blooming and confident. They met in

the same flat which had impressed Bogdanov. Alyonka and their son were not in. Philya entered the room himself and saw Yurka lying on the sofa-bed. Yurka didn't recognize his school friend at first. No wonder. He started demanding his rights. He said it was out of order to break in and to cut the door open and he tried to reach the phone. But then he suddenly stopped, slowly sat down on the chair and thought, "Damn! Why didn't I make a request? I was lazy. I should have made sure. He didn't die. He's gonna kill me now and he will be right. Luckily, Livanova is not home." He said quickly, as if he was making excuses, "Petya, I didn't kill Vasilyich. Can you hear me? I didn't even touch him. I nearly died myself because of that curtain rail."

Philya calmly and very slowly looked at the books on the shelves and said, "Oh, I have read this. And this. I think I have read all of these books. Long ago. But I can remember everything." He paused, glanced at Yurka and went on, "You, my friend, recognized me much quicker than Vovka. Guilt is evident. Right?"

Lisochkin kept silent.

Philya looked at the book shelves and noticed that in the bookcase there were books only by French authors – Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, Corneille, Bommarshe... Complete sets of works. On one of the shelves next to the photo of Yurka, Alyonka and their son there was a small figurine. Anyone would recognize it, it was the Eiffel Tower. Something was sticking out from its top for about five centimetres.

Lisochkin had become really scared for the first time in his life.

"Don't be afraid. I am not here to take a revenge. What the heck!" Philippov said, continuing to examine the books and without looking at Yurka but reading his mind.

"I don't kill for revenge. Only for money." Philippov waited for a while, then carried on, "I've got an offer for you. What do you think? Are you ready?" Yurka shook his head. "A good offer," Philya looked at him. Yurka shook his head again. "Firstly, I've got to warn you, you cannot refuse it. Not because I am mean and wicked. Simply because it has already been decided at the top. Secondly," he turned to the bookcase and pointed at the figurine, "I don't need it. You can keep it. Let it remind you that I am still alive and you are alive... at the moment."

Lisochkin agreed.

"Pinch-belly! Should have thrown it away. Shouldn't have kept it for memory. What a fool! Even showed it to Alyonka." Yurka was saying

to himself. But it was not about the figurine. The matter was much more serious. Using his contacts, he would cover Philya's gigantic business. Cover from everyone. Especially from the outrage of the hungry state bureaucrats.

So now for Petka Philippov's call "One for all!", which Spivak heard in a state of delirium in the cell of No.6, the response "And ALL for one!" could be heard logically and confidently. Almost ALL...

Serega Bogdanov was on the shelf. He had forgotten the science. Both of them. He didn't want to go to the liberal or monetarist administration. He felt sick of them. He couldn't even go to the Smolny. Even though he was invited by some of them from the former administration who were still working there.

"Their snoots!" he was explaining to his wife. "You wouldn't believe! Sometimes I can see them through the open door. They are sitting there and you can see just one thought on their faces – you are strong, clever and greedy, take as much as you can. Money, money, money, money..." After that three quarters of the population were just unnecessary.

Sergey was absorbing fresh information. It was penetrating everywhere and was letting you know it was there. It was contradicting the old picture of the world. And he couldn't imagine the new picture. Even though he tried really hard. He had to blow out that cognitive rigidity with something. Then holding his glass, Bogdanov would remember tenderly the old times, when he used to do it with a table glass after the party committee meetings. With spirit, liquid nitrogen and a lump of sugar. Every time he would mentally return to Afghanistan, to the miserable house on the outskirts of Kandahar, where he had met Yurka Lisochkin.

Once he had nothing to do and went to his home grounds. House number eleven, windows of the flats where Vovka and Yurka had lived, the kitchen where he had done his homework, their yard... It used to look so big... The same statues of a pioneer girl and a man with an oar. Now they looked meanness. The school had not changed. But there was no birch-tree which had grown near the staff room window. It had been sawn down recently and a fresh stub was sticking out. On the stub there were a few new sprouts with small bright green leaves.

His legs carried Sergey towards the cinema, to the flat where Alyonka lived. Here there was no colour play on the hanging birch tree

branches as before. The yellow street lamps didn't shine. They were either broken or burned out. The entrance was scuffed and the house intercom didn't work. Sergey climbed the third floor, stopped at the door, stood for a while, listened and rang the bell.

Lisochkin opened the door... The dead spit of Yurka Lisochkin, with a moustache, but not so heavy... Oscar Wilde was out of the competition with his Dorian Grey. This one looked the same as he did in Malta, but eighteen years younger.

Bogdanov swayed of surprise. "Here is the result of the French school. Everyone left to go abroad... No one told me anything. Maybe, they didn't even know. And this scum bag..." Then he thought and understood everything. He remembered arguing with Yurka because of Alyonka when he was in his fourth year at university. He understood why Lisochkin tried to tell him something in the Smolny four years ago and he couldn't. The same in Afghanistan... It was not because of his boss. He also understood that the whole layer of his life had been cut off. In exchange for the joy of the useless juggling with pieces of paper full of notes...

"Who are you looking for? My parents are not in. I can pass them a message."

"What's your name, comrade Lisochkin?"

"My surname is Livanov. My dad is Lisochkin. My name is Sergey and what's yours?"

"I am also Sergey..." Bogdanov uttered with great difficulty. In his head he thought, "She did call him Sergey!" His heart was beating so fast that he couldn't hear his own words, "I was at school with your parents."

"Well, come in. They will be back in an hour."

The feelings that suddenly appeared in the first stroke of emotions now faded away and disappeared. His mind switched on. He had to comprehend everything. He wouldn't have been able to meet Alyonka now. Everything seemed so small and trivial.

"That's fine. Thank you, Sereja. I'll go. Send them my love. I will pop in another time. I will do."

Bogdanov rushed to leave. He felt like going and never coming here again. He was seized by a different sort of feeling – a feeling of something big, important and desired he had lost. His emotions were driving him away. It happens when you are desiring something and

then find yourself in your childhood place. Somewhere in a yard, lawn where you used to play war, or school. You are expecting nostalgic experiences of something subtle but very important for you, you are waiting to meet the moments of your childhood happiness. This must be the most important reason why school friends meet. Especially if they meet in twenty or thirty years. You are waiting and hoping. These are only illusions. We all want to touch them again. As soon as you touch them, everything falls into pieces right in front of you. And all you are left with is disappointment. Everything is run wild or planted with potatoes, there are scuffed walls or burned out street lamps, cut trees or some business place.

Bogdanov turned to the lad standing in the doorway and said, "Have your parents told you anything about me?"

The boy shook his head and slowly shut the door. Behind it his past was left. A big piece of his life where he had a lot of feelings and a lot of events happened.

Bogdanov went down the stairs of the old Stalinesque house. Through the window on the landing he could see the lights of a new construction site.

Author's remarks

Amalrik – Andrey Alekseevich Amalrik, a dissident, author, died in 1980 in Spain.

Cafe “Saigon” – in 1970-s – beginning of 1980-s was a fellowship place of Leningrad geeks, officially unrecognised artists, poets, musicians, other creative youths and also black marketeers.

Coffin and storm (polar explorers slang) – additional payment for the days spent in the sea during the officially recorded storms.

Cognitive rigidity – inability to change perception and apprehension of the environment according to the real changes of the environment.

General department – a unit of the party body in charge for paperwork maintenance, document stacking, document order control, including confidential documents.

Greyhound – 1) person not willing to work; 2) detective.

Instructor of the district committee – executive official supervising the party work in several primary party organizations of factories and organizations located in the same area. Governing establishment of the district committee CPSU bureau.

Isotropism – characteristic of bodies in which elasticity and other physical properties in three mutual perpendicular directions are the same.

Social sciences – historical materialism, dialectical materialism, scientific communism, political economy of socialism, political economy of capitalism, history of the CPSU. Heads of the relevant departments were the governing establishment of the party town committee.

Marxist-Leninist philosophy lecturers were the governing establishment of the party district committee.

The fifth point – the fifth point of the personnel records form – “nationality”.

The main “ideologist” – a person in charge for ideological department of the regional committee, town committee or district committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The offended (thieves slang) – a raped or transferred into an “untouchable” caste prisoner.

The red (thieves slang) – representatives of the group of prisoners formed to co-operate with the administration.

Yesenin-Volpin – Alexander Sergeevich Yesenin-Volpin, mathematician, philosopher, poet, one of the leaders of the dissident and human rights movement in the USSR. Total period spent in prisons, exile and nut hospital is 14 years.

~~Translator's remarks~~

Marks in Soviet/Russian schools:

“five” – excellent, “four” – good, “three” – satisfactory, “two” – poor, “one” – extremely poor.

The following names are variations of the proper name SERGEY BOGDANOV:

Serejka, Serega, Sereja, Sergey, Sery, Bogdasha.

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