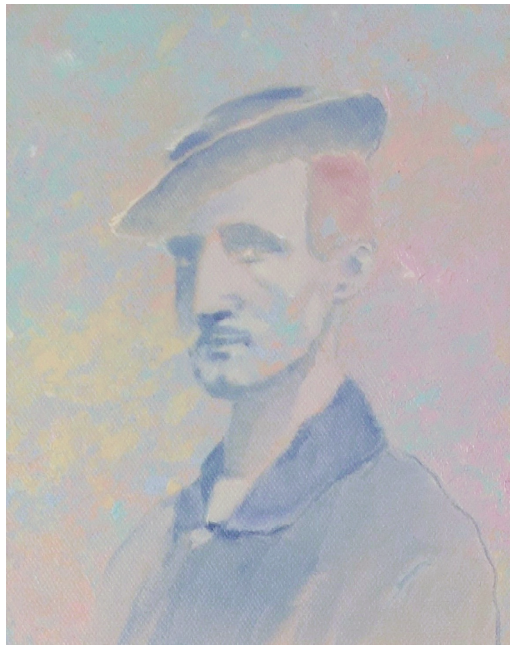


ALL THE WAY
TO
CHATTANOOGA

The Old-Timer's Diary



Geli Vishenchuk-Vishenka

This is a work of nonfiction.

The events, places, and circumstances are all true, all the characters real, though a few names may vary due to memory imperfections.

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The Old-Timer's Diary

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To Nina

*Galloping he rode—a lonely rider,
a ring a-twinkling on his hand.*

A folk song

Look around. Is this where you are?

A question

Prologue

At the first hour of April 13, 2020, a monstrous tornado hit the Village of Ashwood. We did not know the danger was coming until the bedroom window crashed into us while we were sleeping. A few minutes later, the tornado roared away leaving us in darkness amid the debries.

At first light we came out to see what happened.

There were ruins all around. A woman got stuck in the bathroom. Rescue workers used a chainsaw to take her out. Luckily, no one died or was seriously injured. I had small scratches all over and glass dust in my eyes. Nina was fine; I had wrapped her in the blanket, and then we stepped into the closet. It was several more minutes before she could understand

what was going on. The tornado had just started at the Village. From here it went on across Jenkins Road and then all along Standifer Gap Road, tearing trees and houses to pieces. Don and Joyce Womack's condo on the other side of the Village was also destroyed. Don is ninety-six. He is a war hero. During the World War Two he was a bomber pilot.

* * *

I'm writing this on August 13, 2021, when the country has been hit by yet another wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The attack of disenchanted rioters at the US Capitol is in the past, but the pain is still there. People died. It should never have happened.

Some supporters of Donald Trump believe he will be reinstated as president.

Selma Blair made a movie about her battle with Multiple Sclerosis. She had been told to "make plans for dying." The sad news is in such a contrast to her dancing *magic* "Hava Nagila" with Max Beesley in *Kill Me Later*.

Val Kilmer came up with a documentary *Val*, which is a story of his life. He lost his voice for throat cancer. His recent memoir *I'm Your Huckleberry* delighted me, but I came to know him mostly as a gallant character in the movie *The Ghost and the Darkness*.

Americans have come victorious at the Tokyo Games.

Steve Doocy shows up daily on *Fox & Friends*, which is a sure evidence of normalcy. He exudes safety like no one else.

Quentin Tarantino keeps to the vow he made in his childhood not to give his mother "a penny."

US forces are leaving Afghanistan.

And so on.

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* * *

Clipper Water Witch was a Boeing 747 in Pan Am. It was the most beautiful aircraft I had ever seen. In spring 1991, Nina and I flew on it as emigrants from Russia, the then Soviet Union, to America. By that time, I'd already made a miserable fiasco of my life.

That spring I set off on a new journey.

* * *

I've traveled eighty-six years on God's earth, and it seems like I'm not going to have a hell of a lot of time for anything, although there are certain things on my schedule yet to be done.

Is that so.

* * *

This is a diary. I put down today's date and narrate from memory what happened in days of yore or has taken place since quite recently. The trivial swing-chair-oscillation idea comes in quite handy—past and present are so close you would not know where you are now. Since I have lived this one life only, which essentially has been an experiment, a probe into the unknown, I wonder how I would live another one.

You wouldn't.

Well, I must come to the point now. There has to be something to begin with.

I am staring into my fading eyes in the mirror. Are they smiling? Sorrowing? Dreaming?

What is it that you want to say, old geezer?

Julian Vishenka

A little blond girl was dancing to her grandmother's ditty:

Green, green baby oak.

Green, green baby oak.

The girl was five years old. It was in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Nina had moved to that Asian town with her family two years before.

Tomka Tikhomolova, the girl next door, would show up on the balcony and sing out a fantabulous song which is this:

*There was a war, there was a revolution.
And little was Misha boy, he was obscure.
And then he learned to drive a mighty loco,
the biggest, fastest loco in the world.*

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*Speed on, my loco! Tear the air to pieces,
use all your power my glorious multi-wheeler.
Go rumbling through the villages and boroughs,
let them salute your beauty as you pass.*

In first grade Nina used to pick up her friend Mila Ambartsumova on her way to school.

“Where are you from, Ninochka?” asked Mila’s mother the first time she saw the new girl.

“I’m from Russeya,” Nina said.

The error was immediately amended.

“Russia, Ninochka. You are from Russia.”

That was a starting point for the village girl to learn and use the language of educated people.

Post-war-time kids knew oodles of town country songs delivered to them by grownups. Nina acquainted me with some surprisingly good pieces—“Big ocean ships came visiting our harbor” or “A lonely girl sits on the beach, a scarf of silk a-sewing” or “My mother loved and cherished me as her respected daughter.” Among the hits, a perfect gem stood out—a sentimental ballad about tragic love of two strangers.

*Oh, pretty house behind the palisade,
a candy box sunk in the flowering garden—*

One simple song of pain and lament was evidently composed right when and where a battle was raging. It doesn’t show on Google, so the lyrics below could possibly be their first written record.

*The soldiers lay in pain a-moaning.
She salved their wounds, a loving nurse.*

*“I’ll bring you food,” she said, “and water.
I’ll write your letters to your wives.”*

*A soldier now dictates his letter:
“My angel, hope this finds you well.
My wounds are healing. By God’s mercy
Your good old man is coming home.”*

*Another one dictates his letter:
“My angel, hope this finds you well.
I’m badly wounded. God, it’s fatal.
Your good old man ain’t coming home.”*

Saturday, March 4, 2017

Hyperthymesia

After high school, which she graduated with honors, Nina worked at a military hospital for some time, first as a kitchen attendant and later, an LPN.

Hospital meals were both scanty and vomitous as a rule—which left many a stomach empty. Two soldiers, hospital patients, entered the kitchen room one night and asked Nina for bread. The hungry guys got what they asked for and then, with their mouths full, let her know how crazy they were for country music and how super great it would’ve been to hear her sing a song if just this one time. “Sing for us, please. Just a song,” they pleaded with her. Nina didn’t know if she was ready to sing publicly. She finally conceded.

Other patients, awakened by the sounds of singing, bundled into the kitchen and soon filled up the entire room. Sitting on the table, Nina sang on and on, one song after another, until it was really late and the charge nurse shooed the audience back to their beds.

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Nina told me this little story yesterday evening. That's how I know.

* * *

For years we used to spend a week's vacation in Orange Beach, Alabama, which was about eight-hour drive from Chattanooga in our 2003 Buick Rendezvous. Nearly half the time along the way, Nina was singing songs she had known since childhood.

* * *

In my school years, during summer vacations I used to travel, by train, from Lvov, Ukraine, to Stalingrad (hereinafter Volgograd), and out of childish curiosity observe various railroad mechanisms performing their specific functions. On one occasion I stepped off the gangway that linked the railcars, and gazed down at the wheels which were rolling and rolling hypnotically along the tracks. Back on the gangway, I noticed that the gap between the opposing metal handrails behind me suddenly closed, and the handrails crossed. I had been there, right between them, just a fraction of a second ago.

In horror, I watched myself dying on those handrails.

Whenever I set my foot on the front walk of our condo where Nina had fallen and broken her arm as she was running inside for cover during a rainstorm, I feel a vicarious shot of pain. This kind of mirror emotion first became known to me when I was about eleven. My brother Igor and I were going home after visiting Uncle Pavlusha. Some words were spoken that made Igor chase me. He was four years my senior, but I was a damn good sprint runner. He overstrained, fell, and

groaned. What I saw in his face made me suddenly feel like I was badly hurt. I am having this feeling right now as my memory goes back to that incident.

There is a scientific term for things like that—which, of course, is hyperthymesia or rather, as in my case, selective hyperthymesia. Here's a description: some moments of past life are being emotionally relived over and over again.

Kind of spooky.

Names and Other Confusing Things

Until 1915, there was no such name as Vishenchuk anywhere on the planet. That year, in Siberia, our ancestral name was transmuted into a new shape—evidently, in an effort to make various uncommon names look alike in a convenient sameness. It happened when refugees from the Brest-Lithuania province, the extreme western part of Russia, were being registered. Ending *chuk* is typical for Western Ukrainian or Belarusian surnames—it shows the direction to look in.

My real historical name is Vishenka (with a soft n) which goes as deep down in years as my paternal great grandfather Julian Vishenka. Until the 1980s, a gravestone bearing his name could be seen in the Volkovichi village cemetery. My father Michael was also born Vishenka. My grandfather's name was Ivan Vishenka.

There is no way I will ever know who Julian Vishenka's parents were. Those who could inform me on that have been long gone. His first name may point to his Catholicism, the religion of Polish people. He could be Polish. My DNA tells that I'm partially Polish.

Anyway, after some thinking, I decided that my pen name for this book has to be Geli Vishenchuk-Vishenka.

Congratulations.

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* * *

Not a single photo of my paternal grandparents, Ivan and Katerina, is expected to come to surface at any time for it never existed. Judging by their children's looks, one of them was fair-haired and blue-eyed like Uncle Pavlusha, the other—brown-eyed like my father or his younger sister Dominica.

Ivan loved his wife so much—he could not live without her, literally. When she was gone, he followed her to death right away. It happened in Siberia in 1918. He was fifty-seven.

Uncle Pavlusha had a nice exterior. His wife Valentina never missed a chance to say, "Ain't my Pavlusha good looking!" So, it wouldn't be wrong to suggest that it was Katerina who set an example of elegance in the family. She gave birth to five sons and five daughters all of whom survived.

It was a destitute family who shared the house with Katerina's parents. My Moscow cousin Rimma told me one time on the phone that the house was so small—an effort was needed to imagine how it could hold them all.

She visited Volkovichi with Uncle Pavlusha and Igor several times while I was roaming around the world. I have never seen the land of my ancestors.

A legend goes that Grandpa Ivan had a gift of healing. Ailing people were coming to him for help. He somehow cured hernia, among other things. Or so I was told.

He used to make wooden skates for his children. In Syzran, a town on the Volga River, another cousin of mine, Vladimir, is still keeping a small handmade wooden box with the crafter's name, Ivan Vishenka, carved on the underside of its cover.

The 1897 Census of the Russian Empire shows Ivan Vishenka and his wife Katerina with her parents, Roman and Varvara Kovalchuk, the owners of the household. It also shows

their children, my uncles and aunts, born before 1897: Simeon (father of George and Rimma), Alexei, Pavel (Uncle Pavlusha), Praskovia, Anne, and Elizabeth Vishenka. According to the Census, they were the only Vishenkas in that part of the country. There were no traces of any persons named Vishenchuk to be found.

The rest of the children—Akim (father of Vladimir just mentioned above and Yuri), Maria, Michael (my father), and Dominica (mother of Ludmila)—were born, of course, later.

Burning Mystery

Arrested and Shot

In Penza, Russia, we had a big brown dog. Mom, who was a history teacher, named him Ajax. Dad took Igor and me and Ajax, and we went out of town to give Ajax to a beekeeper who needed a dog to guard his property. The beekeeper had us taste what his bees were producing—tangy, aggressively sweet honey. In slow waves, heavy outflow of sunshine honey gravitated from one jug into another. It was a fascinating attraction to watch.

Ajax refused to guard the apiary and ran away. Uncle Simeon bumped into him in town, and we got the dog back.

My first memory began in Penza. But Mom gave birth to me in another town, Kostanay, Kazakhstan, which was far away in the east.

Shortly after I was born, Dad was sent to Petropavlovsk, a town in the northern part of Kazakhstan where he continued his career as a communist party functionary. His new position was rather high—assistant of the First Secretary of the Regional Committee of the communist party.

In May 1938, he was arrested. In October of the same year, *troyka*—three self-appointed judges representing communist party, government, and federal security service (KGB)—sentenced him to death. His alleged crimes were sedition and conspiracy (articles 58-1 and 58-8 of the Criminal Code) which as a devoted communist he had never begun to even fantasize.

Mom was supposed to publicly denounce her husband. Instead, she rushed home, grabbed her two sons, and fled. That was what the raw instinct of survival told her to do. She left us with her younger sister Anne in Goose-Chrystal, a small town near Moscow, and went to Penza to join her parents.

I was three years old. My brother, Igor, was seven.

Hakuna Matata

Dad made it out alive. This is how he explained it in his official autobiography dated December 1939:

In 1938, enemies of the people came up with a vile slander against me. I was expelled from the communist party and arrested.

Being imprisoned for a year, I wasn't charged with any crime and in May 1939 was released. My party membership was restored, and I was completely rehabilitated.

I walked out of prison in a very bad shape and had to leave for treatment.

Wasn't charged. Really? How about article 58?

Rehabilitated? Who was shot, then?

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In another autobiography, written in 1941, he stated emphatically: “I was not taken to court, neither was I under an investigation.” Of course, he wasn’t. He was just *in a very bad shape*. Dad was lying.

Here’s a takeout from KGB archives:

Michael Vishenchuk, year of birth 1905.

Arrested: May 26, 1938.

Accused: October 24, 1938, by troyka. Charge: 58-1, 58-8 of Criminal Code.

Rasstrel (sentenced to be shot to death).

Rehabilitated: August 12, 1954. Reason: lack of legal proof.

Rehabilitated he sure was, but it happened fifteen years later. In 1954, KGB bastards didn’t know he’d survived. According to their files, he was executed in 1938 and since then had been as dead as it gets. According to Dad, nothing happened, everything was fine.

Shot and Released

In my archive, there is a note-size paper sheet stating that Michael Vishenchuk was being “kept in custody” from May 1938 to May 1939.

Kept in custody. That’s all it was. Really?

The first entry in Dad’s job registration book, which for Soviet citizens was a strategically important document to keep, is dated December 1939. It states that the information about the previous years of service was supported by “the book owner’s words.” This means that he was not able to produce a valid proof of his work experience for the period prior 1939. It is highly likely that at that time his papers still remained in his prison file which was a dead man’s file.

He varied his autobiographies and changed information in several resumes he wrote.

There is no record of his rehabilitation in 1939. So, what am I supposed to think? Dad clambered out of the mass grave and then continued his life as a master of deception?

Could he run away? Some prisoners did. But this is not my father's case. The KGB file confirms death.

Neither his autobiographies nor his resumes help in any way solve the mystery: Was he really shot?

And again, that little note about custody—it looks like it was never shown to anyone, just cached. All these facts raise serious doubts as to Dad's statement that he was rehabilitated while in prison or elsewhere in 1939.

* * *

I cut in here from the future with a quotation from an article by journalist Leonid Mlechyn, published Sept. 3, 2017, in *Novaya Gazeta* (*New Newspaper*).

Justification, dismissal, release of detainees were considered serious flaws that led to punishment. As a matter of fact, investigators and operatives didn't seek to be punished. If evidence wasn't good enough, they would concoct another accusation, choose another kind of crime, another article of the Criminal Code. They would never release anyone.

It was a time of simple laws. The fact of being arrested was in itself proof of guilt. A person under arrest was immediately viewed as an enemy of the people and had to be eliminated as such. There were no deviations from that law. No mercy. No setting free. Certain death or at least a long-term imprisonment.

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Sunday, March 5, 2017

Yesterday, an e-mail came from Bolotov. He insists that I stop mixing colors—which, according to him, is lousing up my natural artistry—and return to the Lubok style instead. He lives in Krasnodar, the capital of Cossacks nation. He went on,

The art work you are doing these days is just a drab imitation of the nineteenth century photos, while your previous robust paintings were sure evidence of your talent. Unfortunately, you and your friends, professional artists, fail to see that.

Whatever you say, my friend. Whatever you say.

Spotlights

The question remains, If Dad was right and rehabilitation did take place, why doesn't the KGB file say so? Instead, it states in a plain and simple word, Death. What is the real weight of the note about custody? How could the evidence of custody be given to him after he'd actually been shot? Why there is no indication in his file that he was not shot but instead released with that note in hand?

I don't know at what point I can stop asking questions. There is no compelling answer to any of them. I'm wandering around and around in circles.

Putting it in capsule, if the KGB file tells the truth and my father was, in fact, shot dead as stated, then all his life after 1939 was just a non-stop venture.

Uncle Pavlusha told me that Dad had gone through horrible tortures in prison, that he had signed all the papers he was given to sign. Mom maintained silence. I think she didn't want me to know the family secret because it could've led me to wrong conceptions about life outside. She did make one, judg-

mental, remark though. She said that after Dad came back, he took to drinking and when drunk would sing this:

*Don't you ominous black raven
make your circles o'er my head.*

He returned in the dark of the night, knocked on the window, looking haggard, scruffy. Mom was aghast. She didn't know he'd survived. That was all she chose to tell me.

* * *

News from the future again. Things cleared up, finally. It was painful to come to know what really happened, but at least there is no mystery about it anymore. Details will arrive in due time. Future is not here yet.

Zhora

In June 1942, at the age of thirty-seven, Dad died of a heart attack. His grave in Penza isn't there anymore. The cemetery was demolished to make way for a construction site.

In that gloomy June, Zhora (George), my cousin, son of Simeon Vishenchuk, came right from the war to say goodbye to Uncle Michael. Standing by the grave in the crowd, he held me in his arms for a better view. I was seven years old and, hopefully, not so heavy.

Zhora went through the whole hell of the World War Two, from the beginning to the end, as a 122mm howitzer battalion commander. He was a courageous man, a charismatic with green eyes, elegant body language, mesmerizing manner of speech.

“Zhorka,” his Latvian wife Aina would yell at him, “you’re

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such an asshole!” They passionately loved each other, but the marriage was turbulent and panned out badly. They divorced. Zhora stayed in Lvov where they’d settled down after the war. Aina returned to Latvia, her homeland.

In the following years, Zhora had several other relationships with women. He married and then again divorced. From this second marriage, he had a son Pavel who now lives in Moscow and has a job that requires frequent long-distanced traveling. Pavel’s son Vladimir, 22, is at the beginning of his career as a film actor.

Pavel and I corresponded intermittently for some time. In his last e-mail, he asked me if I cared about my *russkost* (Russian cultural background). I answered that I didn’t and that I was happy to know that my granddaughters had similar approach. There were no more e-mails from Pavel. But I’m not sure if the real reason for that was my remark. He seemed to be just reluctant to communicate.

Back to Zhora. A strange Crimean woman emerged and soon disappeared—vanished into thin air. Then there was a longer period of romantic relationship with a mysterious Polish femme fatale Kazimirovna. One of them, or both, pretended dominance, demonstrated peevish temper. There were various rumors about all this, and some uncertain details were discussed even in Zhora’s presence. He smiled and remained silent.

In the early 1980s, Zhora died from lung cancer. He was buried in the Brukhovichi cemetery, which is near Lvov. None of his women were seen at the funeral. Only Aina came from Latvia—she stood by the coffin alone, weeping.

Zhora and Aina had two daughters, Svetlana and Olga. One now lives in Ventspils, Latvia, the other—in Kherson, Ukraine.

Zhora's mother Augusta was also Latvian. She had a magnificent personality—lofty bearing, hypnotic gaze, thespian talk—a stunner. Aina was a fisherman's blond, pretty daughter, a female fisherman herself, with a specific innate vocabulary and demeanor. Zhora and Aina would use Russian for casual everyday talk and jump over to Latvian for something hot or personal.

In the late 1950s, Augusta left Penza and moved to Lvov to join her son's family. She brought with her, among other things, the legendary rocker, my father's favorite. Zhora told me that Dad had an analytical mind of Sherlock Holmes.

Augusta had established strict drinking regulations in the family, used to hide vodka. The first thing Dad did when we visited Uncle Simeon was hop in the rocker. After a few minutes of rocking and thinking, he got off the seat and strode right to the hiding place.

Uncle Simeon was a lawyer. When I first saw the huge double-pedestal, leather top executive desk in his home office, it immediately made me want to worship it.

Each time Augusta opened the door to let us in, a beautiful German Shepherd Julka greeted us enthusiastically in the hall, jumping and running around.

Granny Dusya

Igor made this remark in his memoir:

Guileless Granny Dusya didn't like Uncle Simeon much. Challenged by my petulance, she would say with a faked anger, "Ain't it an Uncle Senya again!"

Granny left a short autobiography, a powerful recollection of long bygone times, a masterpiece written in excellent

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Russian. I will certainly include it in my notes.

Blue-eyed, lissome, amiable Granny had a subtle sense of humor. We were rather close. I liked to be with her. Even today, I remember her beautiful face in minute details. There was a tiny scar on her chin, looking like a little star. I asked her how she'd gotten it. She said it was a mark of famine.

She knew me better than anyone else. When told about Nina, she laughed:

“Gelka? Married? Can't be.”

Her life wasn't all along happy, devoid of sorrow. In her memoir, she shunned mentioning the names of her dead children, “a boy died at the age of six”—“a boy, ten months old, died.” There was only one occasion when she broke the pattern. “Yuri, our younger son, was killed in war,” she wrote and stopped abruptly, never tried to continue.

Mom told me the name of the six-year-old boy—his name was Seriozha (Sergei).

Granny pined for those whom she lost. This is her song:

*The ducks, the ducks are flying,
the ducks and two gray geese up and above.
Oh, where is my darling?
Oh, where is my darling whom I love?*

Aunt Lydia told me about Granny's last minutes.

“It was late at night,” she said. “We were talking, calmly, half-voice. Granny sat in her armchair, listening. In peace, she closed her eyes, sighed softly, and passed away.”

Monday, March 6, 2017

Yesterday, there was a family gathering on Brock Road where our son Constantin lives with his wife Lily and their

daughter Julia. We were already sitting at dinner when Julia arrived from Johnson City, Tennessee—thin, pale, tired, and hungry. She'd been stuck in a traffic jam on the interstate highway. There will be a graduation ceremony at the University in May, and after that, in August, she will move to Memphis to continue her studies at Medical School.

Polina and Tom are far away, in Providence, RI. Polina is expecting a baby in August. It's a girl, and she already has the name, Katerina Anne Zmijewski.

Belated Introduction

“Treasure Island” by Robert Louis Stevenson is my eternally favorite novel. Once in a while, I lift it from the bookshelf and run randomly through a paragraph or two or just nurse it in my hands to enjoy once again the thrill of the moment when I’d first started reading it. This book had enlightened my childish mind with the ideas of Freedom, Independence, Courage, Dream, and, of course, Luck. I was surprised and pleased to know that there was such thing as private property, that you could own a tavern, for instance, or a ship, that you could travel wherever you want and have breathtaking adventures as a man of will and action.

In February 1991, a few weeks before our departure to America, Igor came to Odessa to say goodbye to us. He looked pale and said he felt pain under his right ribs. His sixtieth birthday anniversary was coming in April, and he had little supply

of alcohol for the big party he was planning to enjoy with his friends and co-workers at Lvov Polytechnics. He was the Head of the Chair of Electronics. Luckily, I still kept my ration coupons for alcohol—he left with a duffle bag heavily loaded with bottles of vodka. The problem had been solved. Igor was beaming.

How much of the past am I dragging along with me? Not much, I hope. I still have some phobias. But the greatest fear I ever had in my long life was to get stuck in my Russian misery forever.

Introduction Continues and Ends

This book was originally written in Russian. Its first readers had trouble keeping in mind a whole lot of names sprayed across the text. They asked me for a list of dramatis personae—I have made one, it is to be found below. Most of the names are real except when they slipped out of my memory on two or three occasions. Some Russian and American names are similar but have different spelling—for example, Mikhail is identical to Michael. I use the latter. Some names have been shortened, patronymics—required by the Russian tradition on many occasions—omitted.

Russians use different name forms for addressing a person or being in the process of talking to that person or telling something about that person or expressing emotion toward that person. Just one example: Vladimir, Volodya, Vova, Vovochka, Vovka, etc. I am not going to drag the reader into this.

Incidentally, academic grading in Russian schools is numerical. I didn't hesitate to use letter grades. Trying to make it even easier, I have made a number of other minor changes, added brief commentaries, and removed several oversized passages to avoid long explanations.

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Here's the list of names.

Geli (read as in Latin) Vishenchuk-Vishenka, self
Nina (Neena), my wife

Slava (Anita) Varava, our daughter
Andre Varava, her husband
Polina (Polya) Zmijewski, their daughter
Tom Zmijewski, Polya's husband
Katerina (Katya), their daughter

Constantin Vishenchuk, our son
Lily, his wife
Julia, their daughter

Igor Vishenchuk, my brother
Aida, his wife
Valya and Marinka, their daughters
Misha, their son

Michael Vishenchuk, my father
Uncle Pavlusha (Pavel Vishenchuk), his older brother
Valentina (Aunt Valya), Uncle Pavlusha's wife

Simeon (Uncle Senya), my father's eldest brother
Augusta, his wife
Zhora (George), their son
Rimma, their daughter

Varvara Plastikova, my mother
Peter Agafonov, her second husband
Lucy, his daughter, my stepsister

Stephan Plastikov, my maternal grandfather
Granny Dusya (Eudokia), his wife, my grandmother

Their daughters:

Varvara (Varya, my mother), Lydia, and Anne

Their sons:

Vasili (Vasya), Viacheslav, and Yuri

Aunt Anne's children:

Leo and Tanya (who has daughter Tanya Jr.)

Paulina, Nina's mother

Ivan Leikin, her husband, Nina's father

Katerina Morozova, Paulina's mother

Maria Moskalyova, Ivan's mother, Paulina's mother-in-law

Dmitri and Alexander, Ivan Leikin's brothers

Agatha (Agashka), Dmitri's wife

Other names are episodic.

Sitting With Dad

The Tale Begins

On snowy winter days, I would throw myself flat on the sledge and slide bolting down the street toward the end of the slope where the Moika River was. One time, I rammed into pedestrians who weren't fast enough to dodge. I got a bloody nose and came home looking like a wounded warrior.

In the kindergarten, I had a playmate nicknamed Akula which means Shark. His father was a bathhouse attendant who used to give us trashed admission tickets which looked like miniature notebooks. I wonder if this can explain my life-long addiction to paper products.

I had a girlfriend in the kindergarten. Her name was Tamara. My love for her was so huge I would give her all my possessions including the New Year presents. I drew her por-

trait and explained my feelings for her in the caption below, “Princess Tamara.” I wonder how I could possibly love a girl with such a name.

* * *

In Lvov, on the second floor of our house on Yablonowski (Rustaveli) Street, there was a girl. Her mother had a stentorian voice, *basso profundo*. She would step out onto the common balcony, which ran across three sides of the inner yard, and shout the girl’s name, “TAMARA!”

Seventy years later, I can still hear the echo of the Mother calling her daughter home.

* * *

In my last two years in Penza, I habitually rambled around town, often until after dark. Benevolent strangers took me home on several occasions. In summertime I bathed in the Moika River, alone. I could not swim, though.

My maternal grandparents, Grandad Stephan and Granny Dusya, lived in a government housing apartment at Penza-4 train station. Grandad was the telegraph service manager at that station. Their younger son Yuri lived with them. He was about to graduate from high school.

In June 1941, Russia entered the World War Two. In 1944, Yuri completed training as a fighter plane pilot. He was killed as German planes bombed the train that was taking him to the front. He was a handsome, intelligent boy of romantic disposition. He loved to sing and dance and was very good at both. I remember things which belonged to him—a fencing sword and an ape carnival costume.

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Mom was the eldest child in the family. In her mind, her grown up sisters, Lydia and Anne, still remained babies who needed special care—a conception that was not always gladly acknowledged by them.

Following the early 1930s vogue, my parents didn't register their ties, and Mom maintained her maiden name Plastikova until her second marriage in 1953.

My brother Igor had a perfect memory. Now I borrow a few lines from his notes regarding our early years in Penza. He wrote,

I was awfully sensitive. When I saw Dad back home from a business trip, I gasped, couldn't utter a word, my eyes welled up with tears. Geli was more practical, stubborn. He tried to throw stones over a fence. It was a high fence—the stones bounced back on his head. It angered him. He went on throwing—and came home with bruises and scratches.

Dad and I were pretty close. We used to go to the river to exercise. In summer, we made a seven-mile trip to the woods—Dad and I, with Ajax.

At times Dad came home drunk. He liked to put Geli and me on his lap, enjoyed having two sons. Seeing this, Mom softened. But overall, her stand was uncompromising.

I have a vague recollection of that time as though I am trying to see my parents, my brother, and myself through a dense fog. There is something in there, discernible but not entirely clear or certain.

It was the eve of the year 1942. Someone is holding me. I am sick, probably with flu. I see the New Year tree, children around it. I hear singing. Suddenly, I find myself sitting with Dad at an empty table. He has just entered and taken a seat, looking tired and sorrowful. I see him as an ectoplasmic image. I'm aware of his dear, special presence. I feel pity for him.

Wednesday, March 8, 2017

In the evening, Constantin came over as he usually does on Wednesdays, this time with Julia. Nina made stuffed *blinis*, and I prepared guacamole according to my own recipe—the usual mild mix with a bit of honey mustard, sugar, and a splash of Jose Cuervo Margarita Mix—a recipe which I dare not recommend. My innovation inspired Constantin to give me an ideological name *guacamolist*. Nina baked vegetable marrow, and a blueberry cobbler. All this was capped with Bustelo coffee and bags of jokes, as usual.

The conversation spun around Julia's forthcoming departure to Memphis. She was supposed to continue her studies there at the College of Medicine. I commented on that saying that I had always been a regular goof-off at school, never willing to get into the smallest idea about anything. Julia listened and pointed her finger at herself. That's my girl!

Julia has had an inventive mind and a lovely touch of grotesque humor since she was yet a little child. She once brought a compass to help me find a gnat who had bitten me treacherously and was now hiding somewhere in the room. She came to the Easter Egg Hunt with a wicker basket and a magnifying glass.

There is one more thing that tells a lot about her personality. She would take a quick look at a display of toys and pick up just one of them. She would never take more than one. The toy would be loved all through her childhood.

Hot Water

Two Widows and Their Four Children

Soon after Dad's death, Mom took us to Denisovka, a village on the Tobol River in Kazakhstan where Mom's sister Anne lived with her little children, Leo and Tanya—they were two and four years my junior. Anne's husband, Victor Krasavtsev, had been killed in action in the first days of the war. Two widows with their four children began to live together.

Overall, Denisovka was a place where I would wish to stay forever. Yet, some moments were nothing less than tales of shudder and terror. A drunk truck-driver smashed into a flock of children playing on the road. A little boy saw his dead sister lying in a pool of blood and hopped away on one leg. He had just seen the unthinkable.

Sunday, March 12, 2017

At night, snow fell on the Village of Ashwood. For a few hours, the roofs and the lawns remained white. This year, winter in Chattanooga was warmer than ever, and suddenly—this. Woa!

* * *

In Denisovka, Mom made her first attempt to send me to school. In my perception, it was nothing less than a brazen invasion of my privacy. My freedom and independence suddenly appeared to be in danger. *Multiplication table? What the heck is that! I'm not interested.*

A year later Mom did persuade me to get some education. It was wartime. The government didn't care much about textbooks or notebooks in classrooms, so there weren't any. The teacher was a German woman, who for the sake of consistency was deemed to be a spy.

In 1944, we moved to Lazorki, a railroad junction near Poltava, Ukraine, and when next year we came to Lvov to start a new life, Igor wrote back to Lazorki, "Gelka probably won't be admitted to school because of his low grades." By that time, I was already 10 years old. The wonders and mysteries of the city of Lvov had shattered my childish solipsistic mindset with such vigor I finally realized who I was.

The world had radically changed, it didn't belong to me alone anymore. I realized that I was just a teeny-weeny part of it. The multiplication table was no longer a problem, but that had nothing to do with memorizing techniques. An arcane power took an action, and the whole crowd of math trickery settled down in my head as easy as natural law. I just didn't notice the change.

Thursday, April 6, 2017

Long Shouts

A huge thunderstorm with tornado threat lashed across Chattanooga diagonally from south-west. It is always scary. People are thinking of a secure hiding place in the house. Fortunately, it all ended before dark.

On the first day of April, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, one of the giants of Soviet literature, poet Evgeni Evtushenko, died. He left Russia in the same year as I did. But there was a difference. I couldn't stay where *sovok* was all around; he couldn't stay where *sovok* was no more. His poetry was far from my interests, but I liked a few of his lines, to wit, "Long Shouts," "This Is What Is Happening to Me," and the introductory part of "It Is Snowing White."

Monday, November 6, 2017

Couple of Minutes

Since the last entry dated April 6, an awful lot of big and not so big things has taken place.

Julia graduated from East Tennessee State University, with honors. It took her just three years to complete the course. Smart girl. In May, the whole family went to watch the Graduation ceremony. In August, Julia began her studies in pharmacy at the College of Medicine in Memphis, said she liked it.

On the third day of August, Polina gave birth to a precious girl Katerina, to the indescribable joy of the entire family.

All this time, I'd been busy preparing the fifth edition of *New Testament Scriptures*. I'd come across Valentina Kuznetsova's seemingly positive remarks on it in one of her interviews and decided to edit it one more time. Constantin has already placed the revised text on my website. There won't be a paper edition.

Nobody in Russia would think about spending money on it, never mind they like it.

On June 23, Constantin drove me to the Memorial Hospital ER. I was diagnosed with a *neglected benign prostatic hyperplasia*. Two days later, I had a heart attack, and a second stent was installed in my heart. Sharp pain in my ribs woke me up. It turned out I'd been taken "out of there" by defibrillator. How long? Couple of minutes, the nurse said.

A thought floated across my sedated mind, "Ain't it a better place out there?" I'd been an unwelcome visitor, though. Returned empty-handed. Did I see the bright lights, the tunnel? Anything? Nope.

Tuesday, November 8, 2017

Yesterday, Russia marked the 100-year anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, didn't celebrate much, though. They are afraid of even the word revolution. People held their breath. God forbid the secure and comfortable criminal regime be gone. Better not.

Their Eyes Were Turned Away from Us

Winters in Denisovka were long, with much snow. Igor and I liked to jump into snowbanks from the flat roof of our house. One morning we opened the front door and knocked against a snow wall, had to dig a tunnel to the outside world.

The house had two rooms with a big primitive Russian stove in the first one. But firewood was a problem. The land around Denisovka was just an endless steppe with feather grass swinging in the wind. Instead, *kizyak* was used, which is dry cow pies. In summertime, like all other kids, I followed cows and gathered the warm manure right from under them with bare hands.

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In winter nights we had visitors. Wolves came close to the house, and we heard them howling.

In the winter of 1944, we watched a long line of sledges moving through Denisovka. People of an unknown nation had been driven off their land. Their eyes were turned away from us. We were looking at them with fear.

The Dam

The Tobol River was not far from our house. It was blocked by a dam which had an opening for a loud, foamy waterfall. Across the opening, a wooden ladder was thrown, horizontally. It all formed an ideal playground.

A big boy pushed me from the dam into the river—I sank to the bottom like a stone. Igor pulled me out and shook the water out my lungs. Next time, I dove voluntarily, out of curiosity, but could not swim back, began to drown. Igor came to my rescue again. On the third try, I swam.

The waterfall side of the dam was teeming with fish, mostly minnows and perches. Minnow was good for frying, perch went to *ookha* which is fish soup. Fishing was both fun and a substantial addition to our scanty food. There was a special treat on the New Year eve—boiled potato with *pampushkas*, little doughnuts looking like meatballs.

In Penza I used to wander around—a practice which continued in Denisovka. One day I advanced too far beyond the horizon but, by some ancient instinct, chose the right direction and came back home safe. It was dangerous, though. But I did not care, was too young to know.

Your Dear Leo

I played in the yard with my little cousin Tanya sometimes. One time I broke a cup—a piece of porcelain hit her in the

forehead. A small scar above her left eyebrow would be there her whole life.

Leo caught cold as often as he could. He liked being sick, and he alone had his own bed, while the rest of us slept on the floor. He would shiver under the blanket and call for help.

“Aunt Varya, blowy!” he whimpered.

Mom came over and tucked him up.

Leo grew up into a kind, sincere, and candid person. He signed his letters, “Your dear Leo.” In his last years, he asked me for a piece of military uniform—I sent him a NATO jacket. His wife, Galina, told me later, on the phone, that Leo “was proud to have such a jacket” and was wearing it at all times. Her exact words were “he never took it off.”

Every once in a while, before going to sleep, we sang in darkness “Steppe Is All Around,” “Across the Barren Steppes of Trans-Baikalia,” “Oh Glorious Sea, Holy Baikal,” and, of course, our widowed mothers’ favorite “What Makes You Sway, oh Slender Rowan Tree” which they sang alone, with us listening. *A slender rowan tree is in love with the manly oak across from her on the other side of the road but doomed to eternally stay where she is, swaying in sorrow, alone.*

Russian old folk songs are normally sad, dark, gloomy. Their heroes, as though they do not have anything else to do, freeze to death in wilderness, suffer terrible losses, end their lives in misery—and mostly blame others for that.

Many years later, I was blissed out listening to a wacky Ukrainian song “A Black Cloud Was Coming,” a witty present from my friend Vovka Malyuk. About the same time, Valentin Karpenko taught Igor and me, in Spanish, “De Colores” which became our forever favorite scolion.

In Denisovka, the Mowgli period of my childhood began to finally wind up. It essentially contributed to forming me as a

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stubborn, egotistic, and naive personality who rejects any kind of outer influence, has difficulty in socializing, and regards freedom and independence as things to treasure most.

Wednesday, November 9, 2017

Yuri Emir-Suin

There was milk and butter on the table because we had a cow. Butter was made by churning—which we did in turn. The process took tons of time and effort. “Cow butter” was the brand name of the product. There was a trick about how we ate that butter. Mom would spread it over a slice of bread in a thin layer. We used the front teeth to push butter a little forward with every bite to finally build a sizable mass to enjoy. That kind of trick.

One day, the cow did not return with the herd, vanished in the steppe. There was no milk anymore.

Aunt Anne took a wounded lieutenant Yuri (Yunus) Emir-Suin to stay with us until full recovery—as was the usual practice in wartime. Yuri was a well-educated, ingenious young man with a strikingly handsome look. He was one of the Crimean Tartars nobilities. His name alone—Emir—pointed to it convincingly. Aunt Anne married him. Well, not exactly married, but they were together till the early 1950s.

Soon we left Denisovka forever.

Saturday, November 11, 2017

Yesterday, Constantin joined us for dinner. There was soup, fresh cottage cheese, bread, all homemade. Constantin is going to fly to South Bend, Indiana, later today. This is supposed to be his last trip there to finish his studies in oncology. The graduation will take place in August next year.

A Celestial Pleasure

In 1944, Grandad Stephan retired. The railroad administration retrieved the apartment that had been given to him for the time of his service, leaving him homeless.

Eugene Agafonov, Mom's friend since her youth, was now a big communist boss in Moscow. He provided us with a boxcar to move to Ukraine where, as rumor had it, there was a better chance to survive. The boxcar was waiting for us in Kostanay. It took us a few days to get there in a cart pulled by oxen.

Grandad Stephan and Granny Dusya joined us in Penza. Yuri Emir-Suin was also with us all the way. It was a long and tedious journey with desperately endless stops on every railroad junction.

An infinite joy awaited us at major train stations. There was a big standard sign, HOT WATER, on the boiler's wall. Even a blind eye couldn't miss it. Beneath the sign, a thick, heavy stream of sweet, super-hot water gushed out of a huge faucet. Passengers hurried to it with all kinds of vessels to fill. Drinking hot water was deemed a celestial pleasure.

Major train stations were also kind of unsafe places. All sorts of people with plywood suitcases and huge burlap sacks were trying to break into our boxcar. Each time, we quickly bolted the door. Not a single outsider ever penetrated.

Our boxcar had been connected to and disconnected from various trains many times until, finally, at Lazorki junction, a railroad official came up with the news.

"End of journey," he announced. "Get out."

It was Poltava region, Ukraine.

The Hemp Field

We settled on the second floor of a half-ruined house. Grandad built a makeshift window by closing a gap in the wall with a piece of broken glass and a few bricks. We slept on the floor, which was nothing unusual, normal. What was really new was the land with its orchards and gardens and lush green fields.

The older generation had an extensive experience of survival. Grandad gathered acorns, nettle, sorrel, goosefoot, and other herbs unknown to me. Popular among children was black nightshade with its sweet berries.

In one of his last letters to me, Leo mentioned that Grandad had often taken him out to the fields for lessons on understanding herbs. Not me. I never listened.

Granny was the family doctor. She treated bruises and small wounds with plantain. Castor oil and *badiaga—spongilla fluviatilis*—were her prescriptions for all other clinical cases.

Sunday, November 12, 2017

Them

We bought a dairy cow, but she turned out to be an aggressive, vicious individual prone to butting and kicking. On top of it, despite her oversized udder, the milk yield was miserable. After some struggling, we finally exchanged her for a small, unpretentious, one-horned animal, whose udder was not larger than a man's fist. And, holy mooing, she gave a full bucket of milk at a time.

We also had a goat and a piggy-wig.

There was no problem with the cow—she was just moving and grazing calmly, not going too far. But the goat was a headache. She always wanted to go to where she was not supposed to be. There was no way of stopping her—she would immediately turn into a bronze monument. Her green, evil eye, full of hatred, would not even once blink staring at you.

The piggy-wig showed his swinish personality. His meal was given to him in a trough brimful of watermelon rinds, potato skins, wheat bran, and all other kind of waste food. He would knock the trough off my hands the moment I was about to put it in front of his spout—and munch the swill from the muck, slurping out loud. Jerk.

The Sword of King George VI

Uncle Vasya, who was a stoker at an icebreaker in the Northern seas, stopped off with us for some time. He'd been wounded and, after hospital, came to recover. His fascinating stories about a sweating stoker who throws coal into the firebox

infected me with sea romantics. It was from him that I first heard the legendary song “The Vast Expanse of the Sea.”

Later, in Lvov, a sail ships study book came to my hand, and I began to learn the names of all those masts, yards, sails, and decks. It had gone so much far that I started to think about entering a navy college for boys. However, the medical board found me not qualified. I was shortsighted.

It could have been worse—I could have been admitted. No doubt, I would have started hating the barracks, the army routine and eventually run away.

Aunt Lydia also came, wounded. She lost her baby boy in a bombing raid in Volgograd. She lost her husband, Benjamin Konovalov, too. He had burnt in his tank in battle.

Aunt Lydia was an army volunteer at the Volgograd Tractor Plant. She was fighting Germans there. She had been building that plant together with American engineers before the war.

Now she stood leaning against the high masonry stove, day after day, staring into the void, and didn’t talk.

She came right from the Kremlin where on February 2, 1944, king George VI handed the sword of bravery to the delegation of Volgograd defenders of which she was a member.

Cobbler’s Last and Zinger Sewing Machine

The war was still raging somewhere in the west. Germans left Lazorki with less population than it had been before the war. We children discovered neglected apple and plum trees and swung on their branches for most part of the day. But the watermelon plantations were guarded. One of the guards spotted us. We burst out running through a hemp field, which was a mistake. Hemp stalks arrest the movements of the runner, catching his feet like snares, allowing him only to move in short

steps. Igor was caught. Grandad and Mom had to go and get him back. At wartime, it was dangerous, could lead to a terrible punishment.

The clothes we had on were all homemade. Granny did the sewing and patching. Grandad made and repaired the footwear. I remember his tools—a cobbler's last, an awl, a gob of road tar, thick thread, and wooden nails of his own make.

Granny had a Zinger sewing machine.

We slept on the floor, as has been said before, and next to me was Tanya. On cold winter nights, we slept cuddling with each other. Later in years, it was perceived by both of us as an intimate thing, a secret to keep. On a snapshot taken in 1951, Tanya stood leaning her head against my shoulder.

Monday, November 13, 2017

Grandad Stephan

In Lazorki, Grandad received a notification that his son Yuri had been killed in action. I was with him when he took the paper from the mailman, looked at it and gasped. Yuri was the youngest.

Grandad had come from the world of which no trace could be found anymore. The moral standards were badly distorted or lied about. For him, goodness and justice remained in the terms they'd been perceived in that long forgotten time.

Here's one of the stories I heard from him.

At a Gypsy camp, old Baron was dying. Standing by his deathbed was his clan. In silence, the Gypsies were listening to his uneven breathing. What would his last words be? Time went on. Finally, he whispered, "I want my whip." They gave him his whip. He weighed it in his hand and using all he still had in him, lashed the crowd with it. Satisfied, Baron closed his eyes. Then, he died.

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In her memoir, Granny said that her husband was a revolutionary. The revolution paid him back in the old Baron's way. Grandad never had an abode of his own. He never had money to buy himself clothes. On his last photos, he is seen in an old military uniform given to him by his eldest son, the colonel.

Granny told me a little story that took place in a food store. She was in the line to the register while he stood by the wall, waiting. A woman came over and gave him a coin. Grandad looked at the coin in his palm, and his eyes watered.

Three Letters

It Could Not Be Real

In the fall of 1945, we moved to Lvov. This is how it happened. On Mom's request, Eugene Agafonov, her Moscow friend, had done some research, found Uncle Pavlusha in Lvov, sent him our Lazorki address—and Uncle Pavlusha invited us to come over.

While I'm writing these lines, my imagination depicts the Lvov train station's debarcadere and the three of us—Mom, my brother Igor, and I—standing in its stilled space which looks like a black-and-white pencil sketch. Walking toward us down the half-empty platform—most passengers have been already

gone—is a handsome man in a fedora, walking and looking at me. The glass dome of the trainshed, the long passenger platform with shimmering post lamps, and the man in a fedora froze for one single moment and left their imprints on my memory forever. This was my first encounter with the Western civilization.

Actually, the first one had taken place two days before in Kyiv, where, on our way to Lvov, we visited Aunt Anne. She had left Lazorki for biological studies in Kyiv and now lived in the university hostel.

I felt the need for a pee. Aunt Anne led me out to the hall and pointed to a door. I entered the bathroom and quickly got my bearings. I already started to button up my pants when a fancy chain with a stone knob hanging from above drew my attention. What was it for? I pulled the chain. Water gushed like crazy from some place to some other place with a deafening noise. I wasn't even frightened—just stepped back in awe. I was facing a global catastrophe.

I'm back on the train station platform now. Uncle Pavlusha recognized us when he saw me. As he explained later, I looked very much like my father at the same age.

For about a month, we lived in his two-room apartment on Obertinski Street. One time, Uncle Pavlusha and I were talking—he stroked my head, and tears came to his eyes.

But the fairy tale went on. It was far beyond midnight. Uncle Pavlusha hired a horse-drawn carriage, and we began our journey across the town. The streets of incredible beauty were empty. There was not a single person to be seen. Quaint facades of the houses were drowning in darkness, refusing to react to gas lights. The horses' hooves clattered rhythmically against the cobblestone pavement. I was being dragged into the supernatural. What I saw could not be real.

Tuesday, November 14, 2017

Letters to Lazorki

Lvov. Sept. 14, 1945

Dear Grandad, Granny, Aunt Lydia, Uncle Vasya, Leo, and Tanya,

We arrived in Lvov at night, September 13. Had to spend a day in Kyiv. It was hard to get on the train, but the situation was finally resolved. Anne saw us off.

Uncle Pavlusha met us at the train station. Lvov is a very beautiful town. They have baths, electricity, gas, and furniture in their nice apartments. Pans lived in those apartments. On our way here, we saw numerous strips of cultivated land, it's because they don't have collective farms here.

Uncle Pavlusha and Aunt Valya live well. Uncle Pavlusha has a radio set and a car. He promised to buy us a motorcycle.

We go to school tomorrow.

Aunt Lydia, come stay with us. It's a good life here. Potato costs 4 rubles/kg. Pears are even cheaper. The house is on the outskirts of the town. Out the window, I see some wasteland and, beyond it, a Panski castle.

Igor

(*Pan* stands for Mister, a rich person in Igor's perception. *Panski* means belonging to a *Pan*; *Pani* stands for Misses or Miss in Polish). Next come my own notes written on the back side of Igor's letter.

Hi everybody,

Today, we took a bath. There is a bathtub in Uncle Pavlusha's apartment. He will buy us a motorcycle. It is very good here. Come soon.

Geli

Lvov. Sept. 19, 1945

Dear Grandad, Granny, Aunt Lydia, Uncle Vasya, and kids,

Mom has gotten a job as a head teacher. It's all settled now, but Gelka

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probably won't be admitted to school because of his low grades.

We are going to get an apartment a few blocks away as soon as its residents leave. Then we will see about a boxcar for you.

Cows cost about 6,000-10,000 rubles, but forage is expensive.

Mom is not planning to move to the countryside, you know the reason.

Igor

Here comes Mom's letter.

Pop and Mom,

Tomorrow, Sept. 20, I'll start working at School No. 21 with 1,200 students, all girls. There is a chance to be appointed the principal, could happen soon. A Head teacher's wages are 700 rubles plus class hours, it all will amount to about 1,000—not much, but let's hope for the better. Here are some prices. An average cow costs 6,000-8,000 rubles, better cows 10,000-12,000, piglet (7-8 kg) 600, geese 80-100, butter 140-150 rubles/kg. Pears and plums 15 rubles/kg, millet 28 rubles/kg, milk 10-15 rubles/liter.

Varya

The Absolute Town

The adaptation wasn't easy. A resident of the absolute town, one of the cultural centers of Western civilization, worries about prices on cows, piglets, and geese. My brother mentions *pans*, having no idea what he is talking about; furniture surprises him. Not exactly knowing what he is supposed to say, Uncle Pavlusha promises a motorcycle. Everybody is confused.

For the first time in my life, I took a bath, and wrote a letter.

I have a very faint memory of my first two years in Lvov. The Mowgli program, though substantially depleted, was still there, not easy to be entirely erased. A real change began only

when I was about twelve. As a result of much reading, my grades in literature and grammar suddenly started to show straight A's.

Apartment 13

Back to the beginning. In the fall of 1945, the deportation of Polish residents began, leaving the city half-empty. Uncle Pavlusha secured for us a four-room apartment 13 on the fourth floor at 18 Yablonowski Street (later renamed into Shota Rustaveli Street). Three bedrooms with tall windows, and a kitchen! The windows looked into the murky inner yard, but since it was the upper floor, the sun had a chance to shine into all of them, one after another, across the wall.

While visiting Lvov for the first time after ten years of absence, I decided to take a fresh look at the residence so dear to my heart. I entered the building, descended to the inner yard, and looked up. It was there on the right side. I walked diagonally across the yard and started to climb upstairs. The second floor, the third, the fourth—here's the door on the left—I gasped, couldn't make another step.

Yablonowski Street ended at Strycki market. Across of the square, the beginning of Obertinski Street could be seen. From here, I used to take left turn to Voloshski and then Sventitski Streets—the shortest way to School No. 14 where I was a student. Despite Igor's prediction, I was admitted after all.

Wednesday, November 15, 2017

An Adoption Attempt

Uncle Pavlusha and Aunt Valya decided to adopt me. Mom didn't object. Soon the larger part of the family moved to Yablonowski Street. I stayed.

I got new clothes, acquired a civilized look. A special regime

of nourishment was instituted. Aunt Valya was a superb cook. Her borscht with thin, thread-like, crisp cabbage cuts was a special treat. I would also single out an appetizer—jellied fish garnished with a slice of carrot and a twig of parsley—delicious. Plates were put on a white linen tablecloth. Fork on the left, knife and spoon on the right. Cloth napkins. It made me feel guilty.

At Christmas time Aunt Valya would make a panettone. She was a believer and a member of the Orthodox church located on Galitskaya Street. One day she took me there. Some bearded ancients chanted woeful litanies. People were wearing an unhappy look on their faces. They stood bowing repeatedly, throwing their arms crosswise. Mowgli explained, Bowing is what slaves do; by crossing themselves they show their willingness to remain slaves. Maybe Aunt Valya should have told me about her God before taking me there.

Meanwhile, my student's status required that I do homework and shorten my outside time. Not that I paid much attention to those requirements. And I noticed that I was being watched. Aunt Valya was a nosy woman.

When we visited her in later years, she never forgot to ask me all those small questions about my meals, including bread brand names. Now she wanted to know what kind of boy I was, what interests and inclinations I had. That's why she was watching, *sancta simplicitas*.

I caught sight of her trying to peer through the interior door window. What did she possibly expect to see through the frosty glass? I was twiddling with some useless piece of junk I'd found in a dump. There was nothing intimate about it, no secret at all, but the fact of snooping touched a sensitive cord. I just stood up and walked away. That was it. No one talked about adoption anymore.

Small Things

Uncle Pavlusha was the Head of the District Public Health Department. There was a man in his milieu, a certain Pavlychko. I didn't know a thing about that man, but I have to have his name on this page just because I heard it mentioned by Uncle Pavlusha.

Small things about loved ones matter. They do. Now I see Uncle Pavlusha at the dinner table with a teaspoon in his hand. He always sipped hot tea from a teaspoon.

Aunt Valya grew exotic houseplants. Her special one was a huge potted Ficus tree which occupied the entire far left corner of the living room. Each time Igor and I came over, she treated us with moreish food, making sure we were full.

Aunt Valya was born in Fastov, a town near Kyiv. She spoke Ukrainian.

Thursday, November 16, 2017

John Lennon

As I read news from Ukraine, a satisfying linguistic joy comes upon me. Historical toponyms are being restored—as well as new, witty, like out of the blue funny ones invented. Here on the left are some former names of Soviet origin—and on the right, the names which have been brought back or just made up as a replacement.

Red Partisan—Volodya's Girlfriend

October—Chinatown Muksha

Lenin—John Lennon

Krupskaya—Pork Jelly

To those who may not know. October is short for the Great

October Socialist Revolution. Krupskaya was Lenin's wife. Muksha is the name of an ancient Slavic goddess.

They are certainly having fun over there.

Pan Tadeusz and Pani Zosya

Uncle Pavlusha and Aunt Valya had friends, Pan Tadeusz and Pani Zosya. I liked to watch their company of four playing cards. They made bets on tiny striped-and-dotted beans. I had never seen such jazzy beans before, but it wasn't them I was looking at. I couldn't tear my eyes from Uncle Pavlusha's mysterious friends. A gold signet ring on Pan Tadeusz's hand, elegant earrings in Pani Zosya's ears, her elaborate postwar hairdo, non-Russian profile, foreign speech—fascinated me. I looked, listened, inhaled the sweet fragrance coming from them and was close to fainting.

In this town, everything was outré, far out. Men lifted their fedoras to salute each other across the street. Ladies walked on the arm of their companions. Gentlemen kissed their hands in greeting or parting. Boys of about my age ran around selling newspapers, shouting, "Czerwony Sztandar! Czerwony Sztandar!"—which is Red Banner in the Polish language. Toy-like streetcars rumbled along with clusters of passengers hanging on the steps of the entrance platform.

Early in the morning, janitors cleaned the sidewalks spraying them with water hoses. At dusk, lamplighters came out to activate gas streetlamps. Offbeat music—mostly violin and accordion—reached out from numberless small coffee shops. Neatly dressed musicians often came to our inner yard to perform operetta medley. People threw money to them from the balconies.

But most of it soon ceased to be. All Polish residents left. With them, did forever vanish Pan Tadeusz and Pani Zosya.

The Polish Eagle

High School No. 14, where I was a student, stood on a hill-top. It used to be a gymnasium. I remember a big amphitheater, where physical laws of energy and motion were shown in action. On the second floor there was a zoological museum with various kinds of stuffed animals, big and small.

Above the school front door, an imposing Polish Eagle was proudly looking to its right. I happened to watch the glorious bird's bas-relief being destroyed. Workers knocked it down—it crashed with an ear-shattering noise at the feet of the awed students.

The school back yard had a football field fenced out along the edge of the slope which descended to a road. Beyond the road, high in the sky, towered an enormous uninhabited hill overgrown with wild bushes. I spent tons of time up there, alone, dreaming of sea journeys and dangerous adventures awaiting me on faraway islands.

Refuse Dumps

Another cool place was the Uncle Pavlusha's Heights as I called a humpy rise which began right from the opposite side of Obertinski Street and then sloped up to the *Panski castle* mentioned by Igor in his first letter to Lazorki. Actually, the *castle* was just a house standing at the end of a street up there.

Some hollows on the Heights were used as refuse dumps for what the deported Polish residents had left in their apartments. It was the most exciting place on earth I'd ever happened to know. Among the things I found there was a silver ashtray. It became a piece of decor—smoking was not allowed—in Uncle Pavlusha's apartment at 36 Obertinski (Zaritskis) Street where my distant cousin Nina Liashchuk, I hope, still lives.

Friday, November 17, 2017

First Blood

By the end of the year 1945, the rest of the big family had moved to Lvov. A new life began, with new adventures. I often took Leo and Tanya to the Uncle Pavlusha's Heights to play, chase one another, and, sure thing, rummage through the dump. One nice day, I noticed a flock of about six or seven kids coming down the hill. I sensed trouble and told my cousins to run down to the street and wait for me there. They heeded and left.

The kids from the hilltop now surrounded me. I was told to buzz off, "Because this place isn't yours." I disagreed, said that I was not going to go anywhere from my playground. They began to push me.

"Hey, heroes," I said. "How about one-on-one?"

They listened, and I got my contender. He looked like my match—same height, build, everything. But they made a mistake. When I first punched him—he fell. When he got up, I punched him again—he fell. Seeing this, the boys pounced on me all at once. I was fighting back. One of them dropped a brick on my head. They saw blood, panicked, and ran away. I threw stones at their backs, shouting they would better not come again.

Makarchik

Two years later, I had a similar incident, but it ended differently. This time I had to deal with real frenzied crowd boys.

My schoolmate Makarchik and I were leaving the stadium where we'd watched a socker game. Somebody stepped on my heels. I ignored it—usual thing with people walking in mass. When it happened again, I looked back. We were followed by a gang of bad boys. I turned around.

“Who’s doing this?” I said.

It was a signal they had been waiting for—next second I was locked up.

“Who’s doing this? Who’s doing this?” they began to mock my stupid words.

I knew what was going to happen next. Nevertheless, I tried my trick:

“How about one-on-one, you heroes?”

But their patience had been already gone. At first, I tried to resist. No way. Those were seasoned, badass fighters. They stopped only after they were pretty sure I had a good, solid drubbing. I was lucky they didn’t knock me down. Anyway, they did a good job, I gave them credit for that, though they were hyenas, freaking cowards.

Makarchik had run away, and it was the right thing to do. I would have hated him to be punished for my stupidity.

Makarchik’s real name was Henrich Makarov. For some reason he behaved like I was superior to him, a person to learn from. He didn’t know how to read time, for instance, and asked me to teach him. He knew he could tell his secrets to me without being laughed at.

He lived not far from our school, on Snopkovski Street. First thing we would do in his apartment was visit the kitchen where he treated me with tap water. He would drink from a ladle, making loud wacky sounds with every gulp.

His father, a university professor, had a titanic library. I wished I could bury myself in those books. Makarchik was indifferent. He sat on the sofa, looking blankly at my fretting fingers as I was turning the pages of the greatest books of world literature.

Makarchik was a nice person, a consummate friend. It was the early 1970s when we saw each other the last time. He had

not changed since ten years ago. He took me to his house, kind of a small villa, where he lived with his wife, no children, and traditionally offered me tap water from a ladle.

Saturday, November 18, 2017

Russians wonder why Ukrainians are different. Here's why. Ukrainians never had their own tzar or nobles or the orthodox obscurantism. Ukrainians identify Christian belief as a gothic fairy tale like Gogol's mystery novelettes *Evenings in the Village Near Dikanka* or his horror story *Viy*. And they also very much enjoy singing their lovely sentimental songs. They are different at least in that.

What the Hell!

Mom decided that my school was geographically too far away, that the one which was just round the corner would be more convenient for me to attend. But the change in location resulted in disaster as to the grades—and I was soon back in the more auspicious environment of my old school. The new school taught German as a foreign language, while my good old one—I was already back—taught French. On my first day, the French teacher Matsynov told me to read for him. It went more or less smoothly until the word *soldier*. The French phonetics for it is *soldah*, but I voiced it in a German way, *zoldat*. This immediately made the teacher remember all bad things which had ever happened to him. As a war hero and hater of Germans, he was deeply offended by a hostile word.

“What the hell! Are you German?” he yelled.

I wouldn't say he scared the shit out of me. Nevertheless, the charismatic teacher made me feel appreciative toward both him and his subject. I realized that reading and writing in French was fun, that I actually savored French euphonious

words. To complete the picture, I rewrote a piece of Alfons Dode's *Tartarin de Tarascon* adaptation into a notebook and added my own watercolor illustrations to it.

Ain't ya a sweet boy.

Psychology-Anthropology

The first two years in Lvov had drifted away like shreds of the morning fog. My achievements at school were so eternally poor that I wonder what it was that made me stay afloat.

Mom set her mind on finding out why one of her two sons was showing such crappy results, while the other was a straight-A student. One day, she came home with a woman who, to my understanding, had something to do with psychology or anthropology. This psychologist-anthropologist tugged me up to her, threw a penetrating look into my eyes, groped about my head, asked a couple of strange questions, and let me go. While leaving the room I heard her say, "You have a bright boy, dear."

Mom stopped worrying about my grades. As a wise woman, she never lectured me or pointed out my flaws. Her educational philosophy was freedom and trust—not quite new but very much workable. What kept me afloat was just my brains.

Prince Hamlet

I was becoming an ardent reader. Mom taught ancient history, and, sure thing, my first books were *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and the myths of ancient Greece and Rome. Somewhere in between, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* popped up. Very much impressed by Hamlet's erratic behavior, I pictured his face in my imagination, drew it in pencil, and nailed the portrait over my bed.

I came to be a regular visitor to the town library. Volume

after volume, I devoured great writings by Fenimore Cooper, O. Henry, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, Conan Doyle, Stevenson, Edgar Poe. I am not sure who of us was so picky, the librarian or myself, but Soviet writers were not on my reading list. Later in years, I once was struck by a frightening idea that I'd missed something important, and turned to the much acclaimed *The Quiet Don* by Sholokhov. Having dragged myself through several chapters, I gave up. No, thank you.

The words *bright boy* didn't evoke any specific emotions in me. I was not yet aware of such things as ignorance or stupidity, neither did I suspect that people might lie. Whatever was being said or done around me was reasonable, simple, ungraded, and unambiguous.

Tangy Smell of Tears

I was at a summer pioneer camp one time. For boys in the dorm in bed, I would read aloud *Little Mook* and *Dwarf Longnose*—marvelous stories by Wilhelm Hauff. Someone in charge would come and turn off the lights. I went on to narrate in darkness, by memory.

I made friends with a queer boy in that camp. He was a professional singer, or so he said, which made him be extremely meticulous about protecting his throat from colds—he was wearing a scarf around his neck even on hot days—and he sang in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

One morning, his father took him away. He was absent for two days.

When he returned, his white face, as wet as a bath towel, was giving off a tangy smell of tears. He said his mother had died.

A few days later, I lost interest in that camp, walked out the gates, and went home. The area was unfamiliar to me—I

changed directions at random and eventually found the right one.

Bad Company

I was about fifteen. Some swanky boys, unknown to me before and never seen after, invited me to a party. We gathered in a villa on the town outskirts. The boys played grownups; each one had a girlfriend of his own. We listened to illegal phonograph records of Shulzhenko and Kozin—both singers were GULAG prisoners. There was some dancing, drinking—I didn't participate. The environment was entirely new to me. "I will recall your hands so tender, so tremulous," Shulzhenko was singing in a feverish voice. Crap.

The company came out to the backyard, which was an old apple orchard, and fired a gun, aiming at a row of empty bottles. Then there was a free ride on a streetcar. The streetcar driver jumped out, grabbed one of the boys, socked him in the face; other boys attacked the driver. I got the picture and went away. End of story.

Many years later, I was told that the kids were sons and daughters of the city high officials. They eventually formed a gang, began to rob and kill people. They were caught and tried. Some of them were sentenced to death.

The Old Man in Black

The elegant apartment house at 18 Yablonowski (Rustaveli) Street built in 1906 in the Secession style was holding loads of mysteries. Who were the previous Polish residents of our apartment? Can I feel their presence? Did they have kids? What do the room walls remember? Can the hushed echoes of the past be heard?

Our next-door neighbor was an old man who had a sister.

The sister was poorly dressed, or maybe not—in my fantasies she was his maid whom he abused by keeping her down.

The old man had a habit. Every day, exactly at the same time, dressed in black—black suit, black hat, black shoes—he would leave his apartment and go for a walk. One time I turned myself into a gumshoe and tailed him. After a few blocks, he turned around and said something in Polish. He'd been aware of my presence all along.

In the apartment across the inner yard lived Pani Majorowa (major's wife). Nobody had ever seen the major, her husband. Was he hiding? Did he exist at all?

The Attic

The stair landing on the fourth floor had two doors, one leading to our apartment, the other to the old man's. From here a narrow staircase led to the attic.

It was an enormous space, dry, dusty, and empty. It had windows, so I was able to observe the outside world from above or even get out to the roof and enjoy the open sky, having it much closer to me. I scoured through the waste in the dark corners of the attic—nothing interesting, just useless garbage. But how could I miss it! Wait a minute, I found books. Most of them were frazzled wrecks, but one held a pretty good shape, and I took it home. It was a story about competition between the Oxford and the Cambridge university boat teams, written in Polish. How I was able to read it is a mystery to me.

Sunday, November 19, 2017

Two days ago, Constantin returned from South Bend, Indiana. He has completed his studies in oncology and will have the final exam in August.

Yesterday, a panic e-mail came from Bolotov:

I've had another heart attack, but I refused to go to the hospital. You know how they treat patients in hospitals.

If you get no further e-mailing from me, take it as I've joined the majority. Thank GOD, I've lived a long life. I want to die at home in my bed with my loved ones around.

Bolotov is eighty-six. He is a professor in linguistics. I'm forever grateful to him—he was there with me when I made the most important decision in my life.

In my e-mail back to him, I advised him to stop fooling around but better go on living optimistically until he is ninety and then only decide what to do next.

Dreams

The Parachute Tower

There were numerous indoor and outdoor swimming pools in Lvov. Even the bath house on Academy Street, despite its limited capacity, had a small one. The biggest outdoor swimming pool had a natural earth island covered with green grass. Or was it a lake? In summertime, with a rainy weather typical for the area, people could still get a nice suntan.

In wintertime I enjoyed skiing on the planes and hills of Strycki Park. One of the hills was suspiciously high and steep. For a time, I avoided it—but how could I stay away? So, one day, I found myself up there looking down and waiting for my fear to go. Finally, I pushed off and plunged down.

For a few seconds, sliding was more or less steady. Then, somewhere in the middle of the slope, my knees buckled, and I fell. I got angry and tried again. I fell again, and then yet again. What was it? Simple. Acrophobia, fear of heights. Falling was not an accident—I wanted it to happen.

There was a parachute tower in that park. I decided that I had to know how I would feel up there. Somewhere in the middle of the staircase, I realized that I was turning into a monument; my muscles stiffened. When I finally reached the top of the tower, my entire nerve system got focused solely on my grip on the railing. I stood there buried in the unsurmountable wish to hurl myself down, head-first.

Chicken.

Our fourth-floor apartment had two entrance doors. We didn't use the one on the stair landing. Instead, we would step on to the balcony and walk all the way across the window wall to the other door in back.

Not that the journey over the long, narrow, ostensibly frail balcony with its thin railing unnerved me much, but I always kept closer to the wall. I'd been walking its length long enough to find myself standing on it in my nightmares from time to time—and, to my horror, see it crumble under my feet.

Coward.

Monday, November 20, 2017

Burjava

A sports complex, similar to a YMCA facility, was the second place, after the library, I often visited. I joined a swimming team first. It was novel to me to be trained in all those fancy styles—backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly. But soon it became kind of boring. I hated its levelness, speed being the major goal to achieve. You had to have long and strong arms for that like

my school buddy Mishka Karyaev did. Later he even became a champ in water polo.

Boxing was much more fun. Hand wraps, huge gloves, and the boxing ring held me spellbound. And it was much more individualized. It made you feel like you are an interesting person, a character. There was a skinny boy who revealed little abilities at training sessions. But when our coach Burjava tried him in a probing match, he KOed his competitor in a few seconds.

“I’ll be damned,” said Burjava.

That was not my class. Even though Burjava once said I was “a promising boxer” and his words were not ignored by me, I didn’t believe him. Soon, I got proof.

An outside boy, who was much more experienced, joined us. He challenged me right away with a spate of painful blows.

“Attack!” he yelled. “Defend yourself!”

Nothing helped. After we finished, he said I had been a disappointment. This fight made me realize I was indeed a failure in boxing. Whatever intellect might be required for it, there had to be something else which I did not possess.

Mom and I were supposed to leave for Samara soon—so boxing had to come to an end anyway.

A Joke

Quite unexpectedly, in Samara, my boxing experience came in just handy.

In winter, I liked to go out of town to the hilly banks of the Samarka River—a landscape ideal for skiing. A local boy approached me one day with a question if I was alone. I answered yes, I was. Then he said he wanted my skis. What? I waved off the dumb joke and went on working my way upslope. Next thing I realized the guy was fumbling with my ski binding.

I saw a razor in his hand. There was no time to think long. I punched him in the jaw with my right-arm boxing hook. He rolled down, struggled up to his feet, and scurried away. A bunch of boys were standing on the hilltop. My new friend joined them.

“You won’t get out of here alive!” he cried out.

Another joke? I turned around and skied away.

Shulgin

Sometimes after school, the class went round the corner to Zalizna Voda (Iron Water) park for a wrestling show. My contender was Shulgin, a lanky boy who was much taller than me. Since he was too tall for his age, he could not use his limbs properly, which was, of course, his disadvantage. I easily put him flat on the back.

Many years later we met in Lvov again. He was now a player in a famous basketball team. In greeting, my hand disappeared in his spade-size palm. We smiled to each other and left it there.

* * *

Yesterday, Tom and Polina came over from Providence with little Katerina. She is a sweet girl, pretty, intelligent, exactly the kind of girl our great granddaughter has to be. She is a little over three months. She looks at you and smiles. She slept in Nina’s arms.

The family is growing, The more it grows, the wider is the generation gap. But I don’t care. This is a free country.

Polina told she’d done a kidney transplant surgery to a patient who was a fifteen-year-old girl. The girl’s health was back to normal in just a few days.

Tuesday, November 21, 2017

The Gas Delight

The rooms of our apartment on Yablonowski Street were arranged single file. The small room on the stair landing side remained empty most of the time for we simply couldn't afford furniture for it.

Each room had a ceramic wood burning stove with a yellow or green glaze. At bedtime Mom would hold my blanket against the stove for a minute and then throw it on me. I know what bliss is—it's a warm blanket.

There was a chronic shortage of firewood and coal. People used gas instead by connecting a hose to the gas vent. It was illegal. Hordes of inspectors were sent out to confiscate hoses. An inspector would shamelessly search your apartment. He always knew where the hose was; he would just grab it and leave without doing any paperwork.

The delight of having gas for cooking often turned deadly. Russian residents had no previous experience in gas usage and occasionally had the vent unclosed when leaving. Back home, they would turn on or strike or click or switch something and—bang! Normally, several floors would collapse. When a sudden shake of air happened, we knew—again!

A Trip to Brody

We began to live a new life. Rationed food, night-long lines for bread, butter, sugar. Everybody had to have an identifying number on the inside palm of the hand, written with a *chemical pencil* to ensure a legitimate place in the line.

Aunt Anne and Yuri Emir-Suin separated. Yuri wanted a full family, with children. Unfortunately, Aunt Anne was barren.

Aunt Anne was a very beautiful woman—men wanted her.

She married Shevchenko, a Ukrainian macho. He was the Head or Chairman of some enterprise and took her with him to Brody, a town near Lvov.

I decided to go visit Aunt Anne, went to the train station, bought a ticket, and boarded the train. The car was almost empty; it was warm inside and rocking a little—I fell asleep. I missed the stop and got off at an unknown junction. I remained calm and practical, asked people where I was and how I could get back to Brody.

“Can you give us a name?” they asked.

“Shevchenko.”

“We are just heading that way,” they said. They were truck drivers. Lucky me.

Shevchenko’s house had a huge old pear tree in front. I climbed it and balanced down a branch to a point from where I could reach pears. They turned out to be small and hard—but at least it was kind of a reward for stupid bravery.

After we left Denisovka, Aunt Anne began to live apart from her children. The fact was sanctioned by the family without discussion as a natural thing. Tanya and Leo belonged to Aunt Lydia now.

Wednesday, November 22, 2017

The Jackdaw Fledgling

The kitchen pantry had a small window looking into a deep well of unknown designation. A jackdaw fledgling fell into the well and made a helluva noise down there. Grandad made a primitive trapping device and after several tries pulled the fledgling out. The bird became a family pet. When we ate, he was on my shoulder, pecking from my palm.

Then, he disappeared. Mom got a new job and was now in charge of an orphanage. She gave the fledgling to the kids there

to have fun with. They snapped the bird's neck without waiting another day. Mom had pity on me—she told me what happened to the pet only two years later, in Samara.

Aunt Lydia

In 1946, Aunt Lydia returned to Volgograd. Grandad, Granny, Leo, and Tanya followed her in the same year. A bit later they were joined by Aunt Anne with her Shevchenko husband, Uncle Vasya with his family, and Yuri Emir-Suin, who would eventually start his own family there. It was not a big secret that Aunt Anne and Yuri Emir-Suin were in love with each other all the time in eternity. But for him, forming a full family was a priority. They were fated to live separate lives.

Since that time, until 1950, I was spending my summer vacations in Volgograd. Aunt Lydia walked me through the ruins, telling stories of what had been happening here and there during the battle. She had killed a German soldier. He'd suddenly materialized around the corner, and she had to kill him. She said she'd felt a surge of nausea and thrown up.

The winter of 1943 was extremely cold—thick ice covered the Volga River. She stepped into a hole made by a bomb, and the current pulled her under the ice. Fortunately, there was another opening nearby, and she was able to scramble out. She crossed the river and entered a half-ruined house. There were Germans inside that house. They sat leaning against the wall, dead, turned to ice.

* * *

On weekends, we would go be beach bums. It was a long trek barefoot through sweltering heat past the ruins of the tractor plant all the way to the pier. The ancient paddle steamer

Chapayevets took us across the river to a sandy island. The essential fun was to stay there the entire day, go ballistic in water, and lay out in sand for hours under the scorching sun.

When I visited Volgograd last time, Leo stepped forward, and I saw that his left arm was missing. For psychological protection I tried to think of a joke. Leo burst into tears.

For a long time after the war, Volgograd remained a dangerous habitat for kids. Unexploded shells, mines, bombs, and hand grenades sometimes looked like innocent things to play with. Three boys made a campfire out of artillery shells. Leo lost his arm, the other two died.

When Leo and Tanya grew up enough, Aunt Lydia adopted a neighboring boy named Ben. She raised him as a Spartan or rather a proletarian. In summertime they slept under the bed, which was supposed to be a cooler place. On the day of his high school graduation, Ben found a hand-grenade fuse which looked very much like a fancy pen, fumbled with it—and died momentarily.

During her final years Aunt Lydia went insane, didn't recognize people. Tanya was looking after her till the very end. Moments before death Aunt Lydia came to her senses. "Forgive me, Tanya" were her last words.

TT Pistol

Aunt Lydia had left behind, in Lvov, some of her war trophies—a green German military jacket and a bayonet with an engraved eagle and swastika among them. I swapped the bayonet for a TT pistol with a boy whom I had never met before. He called his friends, and we all went to the top of the hill behind my school to test the weapon. I told the boys to hide in trenches, which were still there after the war, and fired the pistol several times.

In the evening, the boy's father walked into our apartment. He looked around, found my eyes, and whispered, "Where?" I showed. He grabbed the pistol and left without saying another word. While writing this down, I take again a sigh of relief for that man. Negligent loss of a firearm meant a big trouble for him—at that time, actually, a disaster.

The Hyperboloid

I got interested in my brother's strange hobby. Not that I went too deep into it. I just entertained the idea of making my own radio.

Igor got permission to use a short-wave radio transmitter. He would sit at it for hours at a time knocking dots and dashes of the Morse code. Cute QSL cards kept coming to him from all over the world. From the US, too.

I did engineer a crystal receiver and heard voices and other sounds it emitted. But what a disappointment—it turned out to be just a degraded copy of a wall speaker. I trashed the junk.

Inspired by Alexei Tolstoy's novel *The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin*, I set out to reconstruct the Death Ray that Garin invented. I knew it was a dippy idea but continued to work on it just the same using pieces of glass, candles, flashlights until, eventually, I got totally drained. Then, I gave up.

During my five years in Lvov, I obtained friends, not right away though—it happened later when I became more or less familiar with the notion of social relationships.

Vovka Malyuk and Mishka Karyaev were my classmates. After school we walked home together. Mishka turned left on Yablonski Street; Vovka and I parted when we reached my house.

There was a congenial element in each of us which came about to be enough to start a life-long friendship.

Thursday, November 23, 2017

The family Thanksgiving gathering took place on Brock Road. Counting Julia's boyfriend Aaron, we were eleven. Everybody was excited to see the new member of the family, Katerina Zmijewski.

Nina gave Polina a wooden spindle which belonged to her maternal grandmother Katerina Morozova. Earlier this year, Nina had given her an embroidered towel from the same heritage.

Mishka Karyaev

He was the eldest of the four siblings and had the authority over his brothers, especially when they raised too much hell. His mother Antonina was a talented educator. Being a sweet person, she always had a spare seat for me at the dinner table when I stayed too long. I cannot but remember her gentle soul on this Thanksgiving Day.

During the war Mishka's father was an equine veterinarian with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. There was a piano in his room which had never been played. Sometimes, being a little buzzed, he was making jokes about Mishka's low grades which in fact were pretty high. Mishka had an ironic touch in his character. I guess he took it from his father.

Friday, November 24, 2017

Slava and Polina with little Katya visited us today in the Village of Ashwood with a certain purpose. Polina wanted to know more about Nina's grandmother Katerina.

There was a short discussion about Katya's baptism which is going to take place at a Greek Orthodox church tomorrow. I said I wouldn't be there.

For about two hours, Nina was telling Polina what she

remembered about her grandmother. By the end of the session, being influenced by her own sad stories, Nina got depressed.

Polina took two of my paintings. I also gave her a volume of Stevenson's novels and made a suggestion that it might be helpful for her to read just the first page of *Treasure Island* or *Kidnapped* to get an idea how to engage the reader's attention from the very start. Polina is a person of many talents and, among other things, has literary aspirations.

Vovka Malyuk

Vovka was a perpetual straight-A student as was his elder brother Victor, who also did gymnastics. On the day of contest, Victor would eat up an entire lemon for better results.

Vovka's parents were both teachers. His mother taught literature, and his father, chemistry. The family spoke Ukrainian but changed to Russian when talking to me. Vovka played violin and once performed a piece for me to enjoy.

Sometimes, on our way from school, Vovka unwrapped a sandwich and broke it in half, for me and for himself. It was usually a big sandwich. I suspect Vovka's mother, Sophia, was making it that size not without a purpose. Not long before Sophia died, I spoke with her on the phone and, among other things, asked her about the sandwich. She answered that her memory couldn't reach that far.

Sophia had a remarkable look—red hair, green eyes, aquiline nose, and freckled cheeks—she was a beautiful woman of a great heart.

The Kitten

In the spring of 1950, Vovka, Mishka, and I completed the seventh grade, which at that time was semi-final. After the graduation ceremony, we rambled about town till far over mid-

night. A kitten was meowing for attention from a dark shadow. I put the wretched thing in my bosom. He continued meowing. At home, it turned out that the kitten was astronomically infested with fleas. Mom and Igor hadn't been in bed yet. Everybody got excited. An anti-insect dust was used, and the fleas began to jump off in panicky crowds. They were so many that I took a hammer and began to crush the parasites rapidly like I was nailing them down.

When Mom and I left for a new life in Samara, the kitten stayed home. He grew up and one day felt he had to have a Luna. He walked out to find her. And never returned.

Chattanooga Choo Choo

In downtown Lvov there was a movie theater with a barbaric name Shchors. That's where I saw *Sun Valley Serenade* for the first time. The mashup of hypnotic melodies, surreal images, mesmerizing sounds of foreign language made me feel like I was an outlander in the world so familiar. A dream began to lead me through my life.

Pardon me boy, is that the Chattanooga Choo Choo?

It took me forty-five years to finally come to Chattanooga to settle down for a new life.

Faint Images

Sunday, November 26, 2017

The Right Thing To Do

In Mom's young years when she married my father, Michael Vishenchuk, a discreet young man, Peter Agafonov, was hanging around. According to his own words, he had a thing for Varya, too, but knew he didn't have a chance.

And now, with the help of his brother Eugene, they found each other and reached an agreement.

Mom called us and, after a short introduction on the history of her relationship with Peter Agafonov, asked our permission to marry him. We said, Yes. We never knew Peter Agafonov, but we knew Mom. If she thought it was the right thing to do, then it was the right thing to do.

Can't Do Without a Straight-A Student Around

Mom and I were in Samara now. The family formed almost in no time. My new sister Lucy showed some strain at first, but that was only natural—just about two years ago, she had lost her mother to cancer. She soon got interested. The boy didn't pay much attention to what was going on around him for he was reading books all the time. Lucy was three years my junior and, of course, a straight-A student. Yep.

The Bookworms

My stepfather took an almost flawless stance toward me. He was never prying or intruding into my life, neither did he try to regulate my freedom in any way.

He had collected a good library, including some rarities, such as an illustrated volume of correspondence between poet Mayakowski and Lily Brick, a socializer, who were lovers. I engrossed myself into reading, randomly, book after book—Gogol, Dickens, Tolstoy, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Stendhal, Leskov, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Cervantes—

Peter Agafonov was an avid reader himself—not a silent reader, though. He read aloud—to my mother. His educational background was four years of elementary school, and though he was not an ignoramus, he was definitely not a maharishi. He had a heavy accent, but his voice was steady, powerful, especially when he was reading aloud.

During the period of three years, he completed a multi-volume edition of Dickens' novels and started Gorki's works. Gorki. Nothing could be more boring than Gorki; he is just number one in that.

Herman Konovalov

We lived in a first-floor two-room communal apartment in a big, five-story tenement in downtown Samara. In wintertime the backyard, after being repeatedly sprayed with water, turned into a skating rink—the daily joy of local kids. I stayed in till late at night and came out to skate only after all of them had been gone. They got me one night, suddenly running out, all at once. There was a boyish talk followed by ritual smoking in a secret fumarium. I was weighed, approved of, and accepted.

I came to be pretty close with one of them, Herman Konovalov. He showed me his collection of full-color artwork postcards. Some of it, like works by Kuindzhi, Ge, Vasiliev, were new to me. I got interested. Herman was one year older than me. He graduated from high school and was drafted to the army right away. When he came back home, I'd already been gone.

The Glasses Flew Away

My stepfather had a nervous personality. He never went frantic or showed any kind of discontent, though. Just the opposite, he was obsequious in relationship with my mother, humbled himself for her. A big part of him was a peaceful man, ready to concede. But something was certainly pulling at him. If he was not busy reading Dickens to Mom and had no other situation in progress to control, he could be seen wigwagging incessantly through the room—back and forth, back and forth—for hours.

His movements were often spasmodic, jerky. Mom was about to put the soup tureen onto the table. She moved it a bit aside for a better look at a landing site. He assumed an accident was beginning to happen—his hands gave a snatch movement.

As a result, he had his glasses flip off his nose, and the tureen was knocked down. It took the family of four a lot of effort to move the giant wardrobe a bit aside to get the glasses back from behind it.

While riding in a streetcar, he couldn't just sit quietly. Two or three stops before actually getting off, he would take a ready position at the door only to be pushed and shoved by the exiting crowd.

Such behavior didn't always end well. Boarding a bus, he wanted to be first—and got his foot run over. The foot healed, but the incident was scary.

A File Clerk

Peter Agafonov joined the KGB ranks in 1936 when the country was about to be engulfed by a new, more ferocious wave of terror. From sergeant, he rose to captain. He told me his job was file clerk. When Stalin was alive, the work hours extended beyond midnight—he had to walk home in darkness, keeping to the center of the street out of fear for being mugged or killed. Under Khrushchev, he was transferred to the police force and finally got the rank of major.

Being an ignorant ninny, I never gave a thought to the evident connection between his occupation and his nervousness or to what kind of files he had been responsible for.

He had a yearly four-week vacation which he spent at a special health resort in Sochi on the Black Sea coast. It was a lifetime benefit for the KGB staff who needed psychological rehabilitation. No family members.

Peter Agafonov was a devoted communist. His primary political reading was the newspaper *Pravda* which is *Truth*.

“Can *Truth* state anything which is not true?” he would say as if he were a Columbus discovering America.

My Son Is a Dissident

In later years, when we finally settled down in Odessa, Mom and stepfather visited us every summer.

Constantin was five years old—a critical age for starting to learn basic ideology. Every true communist knew this was about the right time for a child to hear about Lenin. Constantin listened and said:

“There is no such thing as Lenin.”

Peter Agafonov jumped to his feet.

“What did you say?” he yelled.

I’d just returned from work and at that very moment was entering the room. This was how my son avoided persecution for his political views.

It seemed like stepfather felt a bit apprehensive about me. During my university years, the family used to spend summer vacation in Vypolzovo, a village on the right bank of the Volga River just across from Samara. It was a fantastic location—sand dunes, navy-blue lakes with huge water lilies, pine tree groves. I would get up at first light when everybody was still asleep and do something alone—read mostly. This time I was chopping firewood. He came out, adjusted himself comfortably on the front steps, and began to share with me his wood-chopping experience which he’d never had. I weighed the axe in my hand in a theatrical way. A simple gesture blew him back in like a gust of wind. A sudden effect of an overdose.

Yep. It probably was. Stupid of you, too.

I heard him once yelling at Mom, “Damn puppet.” I told him, No more. He listened.

Daddy-Long-Legs

Peter Agafonov didn’t set an example of good manners. He

behaved like a natural rube, telling obscene stories, originating embarrassing situations (like snooping on his brother Eugene while visiting him in Moscow), or seeing nothing wrong in groping young women in the family. While telling his primitive stories, he would slap the companion's knee and give him a jab in the ribs.

He liked to compete with little kids, showing his superiority, bragging, and celebrating the victory—which, of course, made the kids cry. His grandson Denis grew up into a similar kind of goofus.

Incidentally heard and then preserved in the original form was a short dialogue between two seven-year-old boys, Misha Vishenchuk, my nephew, and Denis.

“Do you know who my father is?” Misha asked Denis.

“Of course, I do. He is a professor.”

“My father is Daddy-Long-Legs, you schmuck.”

The Right-Hand Man

In the fall of 1967, we departed to Cuba. Paulina, my mother-in-law, now found herself alone in Odessa. In winter, she caught cold. A common health disorder soon developed into something serious—she began to feel really sick. Mom sent Peter to take care of her.

The helper wasn't much efficient, though. He ate well and tried to read aloud to Paulina. She asked him to put the book aside and better start a fire in the masonry heater. Peter said he had no skills for that. Eventually, it just bored him, and he decided to do what he could do best—he got handsy. Paulina, who was cleaning the floor, gave Peter a smack across his face with the damp rag and told him to get the hell out of here. Being a disciplined person, Peter skedaddled back to Samara the very same day.

My Dear Sister Lucy

Mom wanted me to call him Dad. She told me that, openly. But my tongue couldn't articulate the sacred word for a person who wasn't my father.

Except this, there was little strain in the family. At times, however, my new dear pedantic A-student sister made me feel like I was losing the plot. Head resting on hand, she would give me a hard time raising issues over mere textbook trivialities. In her scholastic way of thinking, spoken words were vacuous. She believed only in what was written. One of such sessions of ours suddenly resulted in a blowout. Something in my eyes told my sister her life was in danger—next second she was running toward the other room. The ancient instinct woke up—I chased her like a carnivorous animal. But she'd already locked herself out. I grabbed the doorknob, tore it off—and came to senses. That was the only time we were in disagreement. Overall, she was a nice girl. Except she was incredibly quick to take offense. I hope I never wronged her in any way.

There was one strange thing in her character—she had no sense of time.

Years later, Nina and I came to Samara to see Mom. Igor came over, too, from Lvov. We were invited to visit Lucy, who now lived in a three-room apartment with her husband and their two children.

“You don't have to be there in time,” Mom said. “No matter how late you come, Lucy will be cleaning the floor. She will open the door for you with a wet rag in her hand and a bowl of slops at her feet.”

We didn't take Mom's words seriously. But it turned out to be exactly the way she said. Lucy opened the door, and we saw a wet rag in her hand and a bowl of slops at her feet.

A Boat Trip

Samara is a beautiful town with gorgeous, diverse architecture. All-wood Artsybushevskaya Street is still there—tourists can enjoy its fancy houses. Leningradskaya Street, where we lived, is now car-free. What? The magnificent corner porch with curved steps has been rebuilt into a horrible shawarma café—please use the back door instead to enter.

The last time I saw the Volga River, it was in really bad shape. Its waters, suffocating in the dam’s grip, were slow and smelled like swamp. And it had stopped flooding.

In the spring of 1953, on the eve of the school finals, Valka, Edka, Slavka, who were my close friends, and I took a boat trip across the river. The opposite bank was all under high water. Chunks of ice were still floating here and there. We picked up armfuls of bird cherry flowers and turned around for home.

Just out of joy I jumped into the icy water. School’s over, new life ahead! Next morning I had a high fever and felt horribly at the exam.

An Agreement

My first day at School No. 13 in Samara began with a test in math, teacher—Abram Sandler. I’d just arrived from Ukraine and was a bit behind the schedule.

“Take it just the same,” said the teacher. “Kill the time.”

I looked into it, scratched my head, made some scribbling. The next day, Abram Sandler stepped into the classroom with a happy whoop, “Pinheads! One A for the class. Just one. Vishenchuk.”

The science teacher was more cautious, however—she gave me B. After having witnessed the miracle at the math class, the students boomed.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

At the French class, the teacher asked me how many languages I knew.

But I didn't delude myself. I knew how it was going to be.

Daily attendance plus the burden of homework—no way! Hometime is mine. Abram Sandler was disappointed. But the next test brought me A again. The pattern continued through the semester. Then, an agreement was reached—Abram Sandler left me alone.

Tuesday, November 28, 2017

We Came and Told Him

Abram Sandler was an extraordinary man, a great teacher with a sharp mind and a refined sense of humor. He was one of those individuals who brings you joy by a simple fact of abiding in your memory.

In 1991, he emigrated to Israel. He learned Hebrew, lived happily, and died in Ashkelon in 2014 at the age of ninety-six.

In the summer of 1954, his former students, now the university freshmen, including myself, decided to visit him and tell him how we were doing. So, we came and told him. I was sure he would be pleased to know that I'd been victoriously admitted to a polytechnic college. He was not.

"You opened the wrong door, boy," he said.

Wednesday, November 29, 2017

A Model To Follow

My young personality began to shape up. I held my head high and was nursing a proud thought that I was not the least important somebody in the world. There was a precocious boy around who behaved as though he were a full grown-up with a life experience and the knowledge of real, serious things. His name was Kolchin. That was the first and the last time in my

life when I wanted to have a role model to follow.

As a result of chaotic reading, I got messy ideas in my head. Yet, some faint images about my future began to show up. Passionately, I wrote clumsy poems and literary compositions. I got enthusiastically involved in school theater performances. But unlike poetry, which was fun, this was a mistake. It turned out to be a typical case of stage fright. I moved like a sleepwalker. At a critical moment, my role words whisked out of my head without a trace.

I got interested in art and classical music, became a theatergoer. A dim picture of the right road to step on was slowly coming into view. But I did not see it. And that was what Abram Sandler told me about.

Thursday, November 30, 2017

I get up at 5.30 am, do my morning exercises and after a light breakfast sit at the computer, read, or write. Then Nina wakes up. I give her a hug and say something like this:

Ninoka, my blue-eyed girl, you are my entire world of beautiful things, a treasure island in the morning mist, a precious flower of the summer field, innamorata, darling, querida. I love you. Jestem w tebe zakochany—

In my memory, I can set our first encounter (in fact, it was a blind date) in motion any time like a video clip. I call her name, she turns around—that's when I first saw her blue eyes with a slight haze of mystery.

Friday, December 1, 2017

Sveta Polyakova

I got a girlfriend, Sveta Polyakova. I was introduced to her by my classmate Gene Deyanov, a tall, yellow-headed boy struggling with a chronic sniffing problem. In wintertime Gene and I would offer old women our service as wood choppers,

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

which earned us some little money. Like my old buddy Makarchik, Gene regarded me as his confidante. A few years later, he made a confession which was so ugly I had to terminate any further relationships with him.

Now it was winter, and Gene invited me to the skating rink. My backyard skating experience wasn't long enough for the real thing yet. I refused. He insisted. After some hesitation, I gave in. Sooner or later, I had to try anyway.

He was with that girl, Sveta Polyakova. His idea was my presence would give him more courage. Big mistake.

For a while I stood aside, alone. Then Sveta pulled me onto ice. We made a full circle, another one, and yet another. A sharp pain suddenly came up in my ankles. I panicked. Crashing flat on the ice was a sure thing to happen any moment. I felt tears in my eyes; I was about to start screaming.

"Let's take a break," Sveta said heading to a bench.

With a forced grin, I looked into her light-grey eyes and said nothing. Gene pulled over and said it was his turn.

"Maybe later," Sveta said and dragged me back to the rink.

Eventually, Gene got jealous, shoved the locker key into my hand, and cleared out.

Sveta Polyakova lived in a three-story stucco house one building away from my residence. Her second-floor apartment had a bay window and a stone balcony that looked like an illustration to old Spanish romantic stories by Lope de Vega or Gustavo Adolfo Becquer.

*Volverán las oscuras golondrinas
en tu balcón sus nidos a colgar—*

The golden engraving V. L. ZHUKOV on the house's pediment informed the world that before the modern history began

to roll out there was a person who owned that house and had a name to be proud of. The prehistoric V. L. Zhukov was a rich Samara merchant.

A Bucket of Sweet, Cold Water

Sveta was a student at the city Music School. She played piano for me a couple of times—soft etudes of Chopin and Schubert she'd learned at school. She took me to the City Music Hall, to the Drama Theater (its fancy building is a fairy tale of a kind) and, on the whole, walked me through the popular history of arts. On my part, I shared with her my experience of a studious reader.

After school I returned to Lvov. We kept corresponding. My letters to her were naively bookish, full of sentimentalities, passionate assurances, wild promises and vows. She wrote something back—none of her letters preserved.

Then I was back in Samara for the mid-summer vacation. We spent a day in her *dacha*, talking over a cup of tea, wandering around the cherry-tree garden, sitting on the deck railing upper. I was telling her stories, real and imaginary. She was listening, but I felt the connection was slipping away.

A bucket of sweet, cold water was pulled out of the garden well. We stood by the well, drinking water, wondering if we were the same boy and girl we had been a year ago. A sudden gust of wind lifted her dress, revealing a part of lingerie, giving us an awkward moment. In the evening I left.

I did not see her anymore. That was it. The grand finale.

Her new boyfriend was a cadet of a military medical academy. Sveta was a medical student, too, which, of course, was a unifying thing. She married him, eventually. For some time, our mothers kept in touch exchanging news periodically. Then, there were no more ties at all.

Sunday, December 3, 2017

Today, we celebrated Constantin's birthday which is tomorrow. Nina baked a classic charlotte cake. At table I told an old story. We were taking our baby boy Constantin home from the hospital in Havana where he had been born. As we drove down the Malecon embankment, I told the driver not to exceed 50 m/h. The driver, private Gadyuka, uttered a groan as if he were fatally wounded, but obeyed.

Monday, December 4, 2017

New Friends

In my archive there is an old studio photo of the four Samara friends—Slavka Samokhvalov, Valka Muravyov, Edka Anokhin, and myself.

Valka was a straight-A student. Of course. He played piano, too. One time, we tried to sing a duet to piano accompaniment. I made it a disaster by producing false tunes and ugly sounds. We laughed and never returned to it again.

We were playing chess under an apple tree at Valka's dacha. I was pondering over the next move, and he excused himself for a while. When he returned, his face was very pale. He had thrown up, had a splitting headache. I suggested to abort the game—he objected.

“A unique disposition,” he said. “We need to go on.”

I gave in, and we finished it off.

Shame on you egomaniac.

Edka was good at math. But writing was a hellish agony for him. Since he was sitting behind me, we had the same topic to work on. As a rule, we were given two hours. I wrote a composition for him first and then used the second hour for myself. That's how I learned that two different views on the same subject are possible.

Edka was a wisecracker. One day it turned out ugly for both of us.

Magic Words

Samara was different from the start. I watched a pack of toughs in gray caps, gray jackets, and gray slacks tucked in high boots, cigarette in mouth, accordion in center, treading down the street. I never saw anything like that in Lvov.

It was one of our visits to Mom in later years. Igor was already leaving, and I walked him to the bus station. As if from nowhere, one of those spaced-out punks suddenly materialized between us. He immediately engaged Igor in conversation. He smelled it. My brother was a little bit naive about people. Of course, he knew some individuals were bad, but he also believed he had magic words for them. The punk listened with much attention and then said:

“I can kill you, if you want.”

I knew something about the guys who talked that way. So, I switched on my inner sleeper thespian and redirected the conversation by using my knowledge of gang terminology no matter how small. We reached the bus station safely.

An Assassin Behind the Steering Wheel

We had a small lot out of town, a miserable piece of land of a few seedbeds that was allowed by the government to own. I had a bicycle and liked to ride it there to hill up soil around the potato sprouts and water them.

I was riding down an empty road—just a lonely truck was coming up from afar. It kept to the opposite side of the road moving with an average speed. Nothing unusual. Normal. But a sudden tiny shift in the space geometry told me the trouble was coming and I had to fear for my life.

On my right was a high, steep slope of the embankment—don't even try it. And it was too late to turn left—the truck was already speeding right into my face like a space rocket. A huge wave of joy tossed me up. High on adrenaline, I began pedaling like crazy, ready to collide. My mind raced. One, two—now! I pushed the bicycle up the slope—froze in midair. The truck's sideboard swished past my left ear. I pitched down on my hands, chin, and breast.

Eff you, psycho! Shivering, I tore my T-shirt in half to bandage my bleeding palms. That was close. I didn't feel a little grin on my face, but I think it was there. I was gloating.

The bike seemed to be undamaged. I swung it around and made my way home.

Next Stop Is Young Guard Street

Edka and I were standing on the entrance porch of the house where I lived. A pack of four gray guys were running past us down the street. Not exactly running, they were speeding—their quick pace rhythmical like a machine. Edka couldn't resist making an announcement.

“Next stop is Young Guard Street,” he cried out.

The guys made an all-at-a-time turnaround—and Edka got a smack in the face. They really were in a rush for they left us with that. Well, at least we didn't try to run away. But we didn't fight back either. We knew good and well who we were dealing with.

Yet, one of us had courage enough to confront this kind of guys like a hero. Slavka Samokhvalov seemed to be a slowpoke, but he was not—he was just methodical and precise in everything he was doing. And he stood firm for justice.

On a summer day he was on a barge, returning from the beach across the Volga River. Two bullies were molesting a

girl. He walked up and told them to leave her alone. They did. But at landing, they followed him in the crowd and stabbed him in the stomach. He survived only because the ambulance arrived in time.

Goodbye, my dear friends. I've finished my story. Thank you for being with me. My life would've been so poor, so meaningless without you.

Wrong Door

Tuesday, December 5, 2017

I Got a Surprise for You

In the summer of 1953, I said goodbye to Samara and returned to my beloved Lvov to begin a new life one more time. Igor met me at the train station. We hopped up into a streetcar. It was good to be back home with my brother.

“I haven’t chosen a college yet,” I said.

Igor jabbed his finger at the magnificent building of the Polytechnic Institute we were just passing by.

“Why not this one?” he said.

“Why not, indeed?” I nodded. How foolish!

The secretary of the admission board shot a look into my high school diploma.

“You’re making a wrong choice, young man,” she said.

A year later, Abram Sandler would say it again in a different wording, “You opened the wrong door.”

The secretary’s remark made me feel offended. *Wrong choice. Really? Wright or wrong, it has yet to be seen.*

Igor had graduated from LPI with honors—he never did anything without honors, that thing was embedded in his nature—and landed a job at the LPI Research Lab where yet in his student years he had been taking an active part in some major projects. His outstanding abilities in science—which he demonstrated even on an elementary level, such as holding in his memory the complete logarithm table—were joyfully recognized by the local academic society. Naturally, the faculty of the Department of Radio Technology wondered if his younger brother was anything similar.

Igor introduced me to the Head of the RT Department, who said that with the anticipated, sorry to say, low results of my admission exams the Department of Chemical Technology—which was a dumpster—would be a good option. *Low results. Seriously? I got a surprise for you.*

What the Hell Have I Gotten Myself Into?

I had to pass four exams. The first was a writing composition. To get my A was no mean feat. The second, physics—another A.

The third, chemistry, left a queer print in my memory. A boy from Belarus stood by my side waiting for the door of the exam room to open. He was all white—white hair, ghost-white face, white shirt—and shivering. Everyone was nervous considering the weight of the moment but certainly not like this. His teeth rattled as he tried to ask me something. He definitely needed a savior to put his soul back in him.

At school, chemistry was lame-o. But the young and pretty

teacher was not. To begin with, she was an extremely sensitive personality. Since we did not recognize her authority, her summons to us to be good boys were ignored. Noise in the classroom was killing her—up to the point of swooning. And more than often the reason for that was Edka Anokhin.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she would say to him.

And then, there she was—flat on the floor. One person who was able to fix her up was Edka himself. He would take the unconscious young woman in his arms and put her back on her feet. Edka was a handsome boy.

At the final class, she demonstrated a riddle which, she said, might happen to be a winning shot at the admission exam. Somehow the riddle got stuck in my head. Well, the ball settled into the right slot. I discovered it in my exam ticket.

In the meantime, the dark shadow of the White Boy fell on my third A. I couldn't look at him and feel no horror. He continued to shiver, as if he had just stepped out the freezer door, and talked blubbering gibberish. I think his life was totaled by those killer exams.

Every next A had been adding more light to Igor's face. Rumors about another talented Vishenchuk began to circulate.

To make it short, I was admitted to the Department of Radio Technology—years before the word electronics came into use.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Wednesday, December 6, 2017

My Lovely Rainy Days

Was it a kind of dim-wit stupidity? Or was it a mistake? The career of an engineer, a scientist, a teacher, a medical doctor meant a 9-5 job and dependence on various rules and regulations coming down from the government. I wanted to keep gov-

ernment out of my life. Did I have a choice? Of course, I had a choice. And I had made one. What I had been looking for was an intellectual surrounding, and this thing could be found in any respected educational establishment. So, it wasn't a mistake after all. I just knocked the wrong door. And a couple of perceptive individuals told me just that.

On the first day of my return to Lvov, Mishka Karyayev, Vovka Malyuk, and I took a night jaunt—like the one we'd taken three years ago. We had a lot to tell each other and walked long hours around downtown. It was a rainy day. I was licking sweet water drops off my lips and felt happy. On parting, I stepped into a deep hole that had been dug for a tree and got even more soaked all the way through.

Lvov is an unusually rainy town. In post-war time there were no umbrellas in our household—instead, we used anything that came to hand—a newspaper, a bag, or in most cases nothing. To come home soaking wet was a normal thing. Rain was not perceived as nuisance.

I always welcome rain when it is pouring down on me—and I hate running for cover.

Felt Boots and the German Military Jacket

While in Samara, it became difficult for me to understand that snow doesn't cover the entire globe in wintertime. So, I brought my *valenki*—felt boots—to Lvov. One morning I noticed a couple of snowflakes making circles in the air and decided it was a good reason to put my felts on. People were looking at me with disbelief. I waved it off.

Later that day I was standing on the front steps of the Polytechnic Institute, still under the influence of beautiful interior decorations—a masterpiece by Jan Matejko, who probably never wore felt boots. My first step down onto the pavement hit

a puddle. From there I went on splashing all the way to Yablonowski Street.

Then, there was a military training class, and I was wearing the war-trophy German military jacket. The colonel, our trainer, a war veteran, was throwing suspicious looks in my direction—he couldn’t believe his own eyes. Then he saw. He reared back to give more space to his voice.

“German! Jacket!” he bellowed. “Get out! Shift!”

A Vacant Look

How about the intellectual surrounding which I had been yearning for so much? My peers were sensible boys and girls, smart, determined, slightly dry tech-heads in a positive way. There was a warm, honest, comfortable aura about them.

I have to mention Igor Lavrichenko, a lean boy with big, blue, girly almond-shaped eyes. He would make a signal whistle to me from the inner yard of our house on Yablonowski Street, and then we walked to the Institute together.

He married my ex-girlfriend Jana Shcherbakova after I left Lvov, had a son with her, but something went awry, they eventually divorced.

Many years later I happened to see him in a downtown coffee-bar in a company of some weird guys. He took a vacant look at me and then angled his eyes away. I think he was drunk and did not recognize me. Or maybe he did.

Arthur Zemskov

And there was Arthur Zemskov, a big charm boy, genial, witty, the life of the party. Svetlana Romashova (last name may vary), a round-faced girl with red hair and green eyes, had a crush on him. During a night-long binge drinking, Arthur, being under the influence, slept with her. In the morning, he

came to senses and honestly told her the truth.

“I just couldn’t resist thirsty flesh by my side,” he explained to me how it happened. “I hate myself. Such a moron.”

Svetlana turned to one of my poems on tragic love, decided that it was her story, began to thank me and cry.

What really ended tragically was Arthur’s own life. After graduation he got a prestigious job, his career quickly grew into the head of a big industrial plant. He married, built a good family, but never stopped having lovers. It happened when he was with one of them. They had simply left the gas vent open. His paramour managed to crawl out the door for help. By that time, Arthur’s heart had stopped beating.

Saturday, December 9, 2017

Today’s morning, Constantin drove us all—Julia, Aaron, Nina, and I—to Cracker Barrel for breakfast. I gave Constantin the fifth volume of *History of The Russian State* by Boris Akunin. Three more volumes are yet to come—one volume a year. Lily was at work.

Yesterday, the first snow fell on the Village lawns.

Svetlana, Emma, and Svirshcheva

There were four girls in our radio-technology student group RT-12. Svetlana Romashova has been mentioned above. There was also a reticent girl with a hypnotically beautiful exterior. Her name was Emma Romanski. Many years later, we met again in Jana’s apartment a few days after Arthur’s death. Later that day I drove her home in my car. She had a serious health problem, was pale. For the first time ever, we looked into each other’s eyes with closeness and understanding.

Svirshcheva was the last name of the third girl. She had an earnest attitude towards the whole world of things, including

everything. As a token of our deep respect for her seriousness, we never used her first name, and eventually it had gone into oblivion.

Jana

And there was Jana Shcherbakova, a girl with curly hair, sharp wit, and irony in her hazel eyes. She was my flame, jovial buddy, English teacher, proponent of my poetic writings. She was beautiful, superb in everything, an excellent student—oh my!—the girl of my dreams. Jana and I were so very close—yet, the cards predicted me a long journey, adventurous life, and quite a different girl in a hot faraway country.

She gave me a playful name, LSK—Little Sweet Kinky—an intentionally dumb appellation. She liked my epigrams on almost everyone around, my short optimistic lyrics, and long poems. I wrote tons of them at that blessed time.

On a cloudy summer day with no sun in the sky, we wandered into Lychakowski cemetery. No other place on earth could rival its mystic, tenebrous alleys with high branchy trees, exquisite sculptures, elegant marble ossuaries. We sat on a stone bench behind a tomb and kissed. In a strange way, the obviousness of throbbing life and the mystery of nonexistence intermingled. Love and Death approached us from behind and joined their hands in unity. I know it sounds like banality. It came true, in a way, eventually.

Reluctantly, as if doing a forced labor, I dragged myself through tests, quizzes, mid-terms, final exams, getting more and more behind. Professors looked at me with unbelieving eyes, wondering how on earth it was possible to fall so deep down from the very top. Until one of them made a guess.

“You’re unlike your brother,” he said.

“Finally!” I said.

Something happened to my eyes. I lost my vision and for about a month stayed home blindfolded. Jana came daily and walked me about the rooms.

“What the hell am I doing?” I asked myself in the darkness. A whole year of my life had gone down the drain.

Monday, December 11, 2017

Digitus Impudicus

My peers had no doubts about their goal. Whatever they were doing today would get them a bit closer to where they knew they would finally find themselves. Charts, blueprints, circuit diagrams, calculations, all those polytechnical things were killing me. For my friends, they were just bricks to build a solid edifice of their future. My friends were getting ready for a job. I had another idea.

* * *

Before my return from Samara, my brother Igor had had a whole bunch of guests to live with him. It was the big family of colonel Vyacheslav Plastikov, who was our uncle. The colonel soon got a new assignment and left taking with him most of the family, but two of them remained—his son Vladlen and his mother-in-law babushka Mashtalova. I remember babushka well because of two things. The middle finger of her right hand had been injured back in her youth and since then stuck out no matter how the hand was positioned. We didn't mind, being ignorant of the fact that the finger had a name, *digitus impudicus*, dated back to the Roman Empire. The second thing was babushka Mashtalova disliked me. One morning, while making coffee she salted it. To redress the error, babushka threw in double sugar. Eewh! I refused to drink. Igor obediently gulped

his coffee. He respected old age. I didn't. Sorry.

Soon all guests moved out leaving us alone.

Poets Club

It was my cousin Vladlen who had introduced me to his friends from the LPI Architectural Department, Pavlo Mamalyga and Zenek Pidlisny. Like myself, they both were well in on their attempt at poetry. Pavlo was also a good guitar player, a songwriter, and a singer, too. His voice was rich, lusciously raspy. His poetry was powerful, vibrant. He definitely had a talent for those things.

Pavlo eventually dropped out of college and returned to his hometown Zaleshchiki in Western Ukraine. The stultifying *sovok*—ideology and mentality that prevailed in Russia at that time—drove him off.

* * *

In a similar way, *sovok* affected my dear friend Yaroslav Pritulyak. We both were admitted to Lvov University at the same time and, even before the academic year started, were sent to the village of Alexandrovka in Kropivnitski region, Ukraine, as farm workers. The poverty we witnessed there was stunning. It was the very hell of it, the demise of slaves. Next day, Yaroslav left. I tried to stop him; told him he would be dismissed from the university. He said he didn't care, just couldn't watch any more the misery his people had been put into.

* * *

In the summer of 1961, Pavlo and I had our paths unexpectedly crossed again in Chernovitsy, Western Ukraine, from

where I was supposed to go to the village of Ispas, the place of my exile or so I called it. It was midday. We took a seat on a bench under a shadowy acacia tree and talked till dark. I told him that poetry had long been gone out of my life—but it didn't bother me, I said. I was about to become a village teacher.

Pavlo had much more news to tell. His guitar was not with him; he sang a waltz acapella—it was so beautiful; it is still vivid in my memory. Then he reproduced, in voice, a piece of a symphony he'd composed, and recited some of his new poems. None of his oeuvres had ever been played in music halls or published in book form. A typical story of a talent doomed to oblivion from the very start. We parted expressing hope to see each other again. It never happened.

Lots of Verses

Zenek talked me into visiting his parents in Kalush, a small town near Lvov. Let's have a peaceful week and write lots of verses, he said.

We arrived at dinner time. As if it were happening today, I see myself eating a full bowl of fatty borshch followed by goulash, mashed potato with mushrooms and pickles, and beef tongue in sour cream, all this topped by an apple pie and hot tea. After dinner, we waddled over to Zenek's room, plopped down on the sofa, and fell asleep. There was an enormous breakfast next morning followed by a heavy lunch and then a humongous dinner. Brains got dazed, senses gone, conscience erased. We returned to Lvov with round faces and squinty eyes, without a single line written.

Twenty years later, Zenek visited me in Odessa. He was now the Chief Architect of the city of Lvov and had an air of gravitas. With him was a young woman of an uncertain standing. He looked down on me, discussed some esoteric architec-

tural trivialities with her, saying out loud that “he wouldn’t understand.” He told me he had a disease that could kill him any minute, which sounded like he was bragging. I don’t know how long his life went on. I hope he is alive and well today.

Tuesday, December 12, 2017

Down by the Riverside

What kind of bricks had I made so far to put up my own edifice? My thinking split into two short abstractions, *What a mess! Can you stop it?*

It’s amazing how a person or even a whole generation can change just in a year or two. Now I wanted to be a relevant, average person like everybody else. *No more Mowgli tricks. Be one of many. Do not differ.*

American culture began to form the lifestyle of the new generation of Russians. My new friends were open-minded, ingenious boys—they rejected the degenerate sovok mentality, sent it to hell.

Slavka Marenkov nicknamed Crash, a dark-haired handsome boy with blue luminous eyes, was an adamant jazz fanatic. He would grab the first thing that came to hand and pound it on the table, following the rhythm. This, I think, explained his nickname. “Down by the Riverside.” The sounds were incoherent, so he converted them into Russian *Davai beri brovai* (Go grab and toss it). His self-manufactured tape recorder was packed up with American music.

Offbeat World

It was the beginning of the time when new names came into my life: Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Dave Brubeck, Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole, Glenn Miller—and a little later, other kind of names: Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald,

Hermann Hesse— *Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann shook me with a love story of such power that probably could only be rivaled by Stendhal’s or Dostoevsky’s novels. I soon got under the spell of a sublime aura of music and literature of an offbeat world.

We used to get together at Crash’s apartment. Crash had a stepfather, who, passing by to his room, never said a word or turned his head to our side. He didn’t mean anything; it was an act of his natural biological behavior. Crash’s mother treated us with delicious potato soup with cottage bread and butter.

Vovochka was a long, blondish fellow with puffy eyes. He was bright in study and conversation, ironical, sometimes up to being waspish. Crash and Vovochka used to exchange sharp remarks. Crash played a dimwit.

“Of course, a moron like myself—” he would start.

“Rightly said,” Vovochka would cut in.

An often visitor and a partner in the sophisticated *preferans* card game we usually played was a skeletal boy with a harried look whose nickname was Razvalina which means Wreck. Sticking out of his mouth was an eternal cigarette with a promise written on it in ink, *The Last One*. I don’t remember he ever quitted.

My friends called me Helios which in fact was the correct Greek interpretation of my Russian name or vice versa.

Vovochka and Getta

The second place where we often gathered was Vovochka’s one-room apartment. His parents had moved to Moscow leaving him here to complete his education. Vovochka was never seen without Getta, a self-conscious girl, who had an enormous crush on him. She would take a seat at his side and watch—he didn’t react, didn’t pay any attention to her presence. When he

was kind enough to listen or say a few words to her, his eyes were turned to the playing cards or the chess board.

The pattern never changed. After graduation, Vovochka moved to Tula, a town in Moscow region. Crash had visited him one time and told that Vovochka led a monastic way of life. He said he saw piles of books all around the room, no TV.

Next time Vovochka and Getta met again was two years later at an alumnus gathering that took place in Getta's apartment. When the party was about to end and everybody was leaving, it so happened that Vovochka and Getta found themselves alone. Nobody knew how they'd spent the time given to them by their empathetic friends. The next day when all came to the train station to see Vovochka off, Getta was standing in the middle of the crowd.

Murroff and Rymsha

Murroff, or Bird, was another member of our noble society. Murroff was a corruption of his real last name which was Muravyov. The nickname Bird, as Crash once explained to me, turned up as a result of unwinding the inferential chain of advanced associations starting with an ant—*muravey* in Russian—and going down to feathered creatures who have the ability to fly. By the way, Crash himself was not sure how his own nickname came about. Murroff was an earnest boy with a Hollywood star bearing, who would have certainly given even more weight to any distinguished bunch of people.

Sometimes, we were joined by a round-headed, white-haired Rymsha. He ridiculed our gatherings but liked to be with us and, with much interest, watch us playing chess or preferans. He lived in a magnificent house on Herzen Street. I remember one time we gave him a whistle signal, he appeared on the balcony on the fourth floor and threw cash down to us—

he knew the old friends' protocol.

He's Been Assisted!

Samarkin was an alcoholic, and he had a master's degree in chess. Whenever he appeared in our company, we experienced a feverish desire to play chess with him. But beating him was mission impossible. Even if he gave us the queen odds.

One time, we all went to a chess tournament to see how he looked like in a serious game. He entered the playroom ten minutes before the closing time. His opponent met him with a wide grin of a winner. Samarkin crushed him in five minutes. The poor fellow saw us behind him.

"He's been assisted!" he cried out in desperation.

Cold Wind

Wednesday, December 13, 2017

Nobody Needs It Anyway

For a time the strategy Be Like Everybody Else worked. The steady flow of the academic routine was taking me away like an autumn leaf fallen into a river. But how much longer would I be able to keep torturing myself?

Wrong door means wrong door, doesn't it?

Valentin Vlasov, a former Igor's schoolmate, gave me a two-volume English textbook for out-of-class studies.

"Nobody needs it anyway," he said. "Maybe you would make sense of it."

That summer I was in Samara. A house was rented in the village of Vypolzovo, which was across the river from town, for the family and the guests. Leo, Tanya, and Aunt Anne with her

little black Russian Toy named Akbar came from Volgograd. There was a family of Mom's old friends, too.

I would get up early, at sunrise, open the English textbook and read it, mostly in whisper. By the end of the summer, I knew it by heart.

Back in Lvov, I soon became a university student at the Department of Philology.

Philology. Hm.

Was it the right door this time? I had a sense that at least I was moving in the right direction. But I had to catch up with what I'd missed during the years of dawdling. Financially, too. First of all I made myself an A-student—*What did you just say?*—which secured me a top stipend. I was doing some tutoring and taught in faraway villages at schools that were badly in need of teachers. All I was supposed to do academically was just come for mid-term tests. I was a free man.

Sunday, December 17, 2017

Yesterday evening Constantin called. He said he and Lily would like to come over and wish us happy anniversary. Oops! We forgot. Fifty-five years of being together. They came with a big bouquet of red roses and a card with a hundred-dollar bill inside. Thank you, guys, we love you so much.

I remember in the tiniest details the moment Nina and I first met—her lovely gait, gracious turn of head, blue eyes with a little bit hazy look.

“Yes, it's me,” she said.

Yaroslav Pritulyak

A month before the start of the first academic year, all students were sent to work at collective farms in eastern Ukraine. My neighbor in the railcar compartment was Yaroslav

Pritulyak. It didn't take us long to realize that we had to say something to each other. Standing in an empty entrance vestibule, we talked all the way to the destination, which was the village of Alexandrovka. Yaroslav told me his story.

At age sixteen, he was arrested right in the classroom and then transported to a Saint Petersburg prison. His crime was poems he had been writing in Ukrainian. For two months before the trial, they beat him until unconscious and then threw him onto the cement floor of the solitary confinement cell. He began to have epileptic seizures coupled with speech impediment.

After conviction, he was transferred to a Siberian prison camp where a former Latvian general, a prisoner himself, took care of him. He taught Yaroslav Western literature, philosophy, and English. The student exhibited a phenomenal memory and exceptional abilities to learn. He recited to me "If" by Kipling in the original language, quoted Herbert Spencer, Kant, Nietzsche. His speech was slow but distinct, academically logical. I was listening to him in a hypnotic state of mind.

The Village of Alexandrovka

Yaroslav and I stayed in a dilapidated house, whose owner lived alone and was seriously ill. In fact, he was dying of cancer. He lay in bed, screaming all through the night, being in an unbearable pain. For some reason his bed was set next to the entrance door. At night I would come over and sit by his side with a glass of water in hand. Sometimes, he had a few quiet minutes and then whispered thanks.

The next day, Yaroslav said he was leaving. I warned him that he would most probably be expelled from the University. He did not listen; said he just couldn't bear the sight of his people dying like that.

Alexandrovka was definitely not the best place on earth to live in. The scanty population was mostly old folks; the remaining young men were drunks. One of them stabbed me in the stomach, with no perceivable reason at all, and fled. The boy did not even have strength to do as much harm as he probably meant. It was just a scratch—I was fine in a few days.

The village was immersed in black darkness. At night there was more light coming from the sky than from the power generator. The village girls would come out, form a small crowd, and sing one and the same song,

*My window left, your window right—
they look at each other day and night.*

Weapon in Hand

As I suspected, Yaroslav was expelled from the University. But we continued to see each other sharing our views on whatever we wanted to talk about, which was mostly political things. The KGB kept him under surveillance, so he often had a chance to tell those murderers how he hated them, he told me. One day he came looking really antsy and said he was planning to join Hungarians in their fight against communists, weapon in hand. For a time, there was no sign of him.

We bumped into each other on Academy Street. I sensed disconnection right away. He had never looked at me in such a strange way. Something was wrong.

“Which way do you go?” he said. His eyes were dimmed as if he’d had a seizure.

“This way,” I gestured.

“And this is the way I go,” he waved to the opposite direction.

That was quite a hell of a shock. Obviously, he believed I

had betrayed him in some way. I was standing with my mouth wide open. What was I supposed to do, for crying out loud? Tell him that I did not do what he believed I did? It was too late anyway. He had already been gone.

Galimatias

The English Department was headed by Pimen Zelenski, a somatic behemoth, a war veteran, and an invalid with the right arm lost in battle. His secretary was tirelessly typing copies of *Pedagogical Dictionary*, a work he made up by defining terms like *book, lesson, pen, pupil*. He had been distributing it, personally and proudly, among the students until one day, having entered the restroom, he discovered the contraption in the trash can. The discovery didn't intimidate him. He immediately started to work on a research paper *Marxism and Grammar Rules*, a mere galimatias.

Pimen Zelenski was an innocent person. Whenever his audience laughed, he laughed, too.

"In the Russian language," he explained to his listeners seeing in them elementary school students, "there are voiced consonants and voiceless ones. Take the noun *dub*—oak tree—for instance, go to declensions and see how it changes. You will finally find out that *dupa* is, of course, an erroneous form of the word."

A hell of laughter exploded—which Pimen Zelenski joined for the sake of good company. He was probably the only person in town who did not know what the word *dupa* meant in Polish.

*A hto Lvova ne shanuye,
nai nas v dupu potsilyue.
Let them Lvov haters
kiss us in the ass.*

By All the Gods

Overall, the faculty was knowledgeable, in some cases highly scholarly—like professor Rudnitski with his course on Shakespeare, for instance. But for me, the academic value was not that critical.

However, I was not entirely indifferent to Professor Lurie's course of antique literature. Sometimes I was there, listening. Students were exchanging scary stories about him at exams, like he would suddenly jump to his feet and start pacing up and down, whispering ominously, "Why are they doing this to me?" But I had a suspicion that the students feared the freaky ancient heroes more than they feared professor Lurie himself. Country boys and girls felt uneasy in the company of guys like Achilles, Ajax, Hector. One of them drove the professor into hysterical condition by calling Odysseus's wife Antelope.

Professor Lurie listened to my blah on Socrates, then we turned to poetry. When I told him that Horace was my favorite poet, he jumped to his feet.

"Anything in particular?" he whispered.

"Well, 'To Lydia,' for instance."

"How about a line or two?"

"If I may." And I began to recite:

*Lydia, by all the gods,
say why you're set on ruining poor Sybaris, with passion:
why he suddenly can't stand
the sunny Campus, he, once tolerant of the dust and sun—*

The professor plopped himself back in his seat, grabbed my assessment book and signed it. Reviewing the exam's results, he asked me to rise.

“Here is the man,” he said unwittingly impersonating Pontius Pilatus, “with whom I can talk.”

I was embarrassed. Mere knowledge is not a big virtue. And then there was no rival to me in that room—nobody there could say that the first books in his or her childhood were *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*.

That Hamilton Woman

The English classes were lousy. In all the university years, not even once did I hear a live English speech. But one thing was really useful—the movie *That Hamilton Woman* with magnificent Laurence Olivier. Nelson’s address to the British Parliament is still ringing in my ears:

Lord Spencer, gentlemen,

You are celebrating a peace with Napoleon Bonaparte. Peace is a very beautiful word as long as the impulse of peace is behind it. But, gentlemen, you will never make peace with Napoleon—

and all the way to the very end of it—*I beg you; I implore you, do not ratify this peace!* Aside from the BBC radio program that was reaching out to me through jamming, Nelson’s oration was the standard of the British accent I was trying to imitate—only to trash it later in Chattanooga.

Tuesday, December 19, 2017

From the Darkness of Time

One of my collegemates was a country boy named Petro Zorilo, who hailed from eastern Ukraine. He had extra dark eyes on an unusually pale face, and straight, wire-like, dark-violet hair. This is a true description, just in case it might seem like fabricated.

Petro and I found common ground in our sentiments as to farm work. In the village of Alexandrovka, we had to haul sacks of wheat grain along a shaky board walkway up to a barn's second floor. Slavka Golovanivski, Yurka Savchuk, Eugene Krizhevich, and midget Theo Kuzik, all sitting on overturned buckets, didn't care a shit about those sacks. All right, who was going to do the job then? My dying host? Petro and I began hefting those sacks up there—first, second, third—finally, the guys lifted their asses off the buckets.

It is possible that most of the persons mentioned above are already gone. But let their names be pronounced and their faces seen, if for just a second, as they pop up in my memory out of the darkness of time.

There was another boy, Kapustyanski. I don't remember his first name—wait, yes, I do—Symeon. His face wore, probably from the day of birth, a permanently mournful expression. He held his hands clutched under his chin like a praying cenobite. The colonel who taught us artillery called him innocently Monastyrski—a derivative from monastery—being sure he had memorized it right.

The Medieval Stairs

Petro Zorilo and Eugene Krizhevich shared a rented single room on the fourth floor at 21 Market Square. The room was furnished with two narrow beds and, between them beneath a small square-cut window, a nightstand. The rickety stairs leading to the room were as old as the medieval house itself—they shrieked like a girl who suddenly saw a bedsheet ghost.

We went on a drinking binge in that room a couple of times. Eugene played a guitar and sang some raunchy songs. He was a nice guy with light-brown eyes and a slightly droopy nose. With him there was always a girlfriend, each time for life.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

The last one was a quiet girl named Zirka—Little Star. She brought us food one time when we were too sozzled to go out. She never talked to us.

Petro was not one hell of an artistic personality, but he had a socializing charisma, which made him a good friend. He later moved into a better lodging owned by a middle-aged divorcee, who offered him a separate room under one condition to sleep with her whenever she would ask him to. Some guys are oh so lucky was our comment. But Petro did not seem to be so very happy about that.

After graduation, we did not communicate, lost each other. Petro went to Kazakhstan—I wonder why it is always Kazakhstan—and disappeared from my life.

Eugene returned to his native Kyiv. He authored a book of poems titled *Cranes Over the Town*—it was the time of a romantic trend in Russian poetry when words like *crane*, *seagull*, *snowdrop* were considered to be wonderfully sentimental. Some books by American authors, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* among them, in his translation were also published.

He died at the age of forty-eight. Or so I heard.

Thursday, December 21, 2017

The American Exhibition

In the summer of 1959, Crash, Murroff, Vovochka, Rymsha, and I went to Moscow, where the American National Exhibition was supposed to open on July 25. For two days we rambled around downtown, dropping in every hash house and dive bar. On the third day, I was broke and took a train to Samara. Crash promised to send me a ticket to the Exhibition whenever he would be able to somehow get one for me. He actually did, but I forgot to claim it at the post office. I regret it till now. Or maybe not.

The Virgin Lands

In the fall I went to the Virgin Lands in Kazakhstan with a group of volunteers. The train took us to the Petro-Pavlovsk region, where my father had been arrested in 1938.

For a few days we stayed in a tent camp. Most of us got diarrhea right away. The latrine had just one hole for one user at a time.

With us was a courageous girl named Lora. She was the only female in the crowd. The latrine door didn't have a lock. Lora pulled it open and saw a boy squatting over the hole.

"Is that you, Mushak?" Lora said.

"Yeah, that's me," Mushak said. "Whom did you want to see?"

"Not you," she said. "Get out."

The Grain Combine

I was offered a choice—to build ricks or to harvest crops. I chose the latter—it was paid twice as much, although it was going to be more than twice harder earned.

I found myself in the middle of nowhere in a half-ruined shanty with the door and windows blown out, the dirty floor strewn with cigarette butts, and filthy pallets for the bedroom furniture.

Shortly before the sunrise, I hopped on an open truck, and for about half an hour we careered across the roadless steppe—long enough to start shivering from cold. A mug of hot tea at breakfast was more than a relevant thing.

Then the hell began. My job at the grain combine, though supporting, was absolutely crucial. Standing on the narrow bridge of the straw holder, I had to control the straw flow with a pitchfork and do it quickly, otherwise the straw walker would

get stuck. Looks like an easy thing. But while reaching distances, the center of gravity often went too far—I had to do the impossible to prevent the danger of catastrophic overflowing.

Near the bottom of the holder there was a lid that was supposed to open by the weight of the straw mass and let the haystack go. But it never did. I had to climb up the holder railing and jump in. Now, the lid opened letting both the haystack and me roll out. For a goodbye, it would hit me on the head, painfully. Then I would spring onto my feet, race to catch up with the doggone junky contraption, scurry up the stairs, and start all over again.

At noon I had lunch which consisted of a bowl of borshch with a chunk of lard followed by a huge piece of boiled beef with pearl barley or potato and, on top of it, a big cup of boiled-fruit juice. A traditional slab of coarse brown bread, too. By noon, I was so ravenous I gobbled up all this before being able to realize it was too much.

The food overload made me stoned by the insurmountable desire for sleep. Hey ho, get back to the bridge, grab the pitchfork—and go move fast.

Don't Get Up in the Morning

There were moments of bliss when the tank had been packed up with grain but the truck was yet to come to empty it—which meant about ten to fifteen minutes of dead sleep, could be literally. One of us dozed leaning against the shadow side of a haystack, ignoring danger. Truck drivers used to amuse themselves by running over a stack at full speed, and that was exactly what happened. The hospital was too far—the poor guy was dead on arrival.

Every night, before falling asleep, I took a vow, *Don't get up in the morning. Don't go anywhere. Keep your vow.* About four in the

morning, a loud cry, “Get up, get up! On board!” made me run out in panic and jump onto the truck. My head cleared up only when a chilly wind began to whir in my ears.

By late October, the work was over. It was a long ride back to Petro-Pavlovsk on an open truck, with cold wind blowing into my face. I was about to pass out, frozen, when the truck finally arrived at the train station. It took me more than three hours to stop shivering.

The railcar attendants welcomed us with cheap vodka. Some of us left all the earnings, no matter how miserable, on that train.

Thank You, Mr Portnoy

Friday, December 22, 2017

The lack of teachers in faraway villages of Western Ukraine was huge. No one in good sense would want to spend years in squalor that awaited a teacher there. In the fall of 1959, I was offered a gig at school in Limna, a village in Turka region near the Polish border.

The little house, kind of an idled lodge I was given to stay in, had a small room and a kitchen with a primitive firewood cookstove. In front of the house, a long-neglected apple orchard grew by itself. Right below the back window, the baby Dniester River was rolling its shallow ice-cold waters. At night I would fall asleep listening to its steady burble.

The school building was on the other side of the orchard. The principal and his wife taught history, geography, and other

stuff like that. There was a girl, a university graduate, who taught English. All other disciplines were mine.

Doppit!

Little kids came to school barefoot—I never heard them entering the classroom. They were barefoot in October and in November. The village lived in an abject poverty.

I was responsible for the night schooling, too. After a day of hard work, the students looked bushed, sleepy. I tried to make it easy for them, revealing in simple terms the secrets of math, geometry, trigonometry. I assigned them homework because I had to, but I knew they wouldn't care. The next day when I was demonstrating to them how easy it was, they wondered,

“Damn, teacher! How do you know?”

At night the village doctor would bang into the classroom, pretty wired, and demand to abort the process of education.

“Doppit!” he shouted. “Nobody needs to know anything. Let's go get a drink.”

This happened so often, the students knew what to do. They would politely see him out and show him the direction he should go. I never saw him in any other place or under any other circumstances either before or after his appearances at school. Was he hiding?

Wooden Apples

On weekends I would go to the village bar, or so it could be called, and take a shot of Hungarian Chain Bridge brandy followed by a fresh egg of local produce—the only viands the village could offer. I'm trying to recollect what kind of food there was on my dinner table. At times, I went fishing trout in the river. Wild brown pears from the forest, which probably had been a paradise in ancient times, turned into a real delicacy

after I gave them some time in the haystack that was in the attic. Apples from the old orchard that was in front of the lodge were pure wood, seriously—you might gnaw at the edge of your dinner table and feel no difference. I fried trout, eggs, and potato on the stove and maybe ate something else.

A Man with a Rifle

There was a chicken coop in the principal's backyard. Or rather there wasn't any backyard or a coop anywhere near the house—chickens were laying eggs around it simply because they knew they belonged to the principal. So, the principal's family ate chicken.

He never invited me to eat with him, but I remember how one day he ominously appeared at the front doorstep of his house, rifle in hand, aimed at a rooster and fired. The wounded bird cried bloody murder, ran for life, and stowed away in a woodpile. The principal began to disassemble the hiding place—the bird fled again. After two more shots were fired, the drama was over.

On Saturday nights, I went to the village club. A little band of fiddle, whistle, and hand drum played rhythmical music. The club members were mostly my students. We formed a circle, hands on shoulders, and danced—rotating, coming to a stop for basic steps, rotating again.

Circle rotation is probably the most ancient form of dance when artfulness was not individualized—the dancers were supposed to demonstrate togetherness and necessity of survival only.

A Basket of Chanterelles

The village of Limna is located in a valley surrounded by mountains. The mountains are not that high, though high

enough to obstruct sunlight in the beginning and in the end of the day. It is cold down there, but the scenery is breathtaking. The green slopes of the mountains with toy-like *smereki*—local fir trees—scattered in a fancy pattern here and there—look like you are dreaming.

The locals do not build bridges. Instead, they put tree trunks across the river which is comfortably narrow here. The structure has a name, *kladka*—a noun derivative from the verb *klasty* (to lay). To walk it, experience and aptitude are strongly recommended.

I had two guests from the outer world. One was an inspector from the Department of Education, the other—the University professor of lexicology, a remarkable woman with a war veteran biography and a talent for witty talk. I feel ashamed for not being able to remember her name. During the sightseeing tour around Limna, I suggested to visit the other side of the river. It took the slim, feisty professor a few seconds to ran over the *kladka*. The inspector made two steps and then proceeded to move his ass on all fours.

Every morning, oceans of new chanterelle mushrooms would surface on the mountain slopes. On my last day in Limna, Mom came to visit me—she wanted to take a look at the wondrous countryside I had so enthusiastically described in my letters to her.

On our way back to Lvov, we had with us a basket of clean and neat yellow chanterelles.

Saturday, December 23, 2017

]nez

In spring, I foolishly came to teaching again, this time some place in the eastern parts of Ukraine. I stayed there not longer than about a month though, did not even bother to remember

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the name of the village—something like Clayfield. There was deep clay mud on the road and elsewhere around. On my first trip to the school, the mud sucked off my shoes, and I had to proceed barefoot.

Minor irksome occurrences began to turn into a big depression monster. In the morning, the landlady put on the table a plate of fried eggs and lard, which caused nausea. The featherbed cover for a blanket was a sadistic thing—sweating when on and shivering from cold when off. I did all kinds of washing in a bowl of local heavily mineralized water that turned my hair into a white sticky mop.

Drab, anemic faces in the teacher's room and mundane posters on the school walls created a suicidal nightmare like waiting for somebody to be kind enough to come over and strangle me with his bare hands. In this precarious state of mind, I began to think about what was going to happen next.

It was the year when Khrushchev decided that he had another brilliant idea—the university graduates should not be philologists any longer. From now on, they had to be village schoolteachers no matter what their aspirations might be. I took it as an attempt to humiliate me personally.

A habit of thinking long was unknown to me. I bagged my bits and pieces and made my way to the bus station.

* * *

No, I didn't forget. I had a girlfriend, a fiancée I should say, Inna Kuzmina, my university intimate. She'd chosen me about a year ago to keep and use when needed. She had a special vision for my persona. The simple plan was to mold me first into a civilized man, then her personal man, then a professor with a degree. I did not object. I found it interesting that there

was someone who did not view me as a final product but had hopes to transform me into a different person. Even if those hopes were unrealistic.

The Gray Suit and the Anchor

Inna was *ma belle*. She really had a whole lot of things in her possession to allure me with. Here's what she looked like. Her black hair was like the Pharaoh's chariot mare's main. She had big *oh-those black eyes*; her lips showed a lovely sentimental pout. She was so very beautiful.

It all began when she decided we should go to the Opera. I felt fine in my everyday garb of a sweater and honest pants, but Inez—I gave her this name after Don Juan's ex-lover in Pushkin's short tragedy *The Stone Guest*—demanded a suit. I took her to Herten Street, tell her to wait, ran upstairs to Vovka Malyuk's apartment on the fourth floor, and changed into his kinky gray suit. It looked almost fine, except the suit was two sizes too large. Inez didn't even smile. She looked me up and down.

"Opera will wait," she said levelly.

This gave start to drastic changes in my outfit. Now I had dress shirts, spiffy neckties, a brown suit sewn at a tailor shop—the fabric was recommended by Inez herself—a dark brown coat from the same tailor shop, a yellow scarf (Inez's gift), and a pork-pie hat delivered from Moscow. This looked very much like my favorite novel *Martin Eden* by Jack London.

There was a major goal set before me by Inez that was much more complicated than all that sartorial stuff. I had to drop some kind of anchor and stay in Lvov, permanently. This was okay with me, for some time. I didn't object to being nattily dressed, looking presentable, and remain comfortably in an intellectual crowd. Rustic civilization was, of course, familiar to

me, deeply respected, and much loved, but my fortune wasn't there.

Sunday, December 24, 2017

Vodka and Onions

I landed a job at the Intourist Travel Agency. I had already worked for it as a guide for two summers before. Most visitors came from Canada, they were Ukrainian emigrants—others were American and British denizens. The latter spoke the language I was studying. But Americans gave me a headache. My first encounter with them was an embarrassment. Two middle aged ladies jumped out of the van and went into business right away.

“Where can we buy vodka?” they said.

I couldn't make out what they were talking about—Russian phonetics for vodka is *wotka*, but what I heard was *vadka*—until they told me that in America vodka was five dollars a bottle, while in Russia, as they had been informed, it was like almost free. They also insisted that I show them *onions*, meaning vegetable-like domes of orthodox churches, but I had to disappoint them—there were no *onions* to be found in the city's entire skyline. For that they had to go to Moscow.

The Women Wept

I was guiding a tour of Michigan State University students—suave, snazzy boys wearing short haircut. They were from another planet, but their language wasn't entirely strange to me, which made me feel like I was one of them, in a way. I led them to the top of the High Castle Hill, wanted them to enjoy a bird's-eye view of my beloved city. They told me that in 1939 Western Ukraine had not been liberated but, on the contrary, invaded, brutally and brazenly. Being an ingenuous

sovok, I was indifferent to what they were saying, didn't give it a single thought.

In the evening, they formed a choir in the boulevard between the Opera House and the monument to Adam Mickewicz and sang "Now Tell Us, Uncle" (*Skazhy-ka dyadya*) in almost perfect Russian.

Mr Portnoy, a lanky old man, a millionaire, was ailing and, as he told me, was supposed to die soon. His idea was to spend a few days in his native town before it happened. He had a big crowd of relatives of whom both of us eventually got sick and tired. At parting, he gave me a dime.

"My wealth began with this small coin," he said. "It may give you a good start, too."

It sure will. Thank you, Mr Portnoy.

A group of Ukrainian American women asked me to take them to St. George's Cathedral. We walked up the hill and stopped at the Cathedral's majestic gates. The women began to weep. An instinct told me that I knew why.

I Don't Care

The Intourist agency received an official paper threatening legal action in case I wasn't fired. It was pointless to argue against a formidable power that was ruling life from a hiding place.

But I was not going to surrender yet. Next morning, I got a job at the Academy of Sciences for which I'd been doing some translations before. By the end of the day, I was fired. Someone snitched on me again.

The regional job distribution committee had a long list of villages to choose from.

"I don't care where you are going to send me," I said and left the room.

At the graduation ceremony, I refused to shake hands with the dean. That was stupid. But what else could I do—burn myself? Jump out the window?

The Little Note Did Not Help

Ispas was the name of the village where I was supposed to spend the next two years in a sort of exile. The village was located near Vizhnitsa, a town in Chernovitsy region, Western Ukraine. The lexicology professor, who had with such elegance crossed the Dniester River over a kladka, gave me a note to her buddies in the local Department of Education with a petition to let me go in peace. There was little excitement in their faces when they were reading the note. I was told to come later in the evening, though. I came, knocked on the door, waited, went outside, waited, knocked on the door again, and left. The little note did not help.

In downtown Chernovitsy, I suddenly came across my old pal Pavlo Mamalyga. We had an all-day confab. Then we parted. We never saw each other again.

Farewell, My Love

Monday, December 25, 2017

Soon, very soon I'm going to leave my beloved city—only to see it again not earlier than ten years later. On return I will not recognize my good old Lvov—it will confront me as a phony, hostile monster, an enemy.

Yesterday, we gathered on Brass Lantern Way where Andre and Slava live in a big house atop a hill overlooking the Red Bank Valley. Tom, Polina, and little Katerina were in Providence, RI. Aaron had gone to his parents in Tennessee. With us was Julia alone.

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Slava prepared a roasted duck with cranberry sauce, boiled potato sprayed with dill, baked apples, cucumber and avocado salad, fried ball pepper and zucchini, and other small dishes. This Christmas will be remembered as marked with joyous talk and the flavor of roasted duck—and the rain falling all day long, too.

Wednesday, December 27, 2017

Illya Vatrîch

In Vizhnitsa, I dropped by a bookstore and found there on the display shelf a rare volume of *Gods, Graves, and Scholars* by C. W. Ceram. It was as much luck as I'd had with two other great books discovered on shabby airport and train station book stands—*Histories* by Herodotus and *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Rabelais. For years, these three books were my invariable traveling library.

In Ispas, I stayed in Illya Vatrîch's house in a tiny back room with a window looking out into the orchard. From the inside, I could reach over for the apples, sweet and crispy. M'm.

Illya lived with his wife Vasilina, their five-year-old daughter, and his ailing mother, who greeted me from the stove bed. He was a jovial young man who liked life as it was. He would dish about his love affairs, going into intimate details as a natural thing. Vasilina laughed listening.

On the outside, it might seem that Illya conceded to the communist regime in his village—in fact, he ignored or ridiculed it. He'd been appointed the leader of the village young communist organization—*What the heck, who cares* was his reaction. It turned out to be the officials' big mistake as they saw him leaving the church in the crowd of believers. Visiting a church was a major ideological crime.

Illya's elder brother Alexei had fought, weapon in hand,

against Russian invaders until, in 1950, he was captured and sent to GULAG. Six years later, he was released due to Khrushchev's amnesty. He was a rare visitor to his brother, but when he did come, we would have a long friendly talk. He had a lot to tell. He was sincere, real.

One night, he came in a gloomy mood, fished a bottle of vodka out of the deep side pocket of his long black overcoat—and we all sat at the table. The bottle was almost empty when he gave me a strange—half-serious, half-ironical—look.

“In good old times, I would put you against the wall and shoot,” he said.

“Shoot?”

“That's right.”

“Why would you shoot me?” I asked though I already knew why.

“You are a good boy, but you are also a Moscow boy, aren't you?” he said.

There'd been a third brother, the youngest. He had accidentally stepped on a land mine. His mother washed up whatever had been left of her son for burial, climbed up onto the stove bed, and never got down again.

Lord Nelson's Stallion

The village Head was Lord Nelson. I gave the man this name for a black band he covered his missing eye with. He was traveling around the village in a gig drawn by a black stallion who looked like an ancient mythical beast. I made an attempt to drive that gig too, but the stallion objected and pulled me into a ditch right away.

Even before Alexei was captured and sent to Siberia, Lord Nelson had been hiding in his house cellar both from friends and enemies, expecting no mercy from either side. Although he

was legally declared dead, his family grew in number by a baby a year. That's how he had been figured out and then returned to the great big world.

To Bloody Battle

Not counting me, Ivan Zrutin was the only Russian in Ispas. Back in 1944, he had been badly wounded and left here for dead. But he didn't die, recuperated, took a look around, and decided to stay. He fell for the young daughter in the family who had been taking care of him, married her, and now had four sons with her. He hailed from a village on the Volga River, visited his relatives there from time to time but did not miss them much. He spoke pidgin Ukrainian. He had in his possession an old gramophone record of two songs of Russian proletariat, "To Bloody Battle" and "March Bravely, Comrades."

Ivan Zrutin, Lord Nelson, the school principal—whose name I don't remember, sorry for that—and I decided to have fun. Lord Nelson's stallion brought us to the parade platform which had been set up at the foot of the mountain nobody remembered when or on what occasion. While one of us made an oration from the rostrum, the others listened, gawking. I began my speech with this:

"Lord Spenser, gentlemen—"

Christina

In Ispas, I got a girlfriend.

What? Don't you have a fiancée somewhere, Casanova?

Good question. Not exactly a girlfriend, actually—a woman about twenty-two, pretty by young age, married, name Christina. Her husband, the school property manager, was a man over fifty. How this mismatch happened I never asked, none of my business.

Christina was the village librarian. First thing I did upon arrival was visit the library—that's where we met. Pretty soon we became more than two booklovers. There were bags of *besos y abrazos* in keeping with the great love stories that were gathering dust on the library book shelves.

Three months later, a writ arrived from the military recruitment office. It said that I had been assigned to an interpreter job at a military academy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. By that time, I'd already had the rank of lieutenant, which had been given to me after completion of a boot camp training. I have to say a few words about that camp.

Felek Zdankiewicz

The boot camp was located in a pine woods outside the town of Brody—a lovely place with plenty of balmy, clean air. We slept in tents. During the day we were dealing with artillery pieces, such as the archaic 45-mm anti-tank guns or 122-mm howitzers. After the final fire drills at the shooting range, each of us was given the rank of lieutenant, which correlated with the post of artillery platoon commander.

There was much sweating, such as when we had to push a 56-mm cannon up to the top of a sandy hill overgrown with pines. All the more happy were we to go wash our bodies at the town bath house. We chanted as we marched:

*Felek Zdankiewicz był chłopak morowy,
przyjechał na urlop sześciotygodniowy.
Ojra, tarira ojra, tarira ojra,
tarira raz, dwa, trzy.*

People stopped and gazed at us, wondering if the year of 1939 with its long forgotten Polish aura was back. The lieu-

tenant colonel, our commander, liked the song so much he asked us to continue all the way to the bath house and back.

Alexander Savitski struck up the first two lines—the rest of us took it up to triumphantly finish the quatrain. Alexander was much older than our average and looked down on us. He used to brag about how one time in his past he had been a soloist at the Vienna State Opera. Actually, he did perform some ariettas at the university concerts until one day he let out a squeak—it didn't stop him, though. He had a zany tendency of pretending to be somebody else, such as a wealthy merchant or an aristocrat from Dostoevsky's novels. One time, at a restaurant, he asked the attendant for a *polbutylki* of wine—the term *polbutylki*, half-liter bottle, had been out of use for more than a century; last time it was Dostoevsky. The puzzled attendant gave him a shrug and brought an open bottle of wine with half-level contents—exactly what he asked for in today's language.

I shared the tent with Yurka Savchuk and two other boys from the History Department. We were talking about some cultural things, Ukrainian songs in particular; I spoke out about my views on the history of Ukraine. One of the boys was a vigilant ideologist.

“You are an effing Bandera,” he yelled at me. “I would shoot you as a traitor.”

No exit from bad luck. Seemed like I was going to be shot sooner or later. Stepan Bandera was a Ukrainian nationalist who fought against communist Russia during the World War Two—he was later killed by a KGB agent.

The next day, the vigilant boy climbed a cherry tree and shoved a handful of sweet fruit into his big mouth. A wasp stung him from the inside. His cheek swelled badly; his right eye disappeared. The boy groaned swagging back and forth.

Serves you right, goop.

Friday, December 29, 2017

In a few days, I will forever leave Ispas for a faraway Asian town. What awaits me out there? My thoughts are all about the future. But Lvov is still in my heart. All my sentimental ties, close rapports, deep affections are there. I won't be able to even say goodbye to anyone. For many years I will not see my brother, his family, my friends, Uncle Pavlusha, Aunt Valya, anyone.

Insignificant Things

At times, Mishka Karyaev, Vovka Malyuk, and I would buy a package of cheap candy in the Academy Street confectionary and, ambling around downtown, engage ourselves in desultory conversations, which, if an important part of our friendship, left little trace in my memory. Vovka's uncanny tales from the anatomical theater at the Medical School, where he was a student, would make us a bit nauseous. That, I remember.

Vovka had a complete collection of Chekov's works. We would open a volume, read aloud, and act a scene in persons. At Mishka's home we would play chess, without Vovka—he didn't want to waste time on trifles.

Neither of us had a girlfriend. It would've been very unusual if we did. That kind of times we lived in.

Igor's Friends

Igor and I had favorite eateries. We were frequent visitors of downtown Bristol restaurant for dinner. But what Igor really loved was a suburban Brukhovichi fast-food joint where we would eat classic cheburekis.

Igor had his own friends: Anatol Kretov, Boris Usatov, Yuzevich, Pedanich, Sogolovski, Valentin Karpenko, Valentin Vlasov, and others whose names slipped out of my memory. I knew two of them pretty well.

Valentín Karpenko

Valentin Karpenko had graduated from Lvov University, Spanish Department. Because of the absolute uselessness of the trade he'd gotten, he had to start over again at the Polytechnic Institute. It was the same kind of summersault that I had performed but the other way around. Valentin taught us a lovely children's song in Spanish:

*De colores,
De colores se visten los campos en la primavera.*

He married a pretty girl who had one leg shorter than the other. He loved her mucho. A week before their wedding, he asked me to render into Russian a poem by Gustavo Adolfo Becquer, with these first lines:

*Volverán las oscuras golondrinas
en tu balcón sus nidos a colgar—*

In honor of their eternal love, I want to have this poem on the pages of this book, at least partially.

*To nest around your balcony, dark swallows
with early signs of spring will come again
and rap their wings against the glassy windows,
inviting for a game.*

*But those who did, beside the fun of flying,
behold your presence, hear your precious name,
who did remember us, alone together—
they will not come again.*

.....

*So many words of love and adoration
before you will again be said and sung—
your slumbering heart eventually may answer
and thankfully wake up.*

*But what I felt for you, it was ineffable—
I saw you and I was in silent awe.
I walked my way and kneeled before a goddess
who was above all words.*

Valentin Vlasov

At first, he was Igor's classmate, then his college buddy, and, finally, his brother-in-law, who had a tendency to think philosophically. Igor ridiculed Valentin's theorizing. He deemed his speculations to be sheer balderdash. Valentin was a deep introvert and paid little attention to Igor's irony, though by slow grades he began to share his abstractions more often with me alone.

Our discussions acquired more weight at the bath house where we exchanged ideas, sitting naked on marble benches, sponge in hand.

Igor preferred to escape to the steam room where he vigorously lashed himself with a switch of birch twigs. After the bath house, we would go to a nearby beer bar. The discussion went on, with Igor lost in his own thoughts. Silence was his usual mood.

Igor and I, when alone, did not do much talking. We used telepathy. I think it was a wrong thing to do. With time, both of us began to find it difficult to speak publicly. We omitted important ideas under the assumption that they are there

implicitly and that everyone was thinking the way we did.

Saturday, December 30, 2017

An Uncanny Gift

Valentin discovered that his psychological ego was able to surprise him with sudden and unusual flairs. One day, he saw two persons he knew who stood by a store front on the other side of the street, talking. Suddenly, he realized that their conversation was being voiced in his head. He crossed the street and reproduced it to them, word for word.

Dreadful Shadows

The story of Valentin Vlasov's life is another example of opening the wrong door. In years, he became more and more inclined to look for, find, and welcome new traits in his personality. He began to write poetry, do bizarre oil painting, and yearn for more variable philosophical discourse. Here is a portion of his letter to me:

After witnessing a few surprisingly miraculous occurrences, I began to feel an inclination to faith. I've read the Bible. I've also read some books on Hinduism. And I was stunned how different those two religions were.

While giving a thought to paradise and hell, I felt uncertain and confused. Now I see that faith could be viewed as a certain abstract entity like the one that was proposed by the leaders of the French Revolution. But that cult didn't last long. It's a pity we can't get together and clear things up.

It became obvious to him that he had spent his life on empty and useless things. A sense of desperation was just screaming out in his art. One of his paintings showed Death, scythe in hand, chasing down a frightened man. He wanted to hang the picture over his bed, but his wife objected.

His poems were also full of gloom and doom. Here's his "Last Chance."

*Don't miss your chance. It'll never come again.
It's out of sight the very moment when
You start to feel unhappy, glum, defeated.*

*Your many doubts will decimate your will.
They'll crush you, push you rolling downhill
to a morass of guilt, regrets and sorrow.*

*They'll turn your mind, your thinking into hell,
they'll make you feel like you're an empty shell,
and toss you into dark and dreadful shadows.*

Remedy for Fear

Valentin became a member of our family after his cheerful, ardent cousin Aida came from Moscow and married Igor. Aida was a pretty girl, extremely sociable, prone to laugh easily. My relationship with her is a long and complicated story which I'd rather forgo to tell.

At that time, my cousin Rimma and her husband Volodya Sukhachev, a war hero and a Gold Star's cavalier, arrived in Lvov with their daughter and son. During the World War Two, Volodya had been a bomber pilot. He was dropping bombs on Germans, who shot him down several times. Rimma was a meteorologist at the military airdbase, and that's where they first met.

Volodya told us what his remedy for fear had been while taking enemy fire. He would start singing "Hop with Smyk" which, of course, was a song of the criminal world. He knew exactly one hundred quintains of that song and performed

almost all of them at our family gatherings. A year later Volodya and Rimma moved to Moscow.

The Man of True Grit

After the mysterious twosome of Pan Tadeusz and Pani Zosya had been deported to Poland, Uncle Pavlusha still had friends, Peter Constantinovich Astakhnovich and Michael Fyodorovich Kravchenko—two last, chance fragments of the world which had been defaced, demolished, incinerated, trampled down, swept away by the wind.

Peter Astakhnovich was a First World War veteran, a St. George's cavalier—the Cross of Saint George was the highest military decoration in old Russia—and a friend of Nesterov, the pilot who was the first to fly a loop.

Jesus, a loop. Really?

At the most dramatic time in the history of Russia, Peter Astakhnovich found himself right in the eye of the hurricane.

“Pavlusha is my one and only friend,” I remember him saying. “With him only, I can speak openly, in confidence. I'm all in my loneliness. My loved ones have vanished. My wife has been turned into Gulag dust. I returned from hell, and I don't know why I still want to live.”

The sign of a man of true grit is the sense of humor. Using his exquisite elegancy, Peter Astakhnovich was able to turn a situation upside down in a funny way.

“Don't be mad at us, Lady Courtesy,” he said to Aunt Valya as she opened the door to let the two friends in. “We got the table—ethanol and pickled herring.”

Puppchen

Michael Kravchenko was different. First, he was out of his mind. Second, he wasn't crazy, though his behavior showed

like he was. Third, he had a nickname, Puppchen.

Puppchen was an operetta written in 1912 by a German composer Jean Gilbert. It was a number one hit during the First World War but, due to its nonsensicality, was consigned to total oblivion in the following years. Michael Kravchenko was probably the only person on earth who could reproduce it in full from the beginning to the end. I am dead serious in my statement that I was honored to listen to him when he was singing the unique verses from *Puppchen*.

*Puppchen, you are my heart's delight.
You're so sweet, so lovable, so bright.
Puppchen, my sweetie Puppchen,
my only wish is just to sing
a song of love with you.*

Peter Astakhnovich, a man of sublime nobility, and Michael Kravchenko, a Hamlet-like insane hombre, were consummate archetypes of the long-gone epoch when wisdom and madness were beautiful things.

Uncle Pavlusha was a charismatic sentimentalist with an angelic touch. Like his friends, he was an outlander. He epitomized the idea of circularity, adding finesse to the friendship of the three old men. It was a classic layout. One of them represented tragedy, another—comedy, and yet another—poetry.

* * *

Out of the blue, Uncle Alexei Vishenchuk materialized. He came from Sukhumi, Georgia, for a two-day visit. I saw him just once—subtle features, gray eyes, and a general impression of mystery, the mystery being his past when he knew my father.

The brothers sang a song, Ukrainian or Polish, which was definitely from their past. Uncle Alexei had a beautiful silvery voice, both being marvelous singers.

Sunday, December 31, 2017

From the Mountain to the Valley

The village of Ispas was divided into two parts or levels or tribes or nations: the Mountain and the Valley. The Mountain was inhabited by *gutsuly* nation. *Rusyny* lived in the Valley. Nikolai Novosivski, a schoolteacher like myself, had received his own writ from the military quarters, and we decided to go to Tashkent together. He had a family—wife and little daughter—and lived on the Mountain. The go-away party took place at his house. The dishes were replaced several times along with the tablecloth, songs performed in chorus, mostly *kolomyiki*.

*Down the Mountain to the Valley
Coming to my sweetheart—*

The function continued beyond midnight. It was past two in the morning when Christina, her husband, a young schoolteacher, and I in the lead stepped single file onto the narrow path and started to descend from the Mountain. There was starlight, *softer than satin*, coming from above, no moon.

Christina stumbled in the darkness—I caught her up. She twined her arms around my neck—and I had to hold her all the way down to the Valley. Her weight, her breath, her kisses on my cheek were pleasing. She was whispering to me childishly something about taking her away, although we both knew it was unrealistic.

When we arrived, I put her on her feet, gave her a long hug, and said that I loved her. I was not lying. Behind us, her hus-

band shifted from one foot to the other.

The next morning, I said goodbye to Illya and Vasilina. Christina was waiting for me on the front steps of her house. We hugged each other for the last time. Tears were shed; words, bitter and sweet, told—and we parted.

Time of the Sixties

Monday, January 21, 2018

Soon, very soon, we are going to meet. I can't wait. I am already in Tashkent, have just gotten off the train, standing on the passenger platform. It's cold, snowing. What date is it? November 14, 1961—you dude. New life, new time—time of the Sixties.

The Anatomy of the Entrenching Shovel

The new military academy in Tashkent began to welcome cadets from Ghana, Somalia, Angola, Kenya, Syria, Indonesia. The interpreters were randomly selected without their consent. They arrived from various parts of Russia.

Borya Zenin came from Siberia, Turgun Ashurakhunov was Uzbek, Zhaken Kaliev—Kazakh, Eduard Emirov—Avar,

Ildar Galiev—Tatar. Others came from Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Odessa, and Lvov like me. We were supposed to put into English or French the whole load of bullshit of combat engineering, artillery training, marching drills, and other such things for the cadets to learn and do.

The venture was fundamentally moronic. There was no reason why African boys should sweat over outdated artillery pieces, full profile trenches, foxholes, dugouts, entrenching shovels. What they would, most probably, do back home was take part in military coups or just career in jeeps across the country, shooting AK-47 indiscriminately and destroying everything on their way.

Tuesday, January 2, 2018

It's chilly outside. 24° F in the evening and 11° at night. It's going to be this way to the end of the week.

Julia and Aaron came to say goodbye on their way to Memphis (her) and Nashville (him). Swell, brainy kids.

Egypt

As military interpreters, we were a collection of grotesques. Second lieutenant Grachev was hysterical about his inefficiency, refused to enter a classroom. His knowledge of English was close to nothing. This being obvious, he was commissioned to marching drills where no language skills were required. His cowardice and incompetence were eventually appreciated—he was sent to Egypt as a military adviser.

I could've been sent to Egypt myself, too. Egypt, like any other capitalist country, was the sovok's wildest dream. Sure, you would be back home with modish clothes, tons of *certificates*, which were imitation dollars, and a classy car Volga.

Lieutenant Boris Greshnikhin, who hailed from Nizhni

Novgorod, and I were called to the Defense Ministry in Moscow where, after an interview, we both got approval for Egypt. A month later, Boris received a summons and left.

Information leaked—my approval had been revoked. It seemed like I'd made some infelicitous statements. Fine with me. But the explanation could be much simpler—a number one requirement was to be a KGB agent. I wasn't.

Wednesday, January 3, 2018

To Hell with It!

Colonel Treumov, who was our commander, had us all sign up for the communist party membership. I did not object. That was, of course, a dumb thing to do—but I must admit it helped me much in later time in more than a couple of situations. I would've never seen a foreign country without it. Years later, in Odessa, I got rid of the annoying presence of ideological nonsense at my workplace by turning party meetings into a book club.

Borya Zenin was a simple-hearted Siberian bear with red eyes, a silent boozier. His professional skills were about as good as Grachev's, but he was at least aware of it and tried to improve. We were friends. Borya was good people.

Not all of us were giving a long thought about what our future was going to be. The army had changed our lives in a heartbeat—most of us just wanted to know what was going to happen next. I was among those who took this laissez-faire approach. I'd left Ispas in a rush like a starting gun had gone off for a short distance. I'd just been looking for a new life, whatever it might be. I hadn't even bothered to drop in and say goodbye to Inez. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a vague idea had been taking shape—it might be a good thing for her to just forget about me.

But some of us went rogue. Lieutenant Prussakov tore off his shoulder boards and danced on them.

“To hell with it!” he yelled. “Don’t need this garbage!”

It didn’t help, never could. No one was supposed to be discharged no matter what.

Anyone?

Lieutenant Barashkin arrived right from Angola with a suitcase of stylish garb. He looked very much like his humble last name (Lamb), which was in sharp contrast to his unhinged behavior. The night of his arrival, his bed in the dorm remained vacant. In the morning, he appeared in the backyard, turned the outer water tap open, and let water pour on him. His voguish jacket was split open on the back all along. The next morning, there was a remake of yesterday’s show, though not in its entirety—this time his new jacket was smudged in dirt.

On the third day, he appeared at noon during the ten-minute break when the faculty and cadets were all out for a smoke. A taxi car pulled over, the passenger door opened, Barashkin’s head stuck out.

“Sex for free,” he shouted. “Anyone?”

Inside the car, shaggy-haired shadows were struggling to be seen. With no response received, Barashkin shut the door and zoomed off in a cloud of dust. The break was over.

A week later lieutenant Barashkin was ordered to take a train and go to Moscow for a new assignment.

Unmasking a Traitor

Lieutenant Sharypkin was a thin, delicately built boy, a refined intellectual who hailed from Saint Petersburg. He held his military cap clutched against his breast and greeted senior officers by nodding instead of saluting. A volume of

Dostoevsky's novel *Idiot* was seen wedged under his arm at all times. Each month, on payday, he flew to Saint Petersburg cynically excusing himself by the necessity to visit the state library. KGB agents intercepted his letter where he was describing the Military Academy as another Auschwitz. A special meeting was summoned to unmask the traitor.

It all went wrong. We demanded to explain to us how it was ever possible that the letter had been read by someone who was not the addressee. We expressed our indignation. At the beginning of the 1960s such things were possible.

Eventually, lieutenant Sharypkin was also ordered to board a train and go to Saint Petersburg for a new assignment.

Absolute Champion

Iron-willed guys tried drinking fugues. Mistake. Heavy drinking was a normal thing in the army.

Lieutenant Vladimir Gorlashkin malingered psychosomatic disorders but was found sane and guilty of simulation. By the way, he had a knack of doing unexpected things. We both stood in the lavatory, taking a leak.

"Listen," he said and produced a booming sound of fart.

Seeing my disbelief, he assured me he was an absolute champion in this kind of artistry, and even if I tried to compete, he said, I would never have a chance to win.

Vasya!

It was a hilarious assortment of various unique characters: eggheads and nincompoops, men of integrity and sumbitches, virgins and womanizers.

Lieutenant Prussakov, who'd been dancing on his shoulder boards, married a whore. Being a Dostoevsky worshiper, he entertained a philosophy that marriage was an educational

tool. His wife had a better idea. She took her new social status as a promotion, began to bring home her bed partners and physically abuse her husband.

Lieutenant Khrizhanovski relished every moment of his military service which vacated him of all sorts of worries, sorrows, and other headaches. He was thrilled by the thought that suddenly, as if from nowhere, a chance popped up to offer him a life of leisure with just one binding obligation which was to do nothing. Day's duty over, he lay supine on his dorm bed, his hands clasped behind his head—gazing at the ceiling in a blank reverie. He erased his personality to total zero.

Lieutenant Klimin turned out to be a petty thief. He was in charge of Ghana boys, admirers of their president Kwame Nkrumah. They'd grown up in the civilized atmosphere of the British colony and now had complaints about crummy living accommodations, filthy facilities, and absence of toilet paper. They had brought with them a few discs of wonderful indigenous music, and he stole their favorite song. He knew that they knew who the thief was, but he didn't care, maintained a deadpan face.

Lieutenant Kotov (name may vary) would drop dead tomorrow morning if he missed a chance to get laid today. Leaving a woman one night, he got a ride offered to him by Uzbek youths, who began to strangle him the moment he got in. They tore off the sleeves of his military jacket, broke his front teeth, pulled tufts of his hair—all this done in dead silence. They pushed him out of the car at the Academy gates.

“With all what they've done to me,” he said, “they could've at least told me why.”

Second lieutenant Alexandrov, a scrawny young man with unlighted black eyes, a patriot, a devout communist, denouncer of dissidents and enemies in disguise, who, he believed, all of us

were, was a KGB informer. Highly likely, it was him who'd squealed on me at the time of Egypt situation.

Many thanks to you, second lieutenant Alexandrov, if it were really you. Muchas gracias for no Egypt. Otherwise, I wouldn't have married the right girl, if at all.

Lieutenant Yuri Shakhov had a giant Harlequin Great Dane named Dog, whom he had brought from his Saint Petersburg home. He walked his pet around the Academy campus, telling everyone who would listen, especially on the pay-day, that he could not afford feeding two eaters. One had to go. The Dog had a volcanic appetite.

Lieutenant Vasya Mazur was a mentalation guru. He was the sanest individual among us. No one could approach him for a chat without being qualified to hear the sacred names of Kant, Hegel, Marx.

Vasya married the Academy secretary, a nice non-philosophical girl of common sense. He was eventually discharged, and the couple settled down in Lvov. Nina and I visited them there one time. The first thing Vasya said at the dinner table was about his place among the local thinkers.

"I'm number one philosopher in town," he said.

His wife, who seemed to have a long experience of quieting her husband's ambitions, uttered a soft groan,

"Vasya!"

And now! Now I am standing under the tree.

Blind Date

Thursday, January 4, 2018

Under the Tree

Yes, standing under the tree. Bolotov has sent me here to date a girl he'd met last week.

"Can't be there myself," he said. "Terrible headache, pain in the neck, total paralysis—but the girl is a real thing."

"I know your girls," I said.

"This one is different. Please."

"No, thank you. Why should I?"

His next argument was more persuasive, much more.

"The girl comes—there is nobody there. Imagine how she feels."

I did.

"Okay," I said reluctantly. "Whatever. I'll go but—"

Now I'm standing under the tree on Tashkent central

square. A tall, slim girl walks past me in a swift pace and turns the corner. *You've missed her, gawd. Go catch up. No, it's too late. Just wait. She'll be back.* Back she is, walking briskly in the opposite direction—

“Excuse me. Are you Nina?”

The girl turns around.

“Yes.”

Her blue, slightly dimmed eyes look at me, waiting, hesitant. I explain why I'm here and then voice the standard invitation to watch a movie, *Crusaders*.

“A Polish thing, presumably good.”

“Sounds like a way out.”

“Excellent.”

The girl's voice is coming as if through a silk curtain. I once heard that voice in a dream. The mesmerizing rustle of waves on the Santa Maria del Mar seashore. Work of chemistry.

Crusaders

It was hot and stuffy in the crowded theater foyer—we came outside. Light snow was falling. Beautiful, chilly. *Was it January?* Maybe. We both are still not sure when exactly it happened. *Do you remember this poem by Nicolás Guillén:*

*¿Cuándo fue?
No lo sé.
Agua del recuerdo
voy a navegar.*

*When did it happen?
I'm not sure.
Across the sea of my memory
I'll go find out.*

To get warm, we chased the passing streetcars. Passengers watched us through the windows, curious.

Crusaders turned out to be a grand, glamorous story. Horrifying, too. A sword plunged into dirt. Eyes gouged out. Revenge. In America, after so many years, I wanted to watch one more time the movie which became the pennon, the oriflamme, the mascot, the symbol of our first date, the beginning of everything. It came to be so boring now, antiquated. But *let it be, let it be*. It had been such a turning point in my life.

There was one more date. The day was freezing cold. We spent some time at the Officers Club, loafing around, leaning against the wall, talking. Then I walked her to a bus stop.

Next time she did not come. Winter was gone. There was no more snow. Katerina Morozova, Nina's grandmother, had died.

A Tough Nut of a Fiancée

In April of 1962, I took a short leave and went to Lvov to see Inez. There was a streak of mulishness in her which I had tolerated so far though I knew it might easily turn into a threat to our relationships. She had refused to be in contact with my family. *Russians are barbaric people*. The exclusion was made only for Uncle Pavlusha, who had impressed her as a civilized person, you know. Never mind she hadn't seen any other member of my family yet.

Inez had laid out a far-reaching program for the two of us. First, my proletarian family had to be cut off once and for all. Second, I had to be chiseled into a refined scholar—which was supposed to be my job. Without a master's degree and then a Ph.D. degree, I wouldn't be able to become an ideal husband whom the loving wife might rightfully be proud of. And, finally, all those wonderful things had to transpire in one place only—

Lvov, nowhere else.

Pure daydreaming. The family would eventually be acknowledged. I would never allow myself to be so stupid as to care about the career of a university professor. No career, ever. And it was not going to be Lvov, even if I wanted to stay. Mowgli had his own ideas about me. He'd led me to the wild steppe beyond the horizon, taught me to have no fear of wolves, swim across the Tobol River, sleep on bare floor. He would send me to faraway parts of the world. Plans? Programs? This is not what my life was about.

Friday, January 5, 2018

Dinner with Inez's Family

There were four persons at the dinner table—Inez, her mother, her stepfather, and I. The mother took the initiative from the start. Some individuals, she said, do not fully understand the importance of keeping their bodies clean, which is the first thing to do in order to abate the horror of stinking like an animal. It is a necessity for women, first of all. But men should not be careless about their personal hygiene either. Some of them neglect to wash their hands even after using the toilet. They are ignorant of table manners, eat blindly, misplace forks and knives, make a mess around them, and in overall behave like savages. Civilized people should distance themselves from this kind of individuals who, as we all know, are in the majority, unfortunately.

Listening to this crap was an embarrassment. A shot of vodka did little to ease a sudden fugly sense of waking up in a wrong place. I would've taken another one but in a different company. The dinner went on like that and then ended.

The next day, Inez told me that I'd made a favorable impression on her mother though in her—mother's—opinion

was a bit stiff in my manners.

A while back, Inez had told me a story, a classic example of Stockholm syndrome. During the war, a mother and her daughter were deported to Germany where they were handed over to a family to do the farm work. For a long three years, they lived in that German family as slaves.

Yes, we were slaves, of course, Inez continued tossing away anonymity, but it was a higher civilization that taught us a lot of nice, ethical things; opened our eyes to reality. It made us realize that back in our country we had been living among vulgarities as unfortunately we continue to do so even today. Plebs should know their place—we must stay away from this kind of people.

We agreed that in July Inez would join me in Tashkent, and we'd marry. In July, Inez did not come.

Hosilot and Watermelon

By that time, I'd gotten my own apartment in Chirchik, a town about twenty-five miles away from Tashkent. Since I knew that government would never let me enjoy anything good for free, I didn't want it at first, but Bolotov persuaded me:

“You like your dorm? Chirchik is better than this misery.”

He was right despite the dubious pleasure of commuting in an army truck. It was not an apartment per se, though. I got a small room with a communal kitchen, and a public outhouse quite a distance away, with four holes on the cement floor. Bolotov had a similar room next door.

After work, we would come home with a few bottles of Hosilot wine and a watermelon in an *avoska* net bag. First thing, we had the avoska securely snagged in Chirchik Creek. Then we changed and, on return, threw our bodies into the creek's violent glacial waters. It was crucial to catch hold of the first bush

twig on the way and get out double-quick, otherwise there was a risk to be turned into a lump of ice and swept away by the rapid current. Now the watermelon would be cold enough. The wine, which was the only brand available in stores, would be good, too.

Red-Haired Angel

Bolotov was four years my senior. He'd had adventures in his former lifetime and was a bit showing off, especially in the matter of women, which, of course, was normal. What he was really proud of, however, was something else.

"No one around has such a powerful profile as I do," he told me one time. "My father belonged to the core of the Russian proletariat. He was a foundryman at the largest industrial plant in the country. As a member of an elite proletarian crowd, I'm protected like no one else."

Now, in the time of new Russia, he told me, to my big surprise, that he actually had a noble ancestry. He bemoaned the lack of pride in his son George, who for the first time "in more than four hundred years of the family history" started working 9-5 job as an ordinary electrician in Canada. When I reminded him of his proletarian genesis, he said that his grandfather owned a small estate, even if it was just a wreck of a house. Then he added that some old women from the neighborhood used to take care of him, coming regularly till the day of his demise—which was a kind of suggestion that they might have been his former servants or something.

Bolotov remains my close friend, no matter how wild his ideas are. He is a red-haired angel, who has been chosen to bring the message about the girl whom I would marry. I remember him as a fine man, affable, fond of pretty women, selfless, able to make the right choice in no time. I saw him save

the life of a little girl—he snatched her from under a truck which was about to start moving.

Regretfully, he'd failed to build close relationships with his wife and his two sons. He complained to me that Lyubushka, his wife, preferred to talk to chickens in the backyard rather than to her professor husband.

I let him read all this in the Russian original of this book. He said he had no objections. You are the author, he said, and have the right to say whatever you choose. Bolotov has always been preaching and doing common sense. He is an awesome friend.

Saturday, January 6, 2018

Life-Changing Decision

Neither did she come in August. The preconditions remained the same—a decent apartment and better financial security to begin with. I tried to explain to her that nothing could possibly be added to what I'd already had—there was no way whatsoever to improve the circumstances. The army did not adjust its rules to an officer's personal needs; it owed him nothing. Military life had pressures, and I can't change it. Inez continued to insist that I do something. Finally, I lost my patience and made it clear to her that if she didn't come right now, I would start looking for an option. In response, she chided me for neglecting my duties as her betrothed, for being weak and unable to resolve simple problems, for having no desire to change the situation for the better. The game was over. I approached Bolotov.

"I walked the girl to a bus stop both times I saw her. Do you know her address?" I asked.

"Yes, I do."

"Can you take me there?"

It was the second time Bolotov was an angel.

Inez and I were a mismatch from the very beginning. Not only the outhouse with four holes on the cement floor but even the honest little room in Chirchik aside from other lovely wonders of an army officer's life would inevitably make her lapse into a clinical depression. To the end of her life, she would have considered me a rotten villain who turned her sweet dreams to shit.

That Appeared To Be That

In December, I received a long letter stained with tears, full of grievances and accusations, demanding an immediate divorce with my newly wed. Sure, it was harder for Inez than for me.

Time passed. Inez married Boris Knyazewski, a decent man, an intellectual, a professor with a degree who had a nice apartment of three bedrooms on General Tarnawski Street in downtown Lvov. That appeared to be that.

In the beginning of 1970s, I happened to work for some short time at the LPI Chair of Foreign Languages. Inez was a professor of English there; the chairman was Boris Knyazewski. Boris and I had a common interest in Biblical literature, and we made friends on that ground. He was collecting apocryphal texts. Later, I sent him, from America, a volume of the complete *Apocrypha* and the latest discoveries in that area—*The Gospel of Juda* and *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.

Sunday, January 7, 2018

A Nap on the Balcony

Nina and I began to date more often, wandering around dusty streets, colorful Uzbek markets. We would part late at night when the city transport had already ceased to run. I had

to walk a long distance from the airport residential area, where Nina lived, to downtown Tashkent. But that distance seemed to me too short for all the things I wanted to think about while walking.

In September, there was quite an assload of field training out of town in the baking sun of Central Asia. I would come exhausted, with the back of my military fatigues turned white from dried sweat. Once waiting for Nina on the balcony, I dozed off for a few minutes and then woke up feeling her light, serene gaze on me.

Bolotov's Closet

In the late fall, I took Nina to Chirchik to show her where I lived. In my room I had a small floor carpet, a soft yellow chair made in Germany, a collapsible cot, and, on a side table, a tape recorder with tons of American music, to wit: Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Ray Conniff, Patti Page, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Elvis Presley—

We paid a neighborly visit to Bolotov. He had a couch, a small table, and a makeshift closet which was a curtain hanging over a clothesline across a far corner. Bolotov would toss pieces of his military equipment and other small possessions he did not need at the moment, over that curtain.

The Truth

It was already midnight. We ran out to the road. A car swished by. An empty bus thrummed away brazenly ignoring our wild waving. There was no more traffic.

We spent the night, cramped on the cot, back-to-back. In the morning, we boarded the Academy truck. Passengers, the Academy staff, sat tight stealing glances at us. They would have never believed the truth.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

It did not look like a typical whirlwind romance, really. The chemistry worked in a different way with us. It was just a quiet and slow beginning of a life-long love story.

Building a Family

The Black Shawl

It was a typical sunny Uzbek day. I took Nina to the upper terrace of Tashkent restaurant. Across from us, in the middle of the square, a fountain sprayed—spritzed, Nina said—its tepid water against the white dazzle of the Alisher Navoi's Opera House.

Having written this, I asked Nina to remind me what was on the table. There were some dishes, a bottle of champagne, and chocolate candies, she said. We left the bottle half empty, she said. That's regrettable, I said.

We talked, enjoyed the view from the terrace—and I proposed to her. I knew she would be surprised.

“Think about it,” I said. “I'll wait.”

We tied the knot on December 16, 1962.

The registrar was a young Uzbek woman with a thick black shawl around her shoulders. She seemed to be suffering from severe cold. Having filled in the marriage certificate, she placed it before Nina.

“Please sign, fiancée,” she wheezed.

Then she slid it across the desk toward Bolotov, who was wearing a spectacular military parade overcoat.

“Please sign, fiancé,” she said as if she was using her voice for her last words.

I snatched the document and signed it. Bolotov handed Nina a big bouquet of white chrysanthemums wrapped in a newspaper. We took two photos, one—us alone, the other—with Bolotov. In the evening there was a wedding party. We had two guests, Bolotov and Raisa Belousova.

Living in a New Family

The single room in Chirchik was soon neglected, forgotten actually, because of its uselessness and clumsy isolation. Nina’s job was an Airflot flight attendant which meant flying across the country from Moscow to Magadan as well as over the border, mostly to Kabul, Afghanistan. Unexpected changes in her work timetable were not a rare thing; she had to be ready any moment, with me nearby.

Nina, her mother Paulina, and her brother Victor lived in a small room similar to the one I had in Chirchik—the only difference was a door leading to a privatized portion of the common balcony. Outside facilities, as usual.

Previously, the room had been a communal kitchen—the firewood cookstove was still there.

I’m standing in the doorway, observing the premises anti-clockwise. On my right are the cookstove and a fridge. Facing

me is a wall with the door to the balcony. To the left of the door there is a window. Under the window, behind a small all-purpose table, Paulina's bed is positioned. The left wall is all taken by our bed. The last piece of furniture, a high plywood chifonier, takes the doorway wall.

There is still a narrow space between the table and the chifonier, just enough for Victor's collapsible cot to be set out for the night. A night trip to the outhouse is only possible by stepping or crawling over the cot with Victor in it.

The overpopulation, however, did not last long. In January, Victor married a Russian girl Katya Redina—who later turned out to be a German native whose last name was, actually, Reding—and moved with her to her mother's house in Sergeli, a settlement in Tashkent urban sprawl.

Next summer, Paulina, who for many years had worked as an orderly at the Airflot hospital, was awarded a two-room apartment on the upper fourth floor of a new house in the Airflot Village. The three of us moved in.

A Call to Canada

Yesterday—today is still January 7—we had dinner on Brock Road. Constantin and Lily invited us to taste some unusual food—smoked fish they'd bought in a Russian grocery store in Atlanta.

Constantin made a call to Misha Vishenchuk, who lives in Toronto. Misha's birthday is January 6. He was setting up the birthday table for the guests, who were about to come. Who? All the family except Marinka, his sister. She was in Moscow with her family.

Many years ago, I used to take a day care of little Marinka. We enjoyed being together, got very close. One day, she entwined her little arms around my neck and said,

“Uncle Geli, I love you. You are my Daddy.”

Monday, January 8, 2018

O Mio Babbino Caro

Last night, I was listening to Maria Callas in a musical dream. She was singing “O mio babbino caro.” There were no images, just the voice. The last time I heard that area was probably twenty years ago.

In 2012, when my hearing began to deteriorate, I found myself constantly humming unidentified tunes. Was I hallucinating? No, that was normal for deaf people. Today, I listened to myself and was shocked. It was “Hey, it’s good to live in the Soviet Land,” a song of the 1930s. This is crazy. Actually, since the time when I participated in military parades, my usual subconscious repertoire has mostly been marching band music.

High Art

Nina chose a convenient date and flew to Samara to meet Mom and stepfather. She invited them into the plane. They came with five-year-old Valya, my niece, and quite surprised Nina, didn’t ask or tell her anything. Instead, they made the girl recite children’s verses—this one first, then that one, then another one, and yet another—until time was up. The girl was not even finished with her last verse.

A propos. Grown-up Valya has an exquisite sense of humor. She laughs at herself, mostly, which, of course, is a sign of high art. The crazier the joke, the more laughable it is, and that is exactly what Valya’s stories are.

That’s a rather unusual way to meet a new daughter-in-law, Nina said when back from Samara. Not at all, I said. Mom always shows off to advertise achievements in the family, and for that she is ready to sacrifice common sense.

Honeymoon Journey

In the summer of 1963, we took a honeymoon journey—Samara—Moscow—Lvov—and back home. In Samara, we spent a day on the right bank of the Volga River which was actually an endless sand beach. Nina was delighted. The huge, majestic mass of clear water; big, warm dunes, and behind them, green grass, brushes, and a cool, shady woods—that was so unlike what she used to see around in Uzbekistan.

In Moscow, we visited my stepfather's younger brother Eugene Agafonov with his wife Claudia, both had been Mom's close friends back in their younger years—I suspect I'm repeating myself. They lived in a two-room apartment on Kutuzov's Prospect.

For two days, we stayed with Eugene and Eudokia Polyakov on Petrovka Street. I'm going to return to them later.

In Lvov, we had a splendid get-together. Uncle Pavlusha was more than happy. The whole Vishenchuk family was in front of his eyes.

“The Vishenchuks!” he said. “Oh yes! A proud tribe.”

Some Delights and a Goodbye Tear

I don't know how come we were so wise, but we didn't do much crazy shopping except a ceramic vase of ginormous proportions—such kind of vase with long bamboo stems sticking out of it once attracted my attention in the foyer of the Tide Water hotel in Orange Beach, Al.

We returned with eleven packages, including a German dinnerware set. Later, we also acquired living room and bedroom white birch-tree furniture sets made in Czechoslovakia. The money had been borrowed.

After I retrieved the soft yellow chair from my room in

Chirchik, the apartment got a look of completeness. The old chiffonier was there no more. Paulina shed a little tear watching it go, but soon a two-door, blazing white wardrobe soothed her.

In a few months, the debts would be paid off. We happened to be that much practical.

Tuesday, January 9, 2018

An Attempt at Journalism

Nina and I were merging with each other at various angles. I had a feeling, however, that just getting along wasn't good enough. We needed to work on some kind of project together, in unity, to discover, even in a small way, how close we were able to connect intuitively.

The Airflot newspaper announced a literary contest for the best story about the flight attendant job. We decided to try. Nina provided specific details; I did the writing. We made up an idiotic story about a non-existent Uzbek farm hero who was flying to Moscow to get a gold medal for his fantastic results in gathering cotton. We got the second prize. The first one went to Gazizova, also a stewardess, who presented a story about attending to a woman who gave birth to a baby in the sky. Well, we didn't have the nerve to raise it that high.

I decided that that was a good start. Next, I sent a critical essay to the *New World* journal, one of the most respected literary publications. The essay was accepted and set to print next month. Oops! Somebody was much faster, and a similar article had appeared in another journal, of which I was apologetically informed.

The Russian Character

But I stuck it out. A local newspaper published my article praising a new novel by a Moscow writer Mikhail Alekseev.

They also offered me the position of literary columnist. I was supposed to write a series of essays on Alexei Tolstoy's *Ivan Sudarev's Stories*, starting with "The Russian Character." I'd read the story in my teenage years and stored it in my memory as good stuff. But I was horrified when I read it again. It turned out to be a phony garbage, a sheer fake. It was all the more a devastating blow, considering I had marveled at the writer's real masterpieces, *The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin* or *The Adventures of Nevzorov, or Ibycus*. I had no intention to celebrate this Russian character humbuggery. Long story short, this killed my journalistic career. No regrets. To be touting something that had been done by another person was not exactly what I wanted to do anyway.

Wednesday, January 10, 2018

And Now

In January of 1963, soon after our wedding, Bolotov got married, too. He had been married once before, back in Saint Petersburg, to an enchanter, a femme fatale, who cheated on him—it all ended in divorce.

"And now," he told me, "taking into consideration my past experience, I want to marry a girl who is not exactly a standard of beauty. With a wife eleven years younger than me, I'm ready to be a husband who is going to be adored, respected, and listened to."

It was a mistake again. Today, already not so young Lyubushka is talking to chickens, who understand her better than her husband. Here's his last letter to me:

I've completed my life's project on earth, and I do not care much about other things.

It's cold outside, snowing. I sit at my computer, looking out the window

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at the bare tree branches in the garden, and take countless tablets. This is so depressing.

I just can't bear the thought that my buddy Bolotov is so unhappy. Benevolent people help a homeless in his misery. A guide dog helps a blind person navigate. Who can possibly help my dear friend, and how?

An Evil Abstraction

On May 31, 1964, our daughter Slava was born. The delivery was difficult and nearly ended in tragedy. The maternity hospital was, in fact, a prison. Visits were not allowed, but a bribe traditionally helped. They took me down to a cellar where, with a sadistic pride, I was shown my newly born daughter. The nurse's aide unwrapped the swaddling clothes, and I saw my sweet baby all covered in sores and chafe. She was squirming and screaming.

Nina got mastitis. Her condition was getting worse with every passing day. A caring doctor from the Airflot hospital and Paulina eventually took Nina out of that hell. A surgery was performed. Pus, blood, and milk were oozing from the surgical opening on Nina's right breast for over a month.

It seemed like some malicious entity with no name and image had a magic power to take my wife and daughter from me and do with them whatever it wanted to. At that time, I vowed to resist the aggressive phantom from now on, keep my family as far away from it as possible.

Friday, January 12, 2018

Orange Juice

In the spring of 1965, my family was still in Tashkent. I got a vacation and came home. Eighteen-month-old Slava sat in

her buggy, having a glass of orange juice in front of her on the buggy shelf. She was not surprised to see me.

“Juice?” she asked me as if I’d been around all along.

“Juice it is,” I confirmed.

“Orange?”

“Orange,” I confirmed.

My daughter was making sure we talked the same language.

History holds a story about two of us. I was sitting on a bench. Slava was making discoveries in plant life in the flower bed. Her personal space was suddenly invaded by an ant—in panic, she dashed toward me with the little villain up on the tip of her index finger. We both remember this well for the story is too big to just forget it.

The International Earthquake

I Saw It First!

The Ministry of Defense sent a colonel over to inform us that in the coming year the venture would be dissolved. Those of us who were not willing to wait, he said, could now choose one of three locations to move to immediately, these locations being Solnechnogorsk in Moscow region, Poti in Georgia, and Odessa, Ukraine. Volunteers? I rose my hand.

“Lieutenant Vishenchuk.”

“Your choice?”

“Odessa.”

“Good. Who else?”

I nudged Anatol Zasorkin.

“Wake up.”

Anatol looked at me doubtfully but rose his hand.

“Lieutenant Zasorkin. Odessa.”

There were no more hands.

Nina had tears in her eyes when she heard we had to move to Odessa. She liked her life in Tashkent, the new apartment, the new, steady family. Why should we leave? Something turned in my heart in response, but Mowgli had no mercy.

“You’ve made your choice,” he said.

I heard many stories, legends, songs about Odessa—and I had never seen a sea before. I felt euphoric.

In the summer of 1965, I got an apartment in Odessa on the Langeron seashore. My family came—Nina, Slava, and my mother-in-law Paulina. I led them down Lermontov Lane and then across a health resort park past a white stone bench and marble lions, all the way to the cliff. Down there, the blue mirror of the Black Sea was gleaming. Slava ran up to the edge of the cliff and opened her arms.

“I saw it first!” she cried out.

It Was Your Breakfast, Anatol

Anatol and I spent the first two nights in Odessa on board the motor ship *Russia*. The vessel had been built in 1938 in Hamburg, Germany, and since then seen in various parts of seas and oceans under the name *Patria* until in 1946, by reparation, it was consigned to the port of Odessa. But I think it’s time to say a few words about Anatol.

Anatol Zasorkin was my friend and companion in a number of adventures that took place after we left Tashkent. As an orphan, he had been raised at Suvorov Children’s Military School. His notion of a father was personified by the company commander, whose morning bawl had stuck in Anatol’s mem-

ory forever:

“Reveille! Pants on! Out! Shoot!”

Anatol was a man of few words, slow and dithering at critical moments. His military lingo failed in a new, highly communicative world which required different approach to various shaky situations. I had to nudge him to make a decision about Odessa.

Always in debt, he borrowed money from one person to repay the other. The continuous rotation of debts made him simplify people into two psychological categories: ready to be touched for money or not ready for that. Elvira, his wife and an actress at a folk drama theater, had a similar quirky personality. She saw nothing wrong in spending her husband’s entire month’s salary in just one day of wild shopping.

Nina first met Elvira at Tashkent airport on a cold October day of 1964. Anatol and I were leaving for Odessa. On parting, Anatol gave his wife a husband’s hug. A boiled egg fell out of her coat and cracked on the asphalt.

“Where does it come from?” said Anatol.

Another egg fell and cracked. Elvira turned the pocket of her coat inside out, showing a big hole.

“Oh my,” she said. “It was your breakfast, Anatol.”

And she laughed.

Sunday, January 14, 2018

Pushkin

It was cold and rainy in Odessa. Despite that, Anatol and I roamed around town for days enjoying the colors of the fall, baroque acacias on Pushkin Street, optimistic Mediterranean architecture, breathtaking sea views from the Langeron cliff, the wonders of Deribas Street—we have just stepped foot on it, unbelievable!

Though Gambrinus, the historic honkytonk on Deribas Street, had been long gone, there was quantity of other dive bars in downtown Odessa. There was Two Karls on Karl Marx and Karl Liebnecht Streets. The streets would later be renamed to Kathrine the Great Ave. and Greek Street, but the bar is still there. At the time when Igor and I tasted wine in Two Karls, the name was vocal, not inscribed in big letters as it is today. Inside, behind the stick, a positively responsive young woman served wine in huge beer mugs. The wine—*feteasca, lydia, fraga*—if cheap, was quite defensible.

For some reason the bar on Pushkin Street had no name. There was a decrepit drunk there, a self-employed bar cleaner, unsurprisingly called Pushkin. His job was to sweep the floor and deliver empty glasses back to the counter, which got him a regular hit of booze. He was usually ignored by the visitors, neither he himself tried to reach out. At intervals, he would stand staring into space with his rheumy eyes, his back against the wall.

In the Bower

Odessa gave me two new friends—Serge Panin and Yuri Nefyodov. Serge, who hailed from Novosibirsk, had been a *corps de ballet* dancer in the city Opera House. At times, Serge and I settled down in a leafy bower of the seaside park to enjoy a bottle of good wine and talk. Both of us had a life experience long enough for telling stories. I called those sittings *a drink under the tree*, which is a quote from Alexander Ostrovski's play *A Burning Heart*.

Serge was discharged from the army on the basis of having gastric ulcer. He successfully simulated the illness, not without the help of kind and understanding hospital doctors, who were inclined to read his situation and make allowances.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

On parting, Serge said he'd learned from me at least one important thing—to understand and enjoy the writings of Saltykov-Shchedrin. In our dorm of twelve beds, I sometimes read aloud, following my teenage practice, the book of *Fairy Tales* by Saltykov-Shchedrin, which happened to be in my traveling library. Surprisingly, the guys listened.

The first time Nina met Serge was when he dropped in to say goodbye. He talked to Slava and recited to her a verse by Agnia Barto:

*Teddy's all in rags and tatters.
I don't care if all this matters.
He's my buddy, he's my friend.
To our friendship there's no end.*

I was saddened by the thought that I would never see Serge again.

A Decanter of Chartreuse

Yuri Nefyodov was a junkie. He grew up in a family of Moscow intellectuals, got a plenty of good education, was smart, open minded, and had a memory of a chapiteau circus quality—his ability to memorize instantly and forever was stunning. He kept in his memory complete Yesenin—a Russian alcoholic poet, who committed suicide—and was persistently trying to build his life as a remake of Yesenin's biography.

His talk was chock-full of quotations taken from various sources. One of his favorite pieces was an article from a (probably) non-existent, two-century-old medical encyclopedia by a mythical doctor Platov:

For the rotten feeling in the morning, commonly known as a hangover,

a good remedy would be a few slight slaps on your small back or one or two shots of the drink that has caused the catastrophe.

I suspect the quote was his own creation. At any rate, Google doesn't recognize it.

Yuri was a handsome, well-spoken young man—there always was a woman around him, one or another. And there was a wife in Moscow who had kicked him out of the house. His normal state was being wasted at all time. He knew some goof-balls that could be obtained over the counter in pharmacy stores. His army pay went directly to wine bars. After the money was gone, there were items of his military equipment to sell. The last time I saw him, he was wearing a frowzy military jacket and civil pants with false blood stripes which he'd drawn along the legs with a red pencil wetted in his mouth.

At a restaurant, he would order a decanter of chartreuse liqueur, pour some in a liqueur glass and set it aflame as proof of excellent quality. After that, he allowed himself to drink it. Then he shook off the remaining drops over his head.

“This is what my grandmother used to do,” he would say finalizing the show.

He had a dream. With a beatific smile on his face, he played in persons a scene of his dishonorable discharge. Here is lieutenant Nefyodov himself, pleading guilty, and here is the enraged general who bellows out, pointing a finger at him:

“Godawful stupid shenanigans! Somebody take a filthy broom! Sweep the punk out of my sight!”

And he shut his eyes in a happy daze. It was Yuri's favorite meme, *filthy broom*.

You Saw It Coming

On April 26, 1966, at 5.23 am, there was an earthquake in

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

Tashkent. I was there with my family. It was a mighty vertical push, right beneath our feet. A glass of water on the table emptied but still remained vertical. A crack ran all the way along the ceiling perimeter, like a saucepan lid had lifted off and then landed back again. Paulina grabbed Slava and ran out.

“Out, for a walk?” Slava said.

Nina and I rushed to the balcony for a better observation point. Quakes continued. All other residents had already been out. They were looking at us in horror.

“Are you crazy? Get down!” they shouted.

Three days later, a letter came from Anatol.

April 27, 1966

Hi Geli,

Yesterday, the news of a catastrophic earthquake in Tashkent reached our quarters. Hope you and your family are alive and well.

The earthquake happened a few minutes after 5 am. Later in the morning of the very same day (there was a warm, sunny weather), in a dark, murky Hauptwache cellar, Yurka (you saw it coming) committed suicide.

After you left, Yurka and Serge were admitted to the hospital for examination and remained there for about two weeks. On returning, Yurka looked happy, shining like a popstar. It was a payday.

By the evening, he'd gone blotto; got a five-day arrest from the general. Five days later, he was seen hanging around the dorm for about 20 minutes, then he was gone. At about 10 pm, he was taken to the Hauptwache again, dead drunk.

Next morning, Sandakov and Greshnikhin came to take him back to the Academy. Having entered that darn dark cellar, they saw Yurka hanging from the water pipe. He'd torn his T-shirt, made a kind of rope of it, then put on his jacket again—and that was it.

This is so sad. His parents are coming today.

Anatol

A note to the letter.

You saw it coming. Yuri had an inclination for suicide. He played with it as if amusing himself. He would make a noose out of his shirt sleeve, tie the other one to the bed top, and try the contraption for strength. I had taken him out of it a couple of times. Leaving for Tashkent, I told Anatol that I was not sure about Yuri—he had listened to me mostly, but bad things could happen in my absence. They did.

Monday, January 15, 2018

The International Earthquake

Lieutenant Greshnikhin had spent three years in Egypt, returned to Odessa, and announced that if he were not given an apartment for his family—wife and two daughters—right away, he would set up a tent on the Academy lawn and fry potato over a campfire in front of the main entrance. To his big surprise, the threat worked. However, having taken a look at what was given to him, he cried foul and declared that he had no intention to even show this garbage to his wife.

At this point of the uneasy conversation, I threw in my two cents saying that if Greshnikhin didn't want to even show this garbage to his wife, I'd take it blindfold. With that, I was told that my family of three was not large enough for a two-room apartment. With that, I said that my family had just grown big enough for this garbage because my mother-in-law had just become a victim of the International Tashkent Earthquake and was ready to join the family. This is how the first-floor apartment 4 at 14 Black Sea Street came into my possession.

Ton Duc Thang

Black Sea Street is the most beautiful of all sights in Odessa, a jaw dropper—I just freaked out when I first saw it.

According to a good Russian tradition, streets should be renamed and then named back again. In Odessa, every street was renamed, with one exception—Deribas Street—but I think it was just a matter of time. One of the most outrageous examples of this idiocy took place in 1980 when the Observatory Lane was renamed Ton Duc Thang after the Vietnam president who had just died, as if his peaceful demise in bed was an act of heroism to be followed. Even if it were the only evidence against the communist regime, it still would be a sufficient reason to dismantle it.

The Northern Sea Route

Long time ago, in 1912, to be exact, one side of Black Sea Street fell down the cliff, and a stunning view of the Odessa Bay opened from the windows of the other side that remained intact. A fraction of the sea could also be seen from one of our windows. That was the only positive side of the wonderful abode that I obtained so easily.

Heating and air conditioning was absent. There was no hot water. Tap water ran at random times. No bath or shower. The cracked toilet bowl was covered in fossilized shit and urine. Windows and doors stuck out, showing wide gaps. The walls exhibited suspicious dents as if somebody had been banging his head against them before committing suicide.

And there were hordes of roaches. I never got rid of them. Many years later, Yura Veselov, a slightly deranged friend of mine, was sitting at the kitchen table with me as we talked.

“What I really hate is roaches,” he said. “I don’t know if a person who tolerates roaches in his house deserves my respect.”

I opened the wall cabinet and reached up for a teacup. A frightened roach fell out and ran. Yura’s eyes traced the insect all the way across the table.

* * *

Constantin said that it reminded him how one day he visited a gas station restroom. There was so much muck in that restroom that a desperate roach ran over and hid its head under Constantin's shoe, seeking immediate protection. Constantin took no action.

"It wasn't my roach after all," he said.

* * *

Veselov was being chased by the ghost of the Northern Sea Route. He had a persistent urge to talk about it.

"Most people believe that there is the Northern Sea Route out there," he was telling me. "But where is it exactly? No one knows. There is no such thing as the Northern Sea Route. It simply doesn't exist. It's a fake, a phantom, trust me. People are being disinformed."

I didn't object. What doesn't exist doesn't exist.

Tuesday, January 16, 2018

End of Tour

The previous resident of our apartment was major Kaputikian, who had a blind wife. The kitchen wall above the gas stove was smeared with fat, oil, egg yoke, and other unidentified food filth. The rooms didn't look much better. I ripped off two layers of gunky wallpaper, scraped dirt and mildew from the plaster. It took me two coats of paint to cover the disgrace. I painted the board floor, too. Nina flew over from Tashkent, inspected the work and said she wasn't so much excited about it. However, the sea view made her a bit more optimistic.

The 14 Black Sea Street was, in fact, three two-story houses

of HSO—Houses for Staff Officers— series put up in the early 1950s to replace the old mansion which had been destroyed during the war by a German bomb. The houses were built by unskilled soldiers of a construction battalion under the command of lieutenant Popkov, our next-door neighbor, who didn't know a thing about building houses.

I watched The Black Sea Street Tour video recently. As mentioned before, the street is one-sided. It is also very short having just seven houses, number 14 being the last. Winding up stories about six drop-dead beautiful houses, most of which had been built in the nineteenth century, the guide obstructed the view of the last one by his nontransparent body.

“End of tour,” he said. “Thank you for watching.”

No Rush

We had to think about more furniture. So far, we had a collapsible cot and a green Airflot spare-part box, the size of a steamer trunk, which we used both as a makeshift closet and as a table.

A total reconstruction was needed. A bathtub had to be set up, the ugly, unfunctional ceiling-to-floor masonry heater removed, the toilet bowl replaced, a heating system and a water heater installed, a wall moved, the bathroom floor built anew for it had a gaping hole into the old mansion's basement. Those were the priorities. But it was already too late. In October, I got a new assignment and left for Riga, Latvia.

* * *

It was the time when the boneheads in the Defense Ministry began to realize that the compulsory 25-years-long army service was the cause of numerous problems. Bad drinking and

unsuitable behavior, defiant rejection of daily military routine, demonstrative insubordination—all this had been a big pain in their arse. Finally, it was decided to limit the service to one year with a subsequent contract deal. Though the new law didn't have a retroactive effect, there was a feeling that it did. Some of us seized the opportunity, Serge, for example. I didn't.

“No rush,” Mowgli was whispering in my ear.

In the Woods

Wednesday, January 17, 2018

The Ipatovs

The personnel officer at the Baltic Military Headquarters in Riga told me that my new position was the assistant commander of the Special Forces regiment command point.

I put up at the Armed Forces Officers hotel on Merkel Street. When Nina came from Odessa soon after, my distant relatives Vladimir and Olga Ipatov gave us a space in their apartment for a few days. I had known them since a long time ago.

During the war Vladimir was a fighter bomber pilot. In the late 1940s, his unit was stationed in Zhovkva, Western Ukraine. As a habitual traveler, I paid them a two-day visit. Granny

wanted me to go say hello to Olga, who was her niece. So I did. They had a son, Genius—yes, that was his name—and a daughter, Irene.

I have to roll back to Riga now. Vladimir was a local airport manager. Olga didn't work as was normal across the country for a wife of a military husband. The family lived in a two-room apartment on the second floor of an old house on the left bank of the Liepaja River. The facilities were, of course, outside, on the stair landing. The service had one hole looking deep down—in wintertime, and winter it was, icy wind reached the visitor's ass like a whip's lash.

Vladimir and Olga had an inborn lighthearted sense of humor. They used it all along giving you the impression that things had always been fine with them. Their next-door neighbor had a habit of letting his mouth hang open for a greeting, saying nothing. Vladimir mimicked the gape; we laughed.

I knew many people who lived *potikhonku*—unnoticeable. My Ipatov relatives lived a big, vibrant life, enjoying every moment of it.

At dinner, Olga took over the command. She was merciless.

“Eat, don't talk,” she insisted. “No leftover. Don't offend me telling you are full.”

In the evening, the family photo album was opened. This time, Vladimir was in charge.

“This is me in 1941. This is me in the cockpit. This is me in a hospital.”

Luckily, he'd been wounded just once, less than two weeks before the end of the war.

Seen on an old pre-war snapshot was a slim girl, skating. Vladimir said Olga had been fond of ice skating and even taken part in big sports events. Olga was not listening—she was far away in her thoughts.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

Friday, January 19, 2018

Yesterday morning, during a visit with doctor Habenicht at Urology Medical Plaza, I had my catheter changed, unsuccessfully. Soon after, burning and bleeding began.

At 3 pm, the catheter got blocked causing a terrible pain in my lower parts. At midnight, I couldn't bear it any longer and drove to the Emergency Room, waited there over an hour, writhing in pain.

When all had been done, the nurse showed me a huge lump of blood jelly that had created the blockage. I was back home at 5 am. Nina didn't notice I'd been gone.

Kismet

In 1970, the Ipatovs evanesced. In the blink of an eye, vicious kismet decimated the family of people of indefatigable spirit. Genius was killed in a Coast-Guard cutter crash. When told that his son was dead, Vladimir collapsed and died on the spot. Olga followed him in a matter of days. Their daughter Irene survived but never fully recovered from the tragedy.

They are right here before my eyes. I see them all. Vladimir Ipatov, a tall, handsome man with blue eyes, curly hair, powerful voice.

“This is me in 1941.”

Olga Ipatov resembles Granny—same delicate nose with a little hump. Radiant personality. Hospitable lady of the house.

“Don't offend me telling you are full.”

Genius—a slim young man of my age, looking very much like his mother. We were not that close, but I know he was a good boy.

Irene—an agile, sunny girl, the whirlwind of the family. There was so much love about them all.

Evanesced.

Saturday, January 20, 2018

Majori

We rented a room in a beach-type house on Smilshu Street in Majori, a small resort town five commuter train stops away from Riga.

Right inside the entry door of the house was a comfort station—a wooden platform with an inviting round hole in the middle. Next was a small kitchen, where Zina, the landlady, a divorcee with a baby daughter, lived. The next door led to an even smaller room with an undersized cabinet, a side table, and a bed. That was the guest room where we stayed. A firewood cookstove in the kitchen provided heat for both rooms. Water had to be drawn from the well outside, where laundry was done, too.

We liked to walk to the bath house in Dubulti, the next train stop past Majori, to wash ourselves. The bath house had a super-hot steam room with a fresh supply of birch switches. There were two lines in the waiting hall—men’s and women’s—the proud of all bath houses. Women were invited by a loud yell *nakosha*, while men were waiting for the *nakshais* call. On our way back, crunchy snow, salty air with a tang of birchwood smoke wafting out of chimneys, our own freshly clean bodies—were giving us a feel of festivity.

Back in our room, we would have a shot of Latvian Crystal vodka and a snack of Baltic herring soaked in oil, vinegar, and onion. It was warm and cozy in the room except that, in case of need, you had to go across the front room where the woman might have a man in her bed, and then enter the freezing cold comfort station. *Brrr!*

Majori is a part of Jurmala resort area which is located on a narrow strip of land between the Baltic Sea and the Lielupe River. Jurmala sinks in sand dunes and pine trees. The weather

here is cold, dreary, rainy, with wet wind blowing in non-stop off the sea like crazy. It's beautiful but seems very much like enough. You have to always turn your face away from a chill wind, nippy drizzle, or spiky snowflakes.

Nina got a job as an accountant at a wallpaper factory in Dzintari, just one train stop away. Her milky-white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes made the factory workers believe she was a Latvian. One of them couldn't resist.

"Why don't you speak your home language with us?" she asked Nina.

An Electrical Mouse

In the morning, we would run like mad to the train station to catch the commuter train on the last second. The clothes we were wearing offered little protection against the biting wind that swept across the platform. I had on me a military cavalry overcoat, last designed in 1914, with a long cut on the back for horse riding. Listen: *Mount up! Sword! Draw! March!*

Nina was wearing her light Airflot winter uniform and all-season shoes. We added a padding to the shoes to make them a bit warmer and later bought a fur coat at an affordable price.

We had a little adventure with that coat. Nina repeatedly felt a tiny spasm like slight evidence of electricity in her arm. Back from work, she took off the coat—and a mouse fell out of a sleeve. Nina had never been biased toward mice, so she kept her cool and let the little creature run away.

This reminded me of another story. In Riga, we had friends, Vyacheslav and Lena Kashutin. Lena had another name, her husband called her Mommy—so Nina and I called her Mommy, too. Now, here's the story. Mommy opened the closet door—and there on the shelf up on her hinds was a live miniature mouse. The eyes of the two locked. Mommy was a

traditionalist—she screamed. Her scream was so hysterical that the mouse experienced a calamitous panic attack and dropped dead right where she was. Vyacheslav ran up with a broom in his hand, but it was too late. When I heard this story from them, I thought it was very much like an urban legend. No. They both swore up and down it did happen as told.

I Know Where You Need To Go

This is how we found our landlady Zina. On that chilly, rainy day when we left the Ipatovs' residence, the rental agreement that had been reached the day before was unexpectedly canceled. And now we sat with two suitcases beneath the rent pinboard at Majori train station, waiting for somebody to come up with an offer, for such was the condition—to wait—odd as it was. Nobody was coming.

I don't know why it was always a matter of chance. Like in the middle of the Sahara Desert or the Bermuda Triangle.

A woman with shopping bags in both hands approached, talked, then invited us to her home. She made a simple Latvian dinner—bread, boiled potato, and pickles. We began to feel a bit warmer, relaxed. Then she said,

“I know where you need to go.”

And she took us to Zina.

In Odessa, Paulina was working her last year before retirement. In Riga, it was impossible to rent a living space for a full family. Slava was with her grandparents in Samara.

Winter was about to end when Zina asked us to leave. Her boyfriend decided to move in and said he wanted us out. Nina had told him once,

“The woman loves you. Why are you so mean to her?”

Because of what Nina said, he hated her. Anyway, we had to leave.

Monday, January 22, 2018

The Brothers Agafonov

I thought it was the right time for me to go on leave. Vasili Agafonov, my stepfather's brother, who lived with his wife Alexandra in a two-room apartment on Hospital Street in Riga, agreed to give us a shelter for a week's time.

There were five brothers Agafonov—Dimitri, Vasili, Peter, Boris, and Eugene, the youngest.

Peter was, of course, my stepfather.

Eugene, Mom's friend since her youth and a big communist party boss in Moscow, was the one who had helped us with the boxcar to travel from Kazakhstan to Ukraine. A year later, he had also found Uncle Pavlusha and given him our Lazorki address. He lived on Kutuzov Prospect with his wife Claudia and their two sons.

I had dropped in on them on my way back home from the Virgin Lands. Although it was not my first visit, Claudia didn't recognize me. Unwashed, covered in black wheat dust, all in scratches due to dealing with straw, wearing a mobster-style cap, a gift from a punk who had stolen my clothes—that's the nicest description I can give of how I looked. Claudia opened the door and drew back, startled.

Dimitri was the eldest. He had been in the military all his life, served in the Far East, and retired in the rank of colonel. He was a stern character, never smiled, spoke only about practical household things, capricious. We brought a legendary torpedo-like, incredibly sweet melon from Uzbekistan. Dimitri turned away, refused to even taste it.

Boris was a journalist and lived with his family in Moscow, too. But I have to stop here. It is one thing to watch horror in movies on TV and quite another to witness it in real life. The family had suffered an unimaginable tragedy—I just can't

brace myself to put it down in words.

Mumsy

And there was Vasili Agafonov and his wife Alexandra—we stayed with them for several days before my leave. Their grownup son and daughter lived apart from them. They called their mother Mumsy, and they also accused her of being ignorant of new trends in abstract art.

“I told them,” Alexandra said, “let me cook pebbles for you. Would it be abstract or realistic?”

She was a volunteer for a parents committee on teenagers issues. One time, she paid a visit to the family of a girl who presumably smoked grass or whatever she did wrong. The girl kept an angelic look on her face all through the conversation, nodding to every word on the need to be a nice person. Then the parents asked her to see the volunteer out. The two stepped out to the stair landing of the fourth floor. The girl kicked the door shut behind her.

“You come again, old bag,” she said in a flat tone, “I’ll send you roll over to the first floor to pick up bits of your body.”

The Empty Space of Siberia

Vasili was a kind of loner with a probable little hint of lunacy. He stayed away from people, distanced himself from his brothers, and preferred to be incommunicado with the world in general except for one thing which is a few lines away. He never visited his brothers, neither he ever invited them to come over, though there was no perceivable reason whatsoever for his estrangement from them. The more odd was his consent to tolerate us in his apartment.

Like his elder brother Dimitri, he had spent his life in the military service in the Far East and retired in the rank of lieu-

tenant colonel, which was one step before Dimitri's.

He had a streak that mobilized him to mulishly write letters to the Central Committee of the communist party. He read us one of those letters in which he lambasted a big party boss who, while visiting an elite buffet in Riga, shamelessly ate food products ordinary people could neither afford nor even find anywhere in grocery stores—which was a gross violation of the party lines on modesty, self-control, and other such things.

The answer from the Central Committee contained a hidden mockery to the effect that, well, thank you for being such a true communist as well as for timely reminding us that we have Lenin's ethics code to follow. We would, of course, be more accurate about these things in future in order that such old farts like yourself stop sending us nonsensical memorandums.

He had quite an archive of that kind of stuff. It beats me why he didn't see the irony in those letters to him.

This aside, he was a kind, plain person. He was an outdoorsman, too. He would wander for a day long in woods bringing home bags and baskets full of berries, mushrooms, as well as some rare therapeutic and aromatic herbs.

At times he would start yelling at Alexandra in an irrelevant, theatrical fury. Alexandra ignored the yelling. It was kind of a game both had been playing since his service in Kamchatka—probably, a side effect of having spent many years amid the enormous empty space of Siberia.

The General's Widow

In October 1967, on the eve of our departure to Cuba, I asked Vasili to allow us one night's stay, so that in the morning we would say goodbye and leave. The request was denied. Alexandra was sick, had just suffered a diabetic seizure. The poor lady wasn't looking good, indeed.

Regiment commander colonel Sutugin suggested that we get out of the woods with the night shift. We arrived at the train station safely long ahead of time.

Three weeks later, in Havana, we received a letter from Vasili informing us that Alexandra had passed away and that now he had another woman, a general's widow named Agraphena, who was taking good care of him.

His next letter came with the news that, to his dismay, the general's widow had an excessive indulgence in epicurean way of life—he kicked her out. And now he was being taken much better care of by Faina, a simple and unpretentious woman of gentle heart.

Tuesday, January 23, 2018

The Six-Day War

On the evening before we left for Odessa, we had a party at Agafonov's with our new friends, major Albert Leikin and his wife Oktyabrina, who was an actress.

Albert was a snappy dresser. He wore his military uniform as though he was about to step out onto the theater stage. He was a savant of art, literature, hockey, dog breeds and was fluent in English.

In 1967, a few minutes after the Israel-Arab Six-Day War broke out, major Leikin and I were locked up in a room with several shortwave radio sets. Day and night, we listened to the news from Israel, Europe, USA and wrote hourly reports for the Baltic Military Headquarters. We didn't leave the room, slept short hours in turn, and were provided with plenty of food.

After the end of the war, which lasted June 5-10, no medals were awarded to us for heroism. Why? Because our country had lost that war. However, I think it was those six days that

defined my future, in a way. And for both of us, a really rewarding thing was the truth that we now knew about that war.

Major Leikin's Bulldog

The one who did have medals was major Leikin's Campeiro bulldog. Dog breed is not just a thing which is so sublime and overhead. Each season, a new bulldog generation would gnaw at dinner table legs and make a lot of other inevitable damage. But who cares—Campeiro puppies were very expensive on the market.

Oktyabrina was away on a concert tour, and Albert invited me to come over and kill the time over a bottle of French cognac. With the evening progressing, I got an impression that the Campeiro bulldog kind of liked me. She rested her head on my knees and kept looking at me like I'd just saved her life.

At the beginning of the second bottle, it became obvious that we had to kiss. I'm not sure how she felt about it, but that kiss was something to remember, you know. Albert went into shock. He said he would never forget the man who did not avert a dog's kiss, which, of course, was clear evidence of the high moral integrity.

Like This!

The Campeiro dog story would happen later. But at this particular moment, we are still sitting at the table with our hosts, Vasili and Alexandra. A little blitzed, we are talking the usual table talk nonsense.

The Leikins were about to leave when Oktyabrina's memory jumped over to a nineteenth century legend about rich Russian merchants who on leaving a restaurant would throw their swank fur coat onto the table with a leftover mess on it.

"Like this!" she cried out and tossed her parka on the plates.

We Needed Her Ourselves

I took a leave, Nina quit her job at the wallpaper factory, and we were back home in Odessa now. Paulina brought Slava from Samara. We met them at the train station. Through the railcar window, we saw Paulina pointing her finger at a girl sitting across from her. In about eight months that Slava had been away from us, she grew up so much. No, we would never give our sweet girl to anybody else again. We needed her ourselves so badly.

Wednesday, January 24, 2018

Nikolay Kiselev

While I was on leave, a new man, captain Nikolay Kiselev, arrived from France. He had been a chauffeur of the Russian Ambassador. On his second year in Paris, a setback happened. He drove DUI, was nabbed by the police, and, making it even worse, resisted the arrest. Forty-eight hours later, as protocol ruled, he returned to Russia. With him was a paid check for a Moskvich car, which was a waste of money, and a few records of French music.

He invited me to a small room he rented in the vicinity of Riga train station. I walked over to the window and saw the railroad tracks. Ten feet away, a train rumbled by, shaking the house like an eight-magnitude earthquake. Nick turned on the tape recorder, and I heard the heavenly voice of Mireille Mathieu—she was singing “My baby shot me down.”

Nick and his wife Nadya both hailed from a village north of Moscow and spoke with a lovely local lilt. They had been together since childhood.

“We were in bed,” Nick was telling me. “She said in an intentionally ugly voice, *Move aside, pig. You’re drunk.* If it were

not that ugly voice— Anyway, I slapped her across the face. The next moment, I was on my knees begging for forgiveness. It happens all the time. I love her more than anything in the world. I know she loves me, too—and yet, I cannot help it.”

He didn’t expect me to say anything. He just needed a grateful listener.

Thursday, January 25, 2018

Bukulti

The regiment had two whereabouts. The command point and the barracks were stationed in Riga. But I had to go to Bukulti, a location hidden deep in the woods, to do the real job.

The woods had inhabitants. Scattered across the area were small farms—usually a cottage with a barn and a traditional outhouse. I rented a room in one of those farms. The room had no heater. And there was no furniture except for a bed, an evil piece of wood that screeched sadistically at any weight. There are certain things in some households that have the knowledge of how to drive you nuts, excuse my philosophy. One thing positive, the house had power. Which later caused problems.

My girls arrived at last. Slava didn’t recognize her father, shot tentative looks at me, guessing who I was. Friends lent us a kids bed—it saved the day. The room was spacious, with much light from two tall windows which looked out into a big front yard. There was a well out there and beyond it, dense woods. Nina would get milk at a neighboring farm where she was also buying cabbage, potatoes, and carrots.

The farmer had a dog, a small, pitiable thing as seen from afar, but she was a mean scheming devil who used to hide behind the barn and suddenly dash out with a clear intention to snap you at your heels. She made Nina feel a bit nervous and hesitant about visiting that farm.

The dog was pleased in a big way when I first walked past that barn. An unsuspecting stranger was a special sweet treat to celebrate. There was no reasoning with that dog. She had an absolute authority over her turf.

Sadistic murderess, your name was Lavinia Fisher in previous life.

Off and On

It was just a single room, no kitchen or stove. With an outside wood fire, it looked like camping. On Sundays, I brought groceries from town, in a backpack. Wild berry gathering was a big help, too. The woods were teeming with lingonberry, huckleberry, blackberry, and, most importantly, mushrooms—boletus, saffron milk cap, russula. Some mushrooms looked unfamiliar, we ignored them, could be poisonous.

A local woman taught us to tell one from another. Elegant dark brown mushrooms looking like toxic fungus turned out to be quite eatable, absolutely delicious. Before cooking, they just had to be soaked in water—might be some kind of local honey agarics after all.

Slava came across a huge cep. It was hard to believe white mushrooms could be that monstrous. Surprisingly, it was not even touched by worms. Great find.

It was late October with its chilly nights and incessant rains. I brought a portable power heater, which became a complication right away. The householder's TV set stopped showing. It didn't take the man much time to connect the dots—he asked me to turn off the heater. I did. It was fine with me and Nina, but our little girl—I turned it on again. He knocked the door. I turned it off. It went on like that for two days. On the third day, he made it very clear:

“You have to leave.”

Grandfather Arthur

Grandfather Arthur lived in an old cottage deep in the woods. He had a barn and a green house where he grew carnations, red and white. On Sundays, he tossed flowers into the wagon, drawn by a horse, and traveled to the military cemetery where a steady demand for carnations was expected at all times. In the evening the horse took him back home in the wagon, dead drunk.

Grandfather Arthur had been growing flowers during the war, too. At that time, he stayed home once in a while, had his wife and son sell the flowers instead. Greedy and suspicious, he believed they were stealing his money. One day, he put them against the wall and asked where they were hiding the money. They denied everything. Then he shot them.

Whether this story was true or not, no one knew. There had been no witnesses. But Grandfather Arthur was sometimes seen on his knees before two small mounds of dirt on his property, a bottle of wine in his hand.

We came to him to find out if we could rent a room. He led us into the barn and pointed at a wooden staircase with no handrails. We climbed to the second floor which was a platform with only two walls. It was littered with discarded flowerpots, broken wooden boxes, snaggles of rusty wire, rotten boards, and other kind of waste.

“Payment up front,” we heard the voice from below.

Grandfather Arthur wanted us to leave, obviously. We walked out to the road and looked back. He stood at the barn door, gazing. At his feet, two dogs were also watching the unwelcome guests go.

We moved into a motorbike shed affixed to the back side of a brick cottage near a lake—a bit tight for the three of us but

still a residence.

There were hordes of mice in the shed. On the table, next to the brick wall, Nina put a glass jar with a package of macaroni on top. The jar was supposed to curb invasion. But I happened to watch a resourceful mouse taking a quick start across the table, leaping up the wall, and making a somersault right into the package.

Bravo!

* * *

A little more time, just a little, and it all will come to an end. It's going to be an unexpected, fantastic turn of events. Mowgli knows.

Stationed Overseas

Friday, January 26, 2018

Not Like Everybody Else

Colonel Sutugin, the regiment commander, was not like everybody else.

“Put in a word for me in Moscow,” I said. “Tell them I want to be sent to Tixi.”

Tixi was a settlement in the Arctic Circle with a substantial military presence where officers were paid twice as much. Years of service were doubled in count, too. Officers were given barracks accommodations to live in with their families. Only a crazed lunatic would like to find himself in that hell.

“Bullshit,” Sutugin said. “Why do you want them to send you to such a place?”

“Why? You know why.”

“All right,” he said. “Let me think about that.”

I’m now going to compress the time and leave out about two weeks. Sutugin called me to his office.

“How about a warmer place?” he said.

“Kushka?”

Kushka, a small Asian town on the extreme southern border, and Tixi were opposite locations geographically with no difference otherwise.

“Nope.”

“Then what?”

“Make a guess.”

“That’s the warmest place I know.”

“Cuba.”

“You mean Cuba—like Cuba?”

“Yes, like Cuba.”

There were two big interviews in Moscow. I left my party membership card at the communist party headquarters and, lucky me, bought a pack of *Winston* in their freaking elite bar. Winston cigarettes and other wonders of the Western World were the perks the goldbricks dawdling in their offices there enjoyed. For the first time in my life, I bought an American product.

At the Ministry of Defense, I received short instructions on the necessity of decent behavior in foreign countries, such as never wear white socks with sandals, and was given free clothing. I got a thick overcoat—*for tropical climate? Thanks anyway*—a black suit, black shoes, and a beret hat, all made in Finland—to look like a civilized Russian. *Thanks again.*

During my two-day absence Nina had a scary moment. The landlady came up with the power bill of 400 rubles, which was about my triple salary, for just one dim light bulb in the

motobike shed. Nina froze—husband far away, money close to zero, nowhere to run. Next day, on the eve of my return, the landlady came with apologies and a correction—4 rubles. That arrived as the last moment felicity before we left the country.

The Aroma of Foreign Soil

On Saturday, October 28, 1967, I found myself and my family on board a TU-104 airliner flying to Havana. Slava counted us—Mom, Dad, herself. Three years later, on our way back home, she was struck by an inconsistency.

“Where was Constantin when we flew to Havana?” she asked.

There was a short stop-off in Murmansk. That was where we began to feel the first, if insignificant, signs of another civilization. Food was delicious, and service was so nice as if it were only a small degree of what we really deserved.

We flew over the east coast of Canada and then the USA. When the plane began to descend to Havana, we saw countless white columns scattered across the area. They were royal palm trunks, whose green tops merged with grass.

Never have I seen a foreign land! The border line was kind of mystery to me. Traveling has been my dream since I was a child. For a long time afterward, I've been wandering south and north and not even once did I have a chance to cross the border of the vast expanse of Russia. Now I waded into the waters of the sacred river, and my good horse brought me up to the Turkish bank.

That was Pushkin, Russia's literary genius. With TU-104 for *horse*, and Havana for *Turkish bank*—it all would fit well. It is hard for me to find my own words to describe the sentiment I had at that time. It takes a child to know what Slava felt when

she cried out from the top of the cliff,

“I saw it first!”

“Never have I seen a foreign land,” the great poet exclaimed in a childish ecstasy.

My eyes saw what they had never seen before. I suddenly realized I was really seeing it right now. The intoxicating aroma of foreign soil made my head spin.

Zashyvaiko Got Incensed

For a day, we were guests of major Zashyvaiko, who had a betraying Ukrainian accent. His hometown was Saint Petersburg—he gave us to know this as a classified information.

“Feel free to take whatever you want from the fridge,” he said and left.

The fridge was empty except for a big can of pickled herrings, a Russian product, stinking like hell. We threw it away. When in the evening Zashyvaiko came back from work, he had a question for us to answer.

“Where is the herring?” he asked.

He’d hoped to eat it at dinner—now it was gone. He was so hungry he couldn’t control himself. He told us everything he thought about us. We had nothing to eat since yesterday.

On the next day, we moved into our own house. Since then, I didn’t see much of Zashyvaiko. There was one queer thing about him, however, I couldn’t wrap my head around how to explain. At work, we would normally drink cold *refresco* when thirsty. Not Zashyvaiko. He would pour tap water in a tea kettle, climb up to the roof, where antennas were mounted, and, with only blue sky above his head, suck water from the kettle spout. It looked like he was waiting for a UFO to take him away. But I doubt it. He was a balanced, down-to-earth man.

The Apollo Program

The next morning, a big, personable young man named Yushkov invited me to his office, turned on a radio, gave me headphones, a blank sheet of paper, and a pencil.

“Write down whatever you hear on the headphones,” he said and left the room.

I was listening to an American radio station. The voice was so close, it seemed intimate. Yushkov came back, glanced at my scribbles, and left again.

I sat, thoughtless, overwhelmed with the feeling of having found myself in the most mysterious part of the world. Yushkov returned and plopped himself down in the chair.

“My term’s over,” he said. “You’re here just in time to replace me. Excellent.”

Yushkov was responsible for the surveillance over the Kennedy Space Center and Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, with special attention given to the Apollo Program. He had under him over a dozen *hearers* who garnered information out of whatever was being said or transmitted or radiated by astronauts, pilots, and other rocket specialists within and around Cape Canaveral. All this was under my supervision now.

Hearers’ Tears

Hearers worked six-hour shifts. They didn’t have enough time for sleep, which made them drained, dazed, and unstable psychologically. Although my job required the 24/7 attention, it was so only in case of emergency. In the morning, I would look through a heap of radio intercepts and teletype news and, after analyzing all this, sent a report to the Central Military Intelligence Agency (GRU) Headquarters in Moscow. Then I proceeded to build up information for the evening report. The

process was non-stop on launch days. I remember the first one on my shift. It was a spectacular Polaris test firing. We ran outside to watch a beautiful radiance coming from the launch pad and spreading all over the night sky.

The hard part of the hearer's job was the relentless continuity of the process and the requirement to think fast. It was a bloody burning hell for the beginners. Grown-up men broke out crying like babies being unable to make out any sense of what they were listening to. Our friend major Kashutin—in Riga he was the regiment personnel—was assigned as a teletype operator which was a child's play as compared to the headphones, and yet Mommy said Sasha, as she called him, had been crying in the pillow.

Apollo 11

There was little anything as to the results of my intelligence activity at Lourdes Station (the geographical name of the enterprise). Much of what was obtained by means of electronic and radio snooping could be found in American media.

The most important and so very much exciting event was, of course, the Apollo 11 expedition. In real time, simultaneously with NASA crowd, I heard the live words which were coming down from the Moon on July 20, 1969:

“That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

I carefully wrote down Neil Armstrong's one-sentence speech and sent it to Moscow.

Enjoy.

Saturday, January 27, 2018

No Fear of Humans

The village of Juan de Dios Fraga, the then residence of the

Russian military intelligence personnel, was three rows of houses of American design, with two lanes alongside and one across. House number 143 we moved in had three bedrooms, a joint living and dining room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. There was a small garden of mango trees in the back yard.

We loved our house, even though it wasn't air conditioned and was shared with mosquitoes who were beastly cold-blooded personalities of a special local breed. With just one of them in the bedroom, there was no way you could have a good sleep. The moment the lights went off, it would take a position from above, buzzing, choosing the right moment, then swoop down and pierce your skin with its icky proboscis, causing a sharp pain. Its favorite hiding place was under the mattress. We had to turn the mattress upside down and then chase the devil around the room.

Flocks of flying roaches gave us hard time, too. And frogs. Tiny, cute, colorful frogs with suckers on their toe pads were not angels either. The horrible thing was—they had no fear of humans. They would leap at you, suck, and hang on your face.

Don't Stare at Me Like That

It took us about ten minutes of driving on the office bus through small settlements El Cano and Torrens to get to the Station. On my first day, I was appointed a lookout in the front seat. Passing El Cano, I noticed a little bright-yellow froggy staring at me from the panel. It was yet too early for me to start being indifferent to extraterrestrials around—so I pulled out my handkerchief, grabbed the froggy and pitched it out the window.

Forgive me, little alien. You shouldn't have stared at me like that. No, this is not a punishment. You won't be hurt flying away inside my soft handkerchief.

On the lawns, tarantulas lived in burrows a tea saucer's size. When in danger, the spider would start trampoline jumping like a wind-up toy. Nina had a scary moment when she saw Slava driving one of those monsters out of the house, broom in hand. Nobody knew how dangerous they actually were.

An Historic Trip

No one was allowed to leave the village except on a crowd tour, which was not so much often. Our first trip to Havana took place on November 8, 1967.

It was, in a sense, an historic trip. The pre-revolutionary Cuba, though still breathing, was about to be choked to death. Nina and I were newbies. The veterans showed us old Havana, stupendous 23rd Street, Prado, el Malecon, Avenida de los Presidentes, el Capitolio. We hurried through a few variety stores, visited a coffee bar. I carved out a minute to drop in a bookstore and buy a couple of American paper back mystery novels.

Sunday, January 28, 2018

Cuban Socialismo

Small downtown stores were selling jewelry trinkets. We gazed at them as though they were a museum's trove exhibit. Nina chose a thin gold ring and a light necklace with the Mary-and-Infant motif embossed on a tiny golden disk. The books and the two pieces of cheap gold were the only, much treasured, souvenirs we brought home from Cuba. The books would be given out, the ring lost. Our daughter Slava is still wearing the necklace.

In the beginning of 1968, Fidel Castro outlawed all private businesses. Sales and marketing disappeared as well as retail stores and small boutiques. Government stores began to

demonstrate empty shelves. We were witnessing the advent of Cuban socialismo.

The Adventures of an Absentee

Not allowed to leave the village alone. Bull. On free days, I would go to a bus stop on Fifth Avenue and soon find myself in downtown Havana, taking pictures. However, going on a trip was not as simple as it might seem.

On the day of our arrival, after we'd gotten through customs at Jose Marti airport, the first person I came across was a Russian Embassy official.

"How did you declare the purpose of your visit?" he asked.

"Servicio militar," I said ingenuously.

"Economico! It has to be economico!" he groaned.

I left my passport at the Russian Embassy and went out of its building empty handed without any identification paper. Now I was a top secret. In other words, I wasn't there, I was non-existent—the trick that has been widely used by the Russian military intelligence till this day. You do some secret business in a foreign country—you are not there. Such persons are called *Ikh Tam Nyet*—Who Aren't There.

Somewhere on Fifth Avenue, I turned in to a side street which beguiled me with its colonial houses set behind elegant fences and well-trimmed trees and bushes. Taking pictures along the way, I suddenly caught sight of people in the military uniform, running toward me from all directions. I stopped. Young men and women made a tight circle around me—some eyes were curious, others morose, hostile, especially those of the girls, who evidently were trying to be more vigilant than others. A short dialogue followed.

"Quien es usted?"

"Estoy Ruso militar. Vido en Fraga."

“Identificacion?”

“No tengo.”

“Quitar la pelicula de su camera.”

“No problema.”

I took the film out of my camera and handed it to the most vigilant girl. They began to converse. *What are they talking about? Did they notice my fear?* I was smiling, nervously. All of a sudden, they turned around and walked away.

Hello guys, what are you doing? Leaving me alone? Really? Why didn't you—No, no. Muchas gracias. Better not to think how it might have ended.

La Libertad, Sancho

Since a long time ago, my sweet dream had been to speak Spanish—the most beautiful language of all. In my university years, I knew a Spaniard, Don Jose Moreno Palli, a real Spanish hombre, from Spain. Don Jose looked like a copy of Goya's self-portrait—same virile, a bit blurry features, potato-shaped nose—a paragon of nobility and lovely Spanish mystery.

For some short time, I was one of his students in the optional course of Spanish but soon dropped out—could be busy with something else or felt like it was too much to have one more teacher over me. Whatever remained of it, were random pieces of unrelated texts that I bothered to memorize. Here is my favorite one:

La libertad, Sancho, es uno de los más preciosos dones que a los hombres dieron los cielos; con ella no pueden igualarse los tesoros que encierra la tierra ni el mar encubre; por la libertad, así como por la honra, se puede y debe aventurar la vida, y, por el contrario, el cautiverio es el mayor mal que puede venir a los hombres.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

I also keep in my memory the verse I came across in Romain Rolland's novel *L'Ame enchantée*. It had been always with me in all my troubles.

*El corazón te daré,
tambien te daré la vida.
Y el alma no te la doy,
porque esa prenda no es mia.*

Cuba helped little. The work left no time for learning. Once a week, a lawn crew of young Cubans with machetes would come to the village to cut off the vegetation that had grown up since last time. There was a slightly off-center black woman Cuca in the local grocery store, who used to croon hypnagogic songs at the register. That was the entire Spanish-speaking high society around.

In prehistoric times, I saw two movies I can't forget. One of them was *Carmen*, 1942, with a magnificent Spanish voiced by Jean Marais. It impressed me as an example of how beautiful human speech could be.

I admired *Pobre mi madre querida*, 1948, for the powerfully sentimental Argentinean music. At times, I still listen to the tango Hugo del Carril sang in that movie. His fiery "Marechiare" is also a part of my nostalgic memory.

Monday, January 29, 2018

A Swing of a Dance

My knowledge of Cuba doesn't go far beyond my personal experience.

A huge Greyhound bus is racing through the narrow streets of old Havana, nearly scratching the walls of the houses. The driver doesn't even care to slow down at turns. Passengers stay

calm. I'm nervous.

People sit on the open platform of a dilapidated truck, feet dangling off edge, others stand on the cab steps—waving to everyone they see. The driver sits on an unfixed wooden stool.

Young men are speeding around in long diesel cars of the early Elvis era.

Our jeep is moving fast on the highway. Passing drivers show us the victory sign. We congratulate them.

The hood of the car ahead of us, torn off by the wind, is flying sideways toward our jeep. It slams in right where I sit. The metal planks bend into my ribs. There would be a huge welt. Behind us, the hood flies away rolling over the highway concrete. We go on driving.

In downtown, people gladly pose for a picture. I cannot promise a copy, my trips being sporadic, unpredictable. In total lack of clothing in government stores, women are wearing light, elegant homemade dresses. I glimpse a swing of a dance, overhear a hint of “Guantanamera” melody. Socialism is at its beginning, it didn't have time enough yet to wreck people's brains, deform their body language. I like the way they are now, enjoy being with them, talking. My countrymen sneer at Cubans, call them contemptuous names. My dear friend Yuri Nefyodov would've said, *Godawful stupid shenanigans*.

Oh Russia

A few days after our arrival, the entire staff of the Lourdes Station gathered at a long table to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Great Russian Revolution. Everybody went shit-faced.

Next morning, the political deputy commander Victor Guryich woke up with great difficulty and discovered that his jacket was missing. It was a nice jacket, but the jacket was not what it was all about. There in the inner pocket of that stupid

thing was the complete top-secret list of the Station personnel, not to mention other sensitive information. In horror, Victor Guryich barreled around the village like a rabid animal. But don't you worry. The jacket was soon found in shrubs. Judging by its virginity, it hadn't even been searched.

When the drinking party had reached the full swing, we sang this:

*Oh Russia, my country, my homeland.
Oh Russia, the love of my heart.
So spacious, so radiant, so beautiful,
so worthy, and so much loved.*

As I'm trying to recall what my feeling was at that time, I realize that most of us loved the sweet homeland not for its space or beauty or radiancy but rather for being so very far away.

However, I must give the homerland credit for not forgetting us. The defense minister, marshal Grechko, sent to each of us the anniversary present, a package of classic choice—a bottle of cognac, a can of red caviar, and a salami stick—a priceless selection of men's menu in Russian culture. But not all of us were that happy about it. Some of the packages had been robbed and delivered with one of the items missing.

Tuesday, January 30, 2018

Two Hot Bodies in a Bed

Kormilitsyn, an emaciated young man, a hearer, was occasionally passing out at his workplace. Lack of sleep might have been a logical explanation. But why was it happening to him alone, while all his co-workers remained fine? Big mystery. Well, not so big, actually.

It turned out that in order to save up certificates—an imitation of American dollars Russians were paid in while stationed overseas—his wife put him on a strict weight-loss diet. Of course, you are an idiot if you don't save—all sovoks did save certificates—but surely not like that. Moreover, she gave him little time to sleep by leaving the baby on his hands and going gossip to her friends. The then commander, colonel Rogovoy, called the foolish woman to his office.

“Who do you think is on the government mission here—you or your husband?” he yelled.

Soon after his wife's departure, starveling Kormilitsyn stopped fainting. He never gained much weight, though.

* * *

We had to take little Constantin to hospital a few times. The moment we parked, the driver, a private named Gadyuka—which in this language means Viper—threw the removable car seat onto the ground and while falling on it was already seeing dreams in his sleep. One time, on the way back from the hospital, Nina gave me a nudge.

“Look at Viper,” she whispered.

Viper was driving down the Malecon with his eyes closed. He was so careful I didn't notice he was asleep.

* * *

Nadya Polyakova, one of our neighbors, had a conversation with her husband. She suggested that maybe they would better sleep some nights separately. In that heat, with no air conditioning, two hot bodies in one narrow bed make it even hotter, she said. That was her reasoning.

“As long as you are my effing wife,” her husband yelled at her, “you will sleep at my side. Is that clear?”

That was the Nadya Polyakova who used to say that she was born into a decent family—none of the Polyakov brood had ever been doing time in prison.

Horror

Unexplainable, eerie occurrences were taking place. One of the intelligence officers, major Lebedinski, hanged himself. On first guess, what killed him was humiliation—his wife was cheating on him, openly.

“Here she goes,” the women would say seeing her limping down the street. She was lame.

Other reasons were suggested and talked about. Allegedly, Lebedinski had been informed that after the completion of his assignment in Cuba, he would be sent to an obscure location in faraway woods in Belarus. Someone heard him say,

“I’d better hang myself than that.”

But all this was just an idle talk. The man had been gone.

An army officer committed a perfect double suicide. He stepped on the edge of a dam, shot himself twice in the chest and plunged into the sea. He had shown no sign of insanity, had been a sober man in his right mind. A good career was waiting for him. Loving husband, happy father. Hm.

A body of another army officer was found in the sea, his chest pierced through by something like an arrow. There was nobody with arrows nearby, no strangers around. It was an empty beach. Mystery.

Call Him Fidel

An Axiomatic Truth

A family of husband, wife, and son had a parrot who could talk.

“Sasha, come home,” the bird would call the son, waddling behind him across the lawn.

The parrot also liked to speak on behalf of the husband.

“Julie, I’m back,” he would announce his arrival from work so that the wife would know.

Dipsomaniac Deryuzhkin lived in the house which was right next to the parrot’s. His wife had been trying to control his addiction by using various sophisticated methods. She never succeeded. He was too smart for her. It took her several days, for instance, to catch on why he was so tight while drinking orange juice. He had many other ways of deception. An honest

alcoholic is an unstoppable and irreversible personality. If whatever statement about anything isn't an axiomatic truth, this one is.

Deryuzhkin was fanatical about army rituals. From time to time, mostly unprovoked, he would recite the *Manual of Drill and Ceremony Regulations*, imitating the booming voice of the parade commander.

*“Parade—Shun! To march—past! By—battalions! Distance—
one—linear! First battalion—Forward! The rest—Right—Face!
Shoulder—Arms! Eyes—Right! March!”*

A Shot of Bacardi

A neighbor named Klimano—we used this shorter name for Klimanovich after his little daughter—was in charge of the Station Secret Department, in fact, of just one bronze stamp. At the end of the day, he used it to seal a closet with sensitive junk—some instructions, army manuals, and a copy of TIME magazine, a present from the Russian Embassy.

The little Klimano girl was our daughter's accidental friend. She was about two years younger than Slava, but she was the only kid around—so, at times, we visited the family. Their living room had no leisure furniture—we usually sat at an empty dinner table. Occasionally, Klimano would take a trip to the fridge for a shot of Bacardi behind its door and then return to his seat with a blank look on his face. We didn't have much of a lot in common—nothing, actually. So, we stopped seeing them eventually.

Boa Constrictor

Russian spies in Cuba had no interest in anything about the country's people, culture, or wildlife. Rummyantsev was an

exception. He was an inveterate photographer and a red-blooded hunter. He fished incredibly pretty seashells and was teaching ignorant beginners how to get a mollusk out of its home—just hook it, hang up, and wait—the emptied shell will drop in due time. He was the only one among us to hunt such nightmarish sea monsters as barracuda or murena.

Women screamed in horror when a giant boa crawled into the village out of shrubbery. Entered Rummyantsev with a machete. In just one swift movement, he cut off the snake's head, letting a wide stream of blood run down the street.

Yet, there were some imaginative individuals. Our backyard neighbor named Usenko kept a scrapbook which he was diligently filling with clippings from the local magazines and newspapers. The only thing he really saw with his own eyes, however, was Jose Marti airport.

Wednesday, January 31, 2018

A Homeless Mother Hen

Since the village of Juan de Dios Fraga was locked out, our daughter was free to explore the area up and down. There was an old wooden tower hidden in trees, to climb up. Slava's scouting instinct brought her right to the top of it. She looked down, found it scary, and decided to stay where she was. It was the village comandante who discovered her there and then brought her home.

Roaming around the village, was a homeless hen with her chicks. It was a hot day, and she took her thirsty brood to the water pump where our daughter was splashing in a puddle. Slava had never seen chicks before. She got curious and reached out to one of them. The mother chicken cried murder and sprinted through the puddle to protect her baby—but slipped in water and slithered past Slava on her back, claws up.

Slava refused to wear pocketless clothes. Whatever you put on should have at least one pocket, otherwise—what is it for? Once, on our way home from the hospital, we dropped in a pharmacy store which had a stand with a large bowl full of empty vials of assorted colors and sizes. We were leaving when I noticed that Slava's pockets were suspiciously bulging. I had to brace myself to empty her pockets and put the vials back to the bowl. It wasn't fair, I knew it, but Slava handled it bravely. That's my girl.

Scary Moments

The supergood thing was going to the seaside on Sundays. More than often, it was Minfar beach that presumably had been president Batista's personal beach before the revolution. It did look like it was—it had a big library, a billiard hall, red-marble toilets, a posh bar. The sand beach itself was a small area fenced by a horse-shoe dam with underwater gratings—to make it safe for bathing, although I never saw sharks nearby. The dam's inner wall was a habitat of sea urchins. While climbing upstairs out of the water, it was easy to miss a rung and step on one of those spiky creatures. Sharp black needles would penetrate deep into flesh—the pain didn't go until they dissolved, which took some time.

I did some snorkeling outside the dam a few times enjoying a fantasy world of playful, many-colored fish. Some of them looked weird, one resembling an iron by its triangle shape and having two jets like a military aircraft. Close to me a manta ray was waving its huge wings. I had a spear in my hand.

Don't. It's a floating power station with an electrocuting tail. Stay away.

Slava suddenly vanished, disappeared from sight. The beach is quite observable, fenced, locked. Left, right—nothing.

I rush into the water, transparent all through—where is she? My head explodes. No!

Don't panic. She is here. There's nowhere to go. Yes, but I don't see her. I don't see her! Stop. Kids like to hide. Where? There's no place to hide. It's just an empty space. Stop. Look better.

In the far end of the beach, I see a concrete slab, out of place, neglected. I dash to it, throw myself down in the sand—my sweet girl's hazel eyes are looking at me out of the dark narrow space under the slab.

Varadero

A little adventure happened at Varadero, which is one of the most popular beaches on Cuba's coast. Holding my son, I waded to a nearby shoal, a perfect place for a little boy to sit and splash. On the way back, I suddenly sank into deep water—it reached my chin and then my eyes. I raised Constantin over my head, made three or four more strides and got ashore. I should've known that nearshore currents change the sea floor almost every other minute.

Once in two years, I got a week's vacation, spent it with my family in an abandoned villa in Guanabo, which is a small seaside town. There was no beach around. The kids played on the big lawn, enjoyed picking up ripe tamarind and almond fruit. Slava liked to climb a tree and observe us from above. It was a quiet week.

There are over thirty beaches in Cuba. Santa Maria del Mar is one of the most beautiful. And there was El Salado, a long, shallow beach for local residents. Irene, the brigade secretary, was hit by a stingray on that beach. She got paralyzed but still managed to crawl out to safety. She couldn't move. The brigade crowd left her on the beach, forgotten. We picked her up.

Irene was in bed for several days. Nina attended to her, brought her some food. She told Nina she appreciated my discretion about a delicate situation I had presumably seen her in. According to Irene, I had witnessed her intimate moment with Yushkov and was silent about it. But I had a suspicion she invented all this to make sure we had no doubts about her actual involvement with Yushkov—which was a true romantic relationship between a young man and a middle-aged woman. She wanted us to know this.

Thursday, February 1, 2018

Hemingway's Shoes

We took a tour of Tropicana cabaret. The establishment was defunct but still lovely in its lifeless state, showing fading decorations and a marble fountain with a circle of curvaceous young women dancing naked. It looked like an excavation of Pompeii.

We visited Dupont's Xanadu mansion one time. It was empty, too, though the golf course was still there with its exotic plants, jazzy flowers, teeny-tiny colibris, lavish green landscape. A huge library on the first floor, a row of bedrooms with marble bathtubs on the second—all that stuff was shamelessly exposed to an idle eye. I liked the observation deck on the upper floor—a fantastic view of the sea, and a light, refreshing breeze. *Where is Dupont, by the way? Probably, in some other place where we are not treading his property.*

Nina singled out two things that grasped her attention in Hemingway's villa Finca Vigia—the writer's gigantic shoes and the furniture eaten up by termites. I could imagine the size of the shoes all right, and I knew what termites can do. I remember I picked up a book to resume reading after a busy week. It looked like someone had tested a shotgun on it.

Nina was offered a volunteer job as the village librarian—she used that opportunity to read up lots of Russian classics. When we'd married, Nina was a law student. I'd persuaded her to change it for foreign languages. Soon we began to travel—Odessa, Riga, Cuba—It was only after we returned to Odessa again that Nina had an opportunity to go on and complete her education.

Sumbitch Somenko

The Russian Embassy arranged a grand tour across the island from Havana to Santiago de Cuba. We saw green mountains, waterfalls pouring off Jurassic scarps, deep valleys in the morning mist and took a memorable picture on the bridge over a monstrous precipice.

We spent a day in Guama, an Indian village and a tourist attraction sitting on patches of small islands scattered across the marshes. There were no Indians there. We took a stroll along the wooden walkways, scaring away huge, ugly crabs; went boating, had a dinner at the village restaurant. The assistant commander Lyagusha got a little out of it, mimicked a froggy—which was the meaning of his name—and croaked like one.

Sumbitch Somenko discovered Frog Legs on the menu and demanded to show him the dish before serving.

“Mirar, mirar,” he reiterated rolling his eyes.

The server pretended incomprehension.

Next day we visited a crocodile farm. Not much to talk about, just spooky.

Somenko was a sumbitch because of his wife. She came in hysterical tears to the commander and asked him for protection from a sadistic sex maniac, who, of course, was her husband. There were some other bad things linked to this pervert, but I don't want to spend another word for him.

Cassis Tuberosa and the Emperor's Bed

Seashells were the only available souvenirs to take home from Cuba. I collected enough of that trash during just one trip to a secluded faraway beach.

With a spear in my hand, I swam into a pack of lobsters—*langostas*. Their indurate veterans turned on me, threatening to use their sharp claws.

Don't be that nervous, old guys. I'm just passing by.

A powerful current began to pull me away into the sea. I resisted using the fins and was now hovering over a point like a helicopter. I managed to enter calm waters only after I began to push back with the spear. Sheer luck. In such a situation, the right thing was to get out of the current by swimming crosswise. But I didn't know that.

I fished several ordinary *strombus gigas* with their orange apron—and I was the only one who came across a *cassis tuberosa* of a perfect shape and color. Lieutenant-colonel Chujkov offered me his whole catch for this beauty. He thought I was dumb.

It was the same Chujkov who one time, being drunk, could not remember where he lived and, by mistake, spent the night at the neighbor's house. Since that time, he developed a strategy how he could get home even if he were totes boozed. Just read out loud all the preceding house numbers along the street until one of them sounds like yours. It worked.

Shortly before our departure from Cuba, we visited the Havana Zoo. The animals were living their dull life as if in a daze. The tiger alone was furiously flouncing inside the cage—he was evidently famished.

We were the only visitors at the Napoleon Museum. It was open and empty, there was not a single guide inside. On the

second floor, we entered the emperor's bedroom—the cover and the pillows wore a sure emperor's touch. A chamber pot under the bed looked majestic as well. We went outside and took pictures on the porch.

Friday, February 2, 2018

Es Tu Bebe

I remember dark storm clouds overhead, rolling thunder, gusty winds, and the flood waters sweeping porch furniture down the street.

On Wednesday afternoon, December 4, 1968, we were driving down Malecon to the military hospital. Private Viper was at the wheel. On our left, huge waves crashed against the embankment, sending splashes of water over our jeep. We were in a hurry. Nina was having contractions. She was surprisingly calm. As we were riding the hospital elevator up to the maternity ward, an assistant who escorted us expressed his doubts.

“Are you sure about contractions?” he asked.

“Oh yes, I am,” Nina said smiling quietly.

When the next morning I came to the hospital, a young man—a new dad most likely—met me in the hall.

“Ruso?” he made a sure guess.

“Si.”

He led me up to a glass wall. Behind it, on a baby cot, under a snow-white sheet, lay a newborn child, his arms leisurely stretched out. My guide pointed a finger at him.

“Es tu bebe,” he said.

I entered the ward.

“Have you seen the old man?” Nina asked me—and went on without waiting for an answer, “They came in the morning and said they wanted a name right away to be finished with the paperwork. I said, Constantin.”

The new mothers at the ward didn't approve of her choice. "Why don't you call him Fidel?"

Nina had no lack of attention. The women were wearing her shoes, eating her chocolate, wondering why her *baron*—baby boy—was that big. Nina, on her part, was a bit shocked when a crowd of their relatives and friends barged into the room filling it up with heavy smoke from their cigars.

I missed one day, and when the next morning I came to take Nina home, I found her crying out of loneliness.

It was quiet on Malecon, but I told Viper to slow down to fifty miles per hour. Viper let out an anguished wail—he had never driven that slow.

We came home. Slava brought the village kids to take a look at the new arrival. Nina turned them back.

A Strategic Idea

When time came for our son to start making steps, I began to take him to an abandoned playground. There was a broken pole there, the only remaining part of the one-time carousel. I taught Constantin to hold on to that pole and walk around it. He liked touring the village in my arms, showing with a finger where he wanted us to go.

He had a keen interest in mechanical things—watch, camera, radio—most of all the wheel in the bus cabin as I put him behind it.

An official at the Russian Embassy gave me a strategic idea as to Constantin's birth certificate:

"We normally recommend Moscow for the place of birth," she said. "Being born abroad might cause inconvenience in certain situations back home."

This sovok baloney was just adorable. Why should I lie to my son? Wasn't he born in the most beautiful city in the world?

You see, Constantin. Actually, you were born in Havana, but they explained to me at the Embassy that Moscow would be safer. Is that what I was going to tell my grownup son?

“My son was born in Havana,” I said, “and it has to be shown in his birth certificate. It’s just as convenient as it gets.”

Here’s a little story about Constantin’s first word. Nina was feeding him with mango puree, his favorite.

“Mama,” Slava called her.

Constantin gulped the mouthful.

“Ma,” he said and laughed.

A Sudden Turn of Events

A man helloed me in the village.

“I don’t get reports from you,” he said as if he knew me. Did I know him? The long-forgotten feeling of aversion and danger came back. KGB. I went to playing stupid.

“Sure you don’t. That’s because I send my reports to the Defense Minister.”

“I don’t mean that.”

“Then what is it that you mean?”

“Reports. You have to report to me.”

“Who are you that I have to report to you?”

“You know who I am.”

“What kind of reports? About what?”

“Opinions. Conversations. Remarks.”

“Whose remarks for example?”

“Well, you have Veselov under your command for example. His remarks.”

“All right. You’ll get my report, but Veselov will read it first.”

“Are you kidding me?” he fumed.

“No, I don’t. No reports.”

His face got red; eyes narrowed. For him, it was a big flaw, a career setback, a longer way to the next rank, or something worse.

“There’ll be consequences,” he went on, winded. “Nobody is allowed to do such a thing. You’ll be sent back home immediately.”

“Suck on that,” was my last remark.

I walked away. He stood watching my back.

The Go-Away Party

My mission in Cuba took two years and eight months. It was supposed to be as long as three or even four years with subsequent personal replacement. But that was that. Things happen. My time was up.

Predictably, not all who had been invited to the go-away party came over. Sure, each and every one of them was involved with the KGB. Now my persona became toxic.

Sutugin showed up long before the appointed time; said he had been invited to the Embassy and so wouldn’t be available at a later hour, decided to drop by for a minute. It would’ve been stupid of him, I guess, to openly show solidarity with the outcast. The meal had been ready for the guests, and we had a good time at the dinner table. He departed swaying a little. What he had seen in me that made him think I needed protection is still a mystery to me. He had made me an exception.

We Are Leaving Cuba

I didn’t say colonel Sutugin, Thank you. Was it my dolishness or some kind of false modesty? He had arranged my trip to Cuba in a roundabout way, fooling the KGB. He had been protecting me for over two years until the new guy arrived. The previous one was his man, there was no secret about it.

After Cuba, he retired. We once came across each other in Riga. And again, I didn't thank him. Why was it so hard for me to do such a natural thing?

We were leaving Cuba in a new quantity, with daughter and son. I didn't have much out-of-work time for my children but what I did have had been spent with them. I was returning home with a clear vision of life that was now going to be different in many bad ways. But I also knew that the halcyon memory of Cuba would mystically help and support me at all times. And it did.

Back Home

Saturday, February 3, 2018

With a heavy heart, I begin this part of my story. Years in Cuba segued into a long period of mishaps, failures, and regrets. I finally realized that the experiment with the military service had to come to an end. Yet back in Ispas, where it all had begun, I knew that Army was not forever.

We arrived in Moscow at the end of July 1970. Eugene and Claudia Agafonov had moved into their dacha for summer and offered us their apartment on Kutuzov Prospect.

Mom and stepfather came from Samara. They listened to our stories, gazed at Constantin like he was from another plan-

et, and winced in disgust at guacamole which Nina made to let them taste a flavor of tropical food.

Constantin didn't like the new environment very much. He held on to Nina.

"Mom, let us go home," he said. Constantin was one year and eight months old.

Vladimir and Rimma Sukhachev came to see us, too, as well as Eugene and Eudokia Polyakov.

Drop It!

I had known the Polyakovs since Igor and Aida's wedding in the late 1950s. Eugene was a super sociable person with a thunderous voice. He liked his voice and was using it to repeatedly tell his endless stories. His wife Eudokia would listen with a depressed look.

"Will this ever end?" she would say.

People asked Eugene to stop yelling.

"Can't do that," was his sincere answer. "This is my natural voice."

Here's one of his stories I can recall—which is a kind of *deja vu*. In a restaurant, a server holds a plate of *borshch* above the table, looking for a vacant space. "Drop it!" Eugene says. The plate flies and crashes.

"It's a real story," Eugene says. "I didn't make it up."

Eudokia crinkles her nose.

I'd visited them in 1962 when I had an interview at the Defense Ministry regarding Egypt. Eugene was thrilled. He knew that everyone who'd been sent to work in a foreign country returned with a luxury Volga car.

"Come back with a Volga for me," he said. "You don't really need such an expensive thing."

Good or bad, the trip to Egypt had been aborted.

Eugene had an extensive collection of adages to share. “Even a miserable beggar deserves a nice shot of vodka before borsch,” he would say at dinner table. He was not an addict though. Each time he had more than one drink, he would have a heart attack and find himself in an emergency room.

“Never again, I swear,” he would say.

At old age, his health deteriorated, but he never gave up.

“Not before this one croaks,” he would say pointing at Brezhnev on the TV screen.

Mucha Mierda

After a long leave, I returned to Moscow for a new assignment. Lieutenant-colonel Zadorozhny, the Chief Personnel of the Defense Ministry, handed me a paper.

“Lucky you,” he said.

The paper turned out to be a pass to the Glass, which is a middle name for the GRU Headquarters. At the Glass check point, I was told that a guide was required.

I called Nick Alberdin. Not long before his departure from Cuba, we’d gotten kind of bridged on a basis of some small matters of common interest. We had agreed that I call him in Moscow in passing anyway.

“Why are you here?” Nick asked.

“Not sure. I have a pass.”

“Give me a second,” he said.

He led me into the building. Nick’s boss grabbed the pass and disappeared. Nick was skeptical about my visit. He knew something, was evasive. The boss came back.

“There’s been a misunderstanding,” he said. “Your destination is Riga. Not the worst place at all.”

It seemed like GRU wanted me, but something had intervened. Well, I knew what that something was. Even better that

way. To get discharged from the Glass, which was full of secrets, would've been problematic up to being impossible. Okay. Riga. I go back to Riga. *Mucha mierda!*

That day a small but typical incident happened. I was in a coffee shop, my net bag with a few items of gourmet food hanging on the rack. A man snatched the bag and was now walking toward the exit.

“Put that thing back, please,” I stopped him.

“Oh, I thought my friend's left it here. You say it's yours?”

The rascal put the net bag back.

“You better watch it, if it's not yours,” he threatened stepping out the door.

In Cuba, the sovok behavioral patterns had been completely erased from my memory, otherwise there would be no reason for me to pay attention to such an insignificant technicality of everyday life in Russia.

The Gritsai's Case

I was now looking for a way to get discharged from the army. There is a theory that military life makes mental abilities degrade from the get-go.

*Your tiny brains may not be right,
but keep your field boots clean and bright.*

The process accelerates after retirement and then quickly leads toward a moral and physical death.

However, I happened to know a person who escaped the inevitable. Lieutenant-colonel Gritsai was our stair landing neighbor at 14 Black Sea Street in Odessa. He was a professor of social sciences at the Army Artillery Academy and lectured on Marxism-Leninism, historical and dialectical materialism,

and the rest of the ideological malarkey. He loathed his job. He was sick and tired of it.

“Andrei comes home in such a state he can barely stand on his feet,” Zina, his wife, complained.

Endless quotations from Marx, Engels, Lenin were rotating in Gritsai’s head like a whirlwind. On the one hand he celebrated the communist ideas, but on the other hand he knew they were wrong. This contradiction tormented him, made him feel confused, distracted. He began to look like a revenant.

He retired the very day his twenty-five-year service term expired. For about two months, he lay supine on the couch, a childish smile flittering on his face. Then, one morning, he hopped off the couch and by the end of the day got a job at Otrada Beach as a parking lot guard.

He acquired a look of a young man, his step was now quick, jaunty, his eyes enlivened with light. Nina asked his wife what happened to her man.

“Anrei’s found his calling,” Zina said with a sigh of relief.

The Man Needs a Psychiatrist

There were three legitimate grounds for dismissal to choose from. It had to be a serious disease, such as cancer, stroke, mental disorder, and other catastrophic health issues to begin with.

Second. A crime or a blatant demonstration of a demeanor inconsistent with the army moral code. But again, the discharge was not guaranteed. Major Mostovoi, our chief at the translation bureau in Tashkent, was a classic exhibitionist. He flashed to middle school kids, hiding like an animal in the nearby bushes. A party meeting was called, the case debated. At closing, major Krasotov made a brief, penetrating speech.

“The man is effing crazy,” he said. “He doesn’t need effing lecturing from the communist effing party. This is effing ridicu-

lous. The man needs an effing psychiatric evaluation, not effing moralizing.”

Major Mostovoi was sent to a provincial town where he was given the position of the recruiting commander. His military rank remained unchanged.

White and Brown

In the days of Nikita Khrushchev’s reign, an attempt had been made to feed the population with free bread. When the bread had been eaten up, the communist party Central Committee decided to ration it—Moscow would eat both brown and white bread, while the rest of the country would eat brown bread only. The decision was supposed to be endorsed by the local party organizations across the country. So, there was a party meeting. Everybody voted *Yea* except lieutenant-colonel Kaverznev, who voted *Nay*.

“Let the entire country, including Moscow, eat brown bread,” he suggested. “No white bread for anyone.”

Saying this nonsense, he forgot that he had one year yet to complete his service in order to get a retirement pension, that his wife, being the spouse of an army officer, had never worked, that he still had to support his two daughters, his son, and his mother, and that he lived with his family in an army barracks, having no residence of his own. The next day, facing a dishonorable discharge at the Military Headquarters, he begged for mercy.

“I am so sorry. Please, don’t do this to me,” he pleaded.

“Good boy,” they said. “Get out of here. Next time don’t make a fool of yourself.”

The third ground for dismissal was army layoffs, which was unrealistic. So, think hard, I told myself, think hard.

In the meantime, a brilliant strategy of how to be dis-

charged for certain by using a combination of two grounds at a time was developing in front of my eyes. The author of the strategy was lieutenant Narymov.

Sunday, February 4, 2018

Nevermore

In Riga, I put up at the same Armed Forces Officers hotel on Merkel Street that I had done before. Officers or no officers, there was as much theft at the hotel as anywhere else. On the very first day, my electric shaver was stolen. The thing was in a horrendous deficit. I knew I would never get another one even if I lived a thousand years.

Quite unexpectedly, I met Anatol. We stumbled upon each other right on Merkel street. He had been in Czechoslovakia during the 1968 uprising and later served in Sovetsk, former Prussian Tilsit. He was in Riga in passing, wanted to see me. Long story short, I made a couple of visits to the Headquarters, and Anatol joined me at the regiment.

A notice came from the car store, inviting me to come and take a Moskvich-412 which I had prepaid in certificates. There were four cars to choose from. Nick Kiselev was with me as an expert—he owned a Moskvich junk, too. It turned out that three of the four cars in the store had misplaced wind shields and loose side doors that didn't shut. The fourth one, which I chose, was out of gas before we could reach a gas station. The guys at the special Moskvich repair shop cut out the cigarette lighter and said that they'd saved my life. They also said I could turn on the radio if I want, but it would be safer to cut it out as well. It was raining in Riga. The car was leaking from top to bottom. I had a flat rear tire.

Despite everything, I felt exultant. *A car. My own. Personal. Can go anywhere, any time. Alone. Call me a proprietor.*

But that feeling didn't last long. Problems began to accumulate with a frightening speed. Malfunctions, endless repairs, absent spare parts and tires, bumpy roads, drunk drivers, road rage, hateful pedestrians, garage unavailability, car theft, corrupted road police—it went on and on, for years. Finally, I sold the vexatious contraption, breathed a sigh of relief, and swore to never drive a car again. *You did?*

An Unfortunate Visit

In past time in Riga, Nina and I would eat in cheap diners. Our special choice was bread soup, and Baltic herring in sour cream. The bread soup seemed to be one of the wonders of the culinary art.

On a payday, when alone, I would go to a small coffee shop next to the hotel and had a package of hot *pirozhki* the size of a pinky finger. But my usual diet was a bottle of milk and a loaf of black bread *kluna maize*.

Nina came to see me for a week, leaving the kids with Paulina. The Kashutins, who'd already returned from Cuba, asked their friends to give us a room to stay. The room's furniture was old and tricky. The couch collapsed when we tried to get up from it, and fell on Nina's heel. The wound remained in a bad shape for more than a year. Nothing helped. Eventually, an old doctor applied an ointment of his own make, and the wound healed.

Birds of a Feather

Elvira came from Odessa with two kids, son and daughter, to join Anatol. The bygone days in Riga became a time of legends, and a legend is, of course, a story of what happened no matter what you think about it. Wherever Anatol found himself—be it a coffee bar, a bus, a street—he would start looking

around, and quite often his eyes would lock with other searching eyes. I cannot say much about Elvira, I didn't know her well, but I got a hint from Anatol himself. He asked me to look after her while he was out of town for some time. I was not surprised but said anyway:

“How? Sitting on a chair outside the door?”

“Hell, no. Just drop in once.”

Okay. I did. Brought something for the kids. Elvira came out of the bedroom in a diaphanous nightgown, half open.

“Just checking? Here I am, buddy.”

Elvira was a beautiful woman. Anatol was not an ugly man either. I hope they lived a happy life together.

Top Secret

On the last day of the summer military exercises, lieutenant Narymov reported a missing booklet of top-secret instructions. The regiment gates were immediately locked up, premises searched, officers questioned. In case some crazy dumbass had thrown the booklet into the lavatory, the septic tank was pumped out. No traces of the booklet were found. In slow grades, all arrows began to point in one direction—lieutenant Narymov. He was the only person who once left the regiment during the exercises—he had been sent to the Baltic Military Headquarters with the final report.

On the third day, Narymov confessed that it was he who had stolen the instructions. Here is the dialogue that took place between the investigator and lieutenant Narymov.

“Where is the effing booklet?”

“You will get this information later. But first you have to follow my instructions.”

“Don't give me this shit. Who needs your instructions?”

“You do. Come to the military cemetery at midnight.”

“What did you just say?”

“Cemetery. At midnight. Walk down the second lane on left and wait for my signal.”

“Your signal? Are you effing kidding me?”

“Not at all. I’ll give you a signal with a flashlight. That’s the condition.”

“Who told you we would listen to your effing conditions?”

“You want the booklet? Do as I say.”

At midnight, in the military cemetery there were flash light signals, hushed voices, mysterious shadows creeping behind the tombs—and the booklet of top-secret instructions was finally retrieved from under a gravestone.

Lieutenant Narymov was immediately discharged as a dangerous maniac posing threat to the country’s national security.

* * *

I didn’t lay much hope on my report for discharge. My feeling was it would just give a start to many painful experiences leading to an uncertain result. To my surprise, it didn’t take long at all, just a week or so, to get what I wanted.

The chief personnel showed me my letter with the verdict written in its left upper corner, *Consider on the merits*, which in a normal language simply meant *Give him what he wants*. But the real, deep meaning of it was *Here’s your headache*. The chief personnel gave a sigh of burden.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” he said faking a question.

“Just consider on the merits,” I suggested.

“Thank you, wise guy,” he snorted. “I didn’t know I can do that.”

He finally came up with the layoffs option.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

One way or another, farewell to the army! Thanks a lot for everything. I'll remember all good things I had from you, sweetie. And if something was wrong, it was only my fault.

Running Away

Monday, February 5, 2018

Agenskalns Pines

Riga didn't let me go for some time yet. Eugene Agafonov, here he was again, had made a phone call—and I found myself at the office of Peteris Valeskalns, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet (Assembly) of Latvia. Valeskalns gave me a warm welcome, showed a true interest in my situation as a resigned army officer, and at parting handed me a note for the mayor of Riga with the request to make sure the visitor got an apartment.

Mayor Gunar Ziemelis took a short glance at the note.

“Are you sure you want to settle down in Riga?” he asked. His voice was mean.

“No, I'm not,” I said.

There were no further questions. He looked me straight in the eye.

“It would’ve been my pleasure to let you go empty handed,” he said. “But I have to obey.”

Two days later, an invitation arrived with the mail to come and get a warrant for a condo in the elite residential area Agenskalns Pines. I gave it a short thought and didn’t go. After I ignored the second invitation, the letters stopped coming.

I said goodbye to Anatol and Nick and hurried to the airport to meet Igor. Next day, we arrived in Lvov from where I drove to Odessa, alone.

Clever Vovka

Now I was free at last. Or it seemed so.

Right at that point, I made the dumbest decision in my life. The idea was to return to Lvov. Return. Ten years of the military service almost wiped out my willingness to listen to what my Mowgli was telling me, *Having set foot on the road, go*. But the decision had been made. There was no way back.

For a while, Igor and Aida gave me a space in their large apartment on Academy Street.

Mishka Karyev had moved to Kyiv and got a job as an engineering manager. Vovka Malyuk, who now was a medical doctor with a Ph.D. degree, had also moved to Kyiv. Slavka Marenkov worked for Igor’s Research Laboratory. I got a job at the LPI Foreign Languages Department. It seemed like everything looked about the same as it was twenty years ago. But soon, I began to see changes. Big, radical changes.

A year later, Mishka and Vovka came to Odessa to see me. We shared our stories. Vovka told he had divorced his student-wife. I cut in with a clever idea.

“In some cases,” I said, “it’s hard to figure out—”

“In some cases,” Vovka interrupted me, “what you really need to do is just get your butt out of it as soon as possible.” He spoke like my Mowgli.

Due to the Specificity

In the early 1970s, sovok celebrated its final victory all over the country—very much so in my beloved Lvov. I should have run away without looking back the moment I saw what had happened, or even better—never even think of the past like you could live it again.

It was a full-on hell. As an army officer evidently having the skills to administer and command—sure, the local bureaucrats appraised me as such—I was supposed to be an active member of various committees, educator of students, champion of party ideology, speaker at meetings, participant of lecturing tours.

At 5 am, I was standing inside the cow barn of a livestock farm. In front of me, the milkmaids were sitting on whatever they’d found to sit on. Impatiently, the cows turned their heads in their direction and mooed. I stood silently, savoring the moment.

“Dear ladies,” I finally said, “I’ve been sent to inform you on how the world stands today. Well, let me tell you quite honestly—the world stands good this morning. However, it’s going to stand even better if you just get off your butts, grab the buckets, and go milk the cows. That can’t wait. Go. And thank you very much for your attention.”

I jumped into my Moskvich and drove off. That was my first, and last, official trip to a countryside.

Actually, I had one more adventure of that kind, but that happened after I had left Lvov. It was a winemaking farm on the outskirts of Artsyz, a town in Odessa region. In the evening, tired farm workers trudged into the country club. Standing

behind the lectern, I told them what I'd seen in Cuba. Socialism. Empty store shelves. Rationed food and clothes. Locked borders. Wonderful people, who are not fully aware what they are getting into.

I spent the night in the boarding house. Early in the morning, when I was still in bed, a woman came in and put on the table a plate of fried eggs and a decanter of red wine. She filled a tumbler with wine and left.

The farm manager walked me across the vineyard. I could not resist asking a question.

"Listen, you have this excellent winery here," I said. "But I haven't seen a single drunk pisshead."

"You know," he said, "alcoholism is a common thing. We can't control it because of the specific character of the business. Due to the specificity, however, a pristine process of natural selection takes place. Those who have a predilection for alcoholism drink themselves to death, those who do not, survive."

Yakomoga Skorische

Back in my beautiful Lvov, I found myself in an elite coterie of soul mates, whose ideology could be coined in one phrase which belonged to Crash—*drinking is a mathematically proven justification of life*. They were my close friends, new and old buddies, whom I loved so much. I got locked in to drinking.

Every evening, after 5 pm, as if blindfolded, we were taking the traditional tour of wine bars, then gathered at Igor's apartment on Academy Street to go on drinking. Orest, who was a new talent in the crowd, played cocktail music on the grand piano in the large living room. On Sundays, we would go to the Chebureki joint in Brukhovichi and drink again.

An occasional binge drinking is not a horrible crime in my concept of life. But that was far above anything I could bear.

My mind blacked out. I began to do unimaginably bad things and then drink even more to soothe the guilty conscience. I was inflicting painful hurts upon whom I loved most. I came to hate myself, think of suicide.

Uncle Pavlusha appeared amid a drinking party. He took my hands in his, and I saw that he was crying. He was just looking at me with tears in his eyes, saying nothing.

Next morning, a phone call woke me up. Wine was still running through my veins. I felt dizzy but was able to catch on—it was a replacement request.

“How soon am I supposed to be there?” I asked.

“Yakomoga skorishe,” said the voice on the phone.

Do they speak Japanese now? No, it was Ukrainian ASAP. I wasn’t thinking clearly when I entered the classroom.

“Classes canceled,” I said.

Enough. I went to the personnel office and wrote a letter of resignation. Two days later I was back home in Odessa.

Wrong Booties

I’m going to roll the tape a bit back in time.

Have I forgotten about Inez? Of course, not. We met in the morning when I first stepped into the office of the LPI Chair of Foreign Languages. Last time we had seen each other was ten years ago. She went panicky, began to explain why she’d had to put on booties—because of a bad weather. In her pedantic mind, booties were inappropriate for the situation. Of course. Ten years had passed, my friends call me Odysseus—what can I say? The same Inez, unchanged.

We talked later in the park which was next to the campus. I heard lamentations and reproach. She blamed me for having deflowered her and then having ditched her. I began to hastily search my memory for details of deflowering—couldn’t find

any, but it was already too late. The moment had slipped away. *All right. Whatever you say. But how is it possible to lie like that, looking straight into my eyes? That's crazy.*

Let me tell you this, sweet Inez. As my wife, you wouldn't have liked so much to wander with me across the globe, live in garages, wash clothes out the door in icy water, go pee into the dark shadow of woods, cook over an open fire, sweat in the withering tropical heat, feel lonely for years. You would've left Tashkent the very next day after your arrival. You have to thank yourself in a big way for having not married me. Your husband is a distinguished man, just the one you always dreamed of. Your wannabe is right here with you. My sincere congratulations. Now, look at me. I am nobody. A former army officer. You never needed me.

I didn't tell her any of this. She wouldn't understand. Inez and I belonged to two non-overlapping magisteria. Our story is just their chance encounter for a very short moment. It should never have happened.

Many years have passed. In his last letter to me, Boris Knyazewski, her husband, complained that Inez was having pain in her legs. There wasn't a word for me from Inez in that letter.

Poor Inez. Is she still alive? I hope she is. A beautiful girl, my fiancée— *We both are so old now. Did I love you? I don't know. Maybe I did. We both were young, which meant nothing was for sure. We will never meet again. Can you forgive me? Please.*

Twenty Years Later

I came to see Jana. She still lived in her second-floor apartment at 3 Ferentz List Street where so long time ago we used to sit on a couch, cuddling over a book written in English.

She introduced me to her teenage son Sergei. He did archery and was very good at it. I said that Sergei had the eyes of his father, Igor Lavrichenko. Something had to be said. Jana seemed to be not listening.

We returned to the kitchen. She was cutting into small pieces a lump of something that looked like fatback. I asked what it was.

“Aged *salo*,” she explained. “Gives special flavor to soup.”

We both were silent for a moment.

“You don’t want to ask me about anything,” I said.

“You are here. Good enough for me,” Jana said.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

Tuesday, February 6, 2018

We saw each other two more times at some noisy parties and didn't talk much, if at all.

Soon after my return to Odessa, there was a letter from her.

LSK,

I'll be in Odessa August 4-15. In case you would like to see me and take me sightseeing, leave a note at the Main Post Office—where and when we may meet. Maybe, you would like me to come and see your kids and your wife—how would she like the idea of having a drink to the get-together of two old friends?

You have a job, bon ami? Can you give me your phone number?

Your old buddy

PS Are you still engaged in poetry? Or is it far in the past?

Do you remember "I met you—out of the blue" or "The moment the day is gone with its bright sunset" or "And now again we witness this together" or "No one will ever know. To be so dopy" or "His Highness King" and, of course, "Long live RT-12!"

Please answer soon so I get your word by August 4 and be sure I'll see you.

Jana came and saw where I lived. Am I still writing poetry?—she repeated the question from her letter. I didn't want to pretend otherwise, showed her some lines.

"I like your early poems more," she said.

Then she recited my childish verses which I'd junked long time ago, obliterated them from my memory forever. I listened and didn't recognize my own writings. Someone else, untroubled, buoyant, courageous, had written this. I felt ashamed for my present self, for my meagerness, mediocrity.

After some silence, there came a second letter from her.

LSK,

Hi bon ami,

It's a big pity I wasn't able to come and see you again—because of my malaise, we had to leave the very next morning. Two weeks later, I was in Moscow for a management training course. And here I am, writing to you.

I have interesting friends here—chief editor of the Fine Art magazine, some well-known artists. I visited an exhibition of young artists and saw some pictures by your friend Lucien Dulfan—Early Morning and Agreement on Board a Ship—if I'm not mistaken. I hope you will introduce me to him during my next visit to Odessa. I'm writing a book about artists and looking forward to talking with him. I'm planning to come and have a tour of Odessa Opera House and then leave on Sunday so I could see you and talk about our literary business.

Enough for now. Best regards to Nina and your lovely children.

Me

Attached to the letter was a vertical half of a grid sheet of paper with a poem dated September 6, 1954. The cursive of a yesterday's school-girl, I remember it well.

On the back side of it, the lines were rewritten with a firm hand of a grown-up person, with a preceding statement,

Twenty years later, nothing has changed.

*I saw you in my dream—
The moonlight on the flowers, and in the garden
just you and me.*

*I feel your warm embrace,
Your kiss so sweet, my dream so real, so vivid.
Yes, you are mine.*

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

*Awake or in my sleep
I see your face, your eyes as you are looking.
I love you so.*

*Or—is it just a dream?
This little crazy story of two lovers,
can it be real?*

Sept. 11, 1972

What a strange perpetuity, don't you agree?

That was her last letter to me. Why was I so unobservant? Why didn't her mentioning of *malaise* alert me? Why was this poem, rewritten and dated twice, also put into the envelope?

The sad news about her death came to me years later. Then I realized that Jana had just hated the thought that this priceless evidence of our mutual affection would forever vanish along with her life. But although I didn't hear her, I still listened to her—I did save the poem.

Wandering in Internet, I came across an Irish song “Oh, Danny boy.” A wave of deep sorrow came over me when I listened to Rebecca Watson's singing.

*Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From glen to glen, and down the mountain side.
The summer's gone, and all the roses falling,
It's you, it's you must go, and I must bide.*

I began to render the lines into Russian. In tears, I was thinking of Jana. I was telling her in the words of this song that I have come and that I love her.

Nina

Wednesday, February 7, 2018

We Could Have Dated

Nina was born on a Russian stove bed. Her fingers had no nails. She went limp in her mother's arms. She was so weak.

"The baby won't survive," grandmother Maria said.

Ivan Leikin set out to town to get his newborn daughter registered. It was April. The spring thaws turned roads into a quagmire. He was getting stuck in mud. While crossing a creek, he slipped and fell into icy water.

Now he stood, shaking, before the registrar, his clothes soaked and heavy. He called the name Nina, although another name had been agreed upon in the family, which he forgot.

Nina's place of birth was the Engels farm which was a cluster of villages in Penza region—Vasilievka, Bessonovka, Grabovo. She lived there from the time of her birth on April 8,

1941, till the fall of 1944 when the family moved to Tashkent. During the years 1941-1942, I was in Penza which was pretty close to where Nina was born. It was the shortest distance between us ever. *We could have started dating then. No?*

The Engels farm produced ethanol spirits. The workers were paid with spirits. The spirits were traded for food and clothes—so people were able to go on living.

Grandfather Greg had a coffer where among a few worthless curiosities he kept a small bottle of spirits. Maria waited for him to take a nap, then she picked the key from his pocket, opened the coffer, and had a little jolt from the bottle.

Thursday, February 8, 2018

Mukorvaria Palax

Grandparents Greg and Maria spoke Mordvinic, and Nina remembered a few words. At moments of a disgruntled state of mind, grandmother Maria would say to her husband, *Mukorvaria palax—Nettle to your ass.*

There are two Mordvinian ethnic groups and languages—Erzia and Moksha. Our friend Dima Proshkin, an artist, has a Mordvinian father who lives in Russia and sometimes comes to Chattanooga to visit his son. Nina had a chance to talk to him once, and they exchanged a few disconnected words in Mordvinic. It turned out that the few words Nina remembered were Erzian. So, Greg and Maria were Erzia.

Nina's father Ivan played accordion. Paulina, his wife, had a beautiful voice. No village wedding was considered to be up to the mark if they were not among the guests. Ivan loved his musical instrument and was indifferent to alcohol. In 1941, when the war broke out, a big seeing-off for recruits took place in a faraway village. Paulina refused to go—Nina was only three months old. But Ivan insisted.

“Let’s go, Paulina. It could be the last time,” he said wiping a tear off his cheek.

Clapping, Slapping, and Hopping

Ivan Leikin had gone to war. Paulina continued to live with her parents-in-law, Greg and Maria, and her two children. Nina was still a baby; her brother Victor was four years old. When Nina learned to walk and then speak, she began to feel like she had to have a father.

“Mom, let Bibi live with us. I’ll call him Daddy,” she said.

Bibi was a village idiot.

There was another halfwit in the village, whose name was Anchutka. She was unable to dress herself; hated to deal with buttons. Everything she was wearing looked crumpled, twisted, or shrunk to a smaller size.

“Masha, look. This blouse on me isn’t mine. Too tight,” she complained to Maria.

Anchutka got hysterical witnessing a miracle as Maria rebuttoned her blouse.

Anchutka visited the village Orthodox church and made a comment on that.

“There was some clapping at first,” she said, “and then there was slapping and hopping.”

Men Were Stronger

There were German POWs around, young, looking like teenagers. They had been pushed out of cattle boxcars near the village and left there to die. They had nothing to eat and no place to live in. Maria let them sleep in the barn and gave them bread and potato. They all died anyway.

Ivan Leikin was listed as missing in action. His brother Alexander was taken POW. Their father Greg Leikin was

called to the Recruiting Center and told that since his son Alexander had not killed himself before being captured by Germans, he was now listed as a traitor. By law, the family of a traitor had to be evicted. Back home, when asked what happened, Greg collapsed and died instantaneously.

Nina was three years old—she remembered the eviction. The police were throwing things out of the barracks as the women tried to bring them back. The men were stronger and quicker—soon, the women and children found themselves under the open sky.

*Oh Russia, so spacious, so beautiful,
so worthy, and so much loved.*

People in the village knew the rules. Nobody gave them shelter. Eventually, the family moved into an abandoned dovecote. Nina remembers the frightening feeling she had. The rain was pelting down through the wide openings in the roof. Huge treetops were swaying up there in the darkness, and the sighing of the wind was ominous.

Peace and Harmony

There were three brothers Leikin. The elder, Dmitri, had a war-time exemption on recruiting. As a skillful turner, he had been assigned a job at an aircraft repair plant in Tashkent.

In 1944, Dmitri returned to the village to take his mother home, but Maria refused to leave without her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren. So, Dmitri took them all.

There was a fierce fight at the train station. The transit box-cars were packed with war refugees—outsiders didn't have a slightest chance to get in. Using a superhuman force, Dmitri pushed away a man at the door and, swearing like hell, broke

into the car, dragging behind him the family and baggage.

The train jerked forward and was now moving. Slowly, wild shouts subsided—people began to calm down. Dmitri yanked the cloth stopple out of the big bottle of spirits; glasses popped up—and peace and harmony came into all hearts.

In 1944, I was in Lazorki, shepherding the cow. Several years later, I moved even farther to the extreme western borders of the country. It was the largest distance between us ever.

Friday, February 9, 2018

To Destroy a Man

In the first days of German invasion into Russia in 1941, millions of Russian troops were taken POWs or scattered across the western provinces. Those who had not been captured by Germans were hiding in woods or found shelter in faraway villages. After the Red Army returned in 1944, they were recruited again.

In 1944, Ivan Leikin came to surface and was recruited to the army second time. In his letter to Paulina, he wrote, “We are advancing toward Konigsberg. It is going to be a bloody battle.” That was his last letter. Then, silence.

Paulina never received an official death notice. When in 1963 I sent a request to the Defense Ministry, a note came stating that private Ivan Leikin had been killed in action on October 17, 1944, and buried in the village of Rogaiushcha, Lithuania. I tried to verify the location. No such village was to be found on maps. I made further enquiries—nothing.

Alexander, the third brother, was liberated from a German concentration camp at the end of the war and then sent to a Siberian labor camp along with many other Russian POWs. The hardships he’d gone through made his mind unbalanced, and for some time he was a patient a psychiatric hospital in

Novosibirsk. In 1950, he seemingly recovered and was sent to Tashkent to his brother Dmitri. His stay with his brother was neither long nor happy. He began to show recurrences of insanity and was eventually sent back to Novosibirsk. On his way there, he vanished without a trace forever.

In fact, there had been no recurrences. It was a trick orchestrated by Dmitri's wife Agashka. Her little brain inspired her to throw bread to the garbage can and then point her finger at Alexander. This stupid lie was enough to destroy the man.

Katerina Morozova

Soon after the family arrived in Tashkent, Nina's grandmother Maria died—and again Agashka had a lot to do with it.

Even before all these events took place, Paulina's mother Katerina Morozova had, for the purpose of survival, come to Uzbekistan, where she was hired by the head of an Uzbek family of multiple children to serve as a cook and caretaker. The man was a petty soviet official. One day, Katerina noticed a mujahid cavalry detachment coming down from a distant hill. She ran to warn her master, then hid him in a small cellar under the outdoor cookstove. Being questioned by the armed men, she told them that her master had been away in town and that the time of his return was unknown to her. The mujahids took the food they could find and left without killing anyone.

It happened when she was planning to leave for Tashkent to join her family. The master begged her to stay—she refused.

Katerina Morozova died in January 1962. In the coffin, she lay in Nina's school uniform as was her will. Because of the funeral arrangements, Nina missed the date, and I had to go and find her second time.

Katerina was a person of her own sense of humor. She tended to use words of a dim, forgotten, or queer and mysteri-

ous meaning.

“Looks like an *abhaiski* soldier,” she would say seeing a person in quirky clothes.

There is no such word as *abhaiski* in the Russian language. For a crazy person, she came up with another non-existent word, *omeznoi* which is just a word into itself.

Paulina was her only child with her husband, Philip Glazkov. In 1916, Philip came home for a short leave from war, caught typhus, and died.

“Katya, please don’t cook pancakes in my remembrance,” were his last words.

“He didn’t like pancakes,” she explained to Nina.

Katerina never married again.

Robbery

She was born into a family of wealthy farmers, who owned a Zinger sewing machine and a fur coat made by Katerina’s own hands. The family were dispossessed of their property and sent to Siberia. Their house was ravaged by the revolutionaries. What they were looking for in the first place was the sewing machine. They did not find it because it was not there. It was with the neighboring woman who’d just finished sewing and was on her way to return it. Katerina saw the woman coming and waved her off. This was how the sewing machine was saved. Yet, the cover happened to be in the house and was successfully confiscated. Next day, a drunk revolutionary girl was flaunting Katya’s fur coat around the village.

Katerina had four brothers. Three of them and both parents had perished in Siberia. Peter Morozov was the only one who had survived. Nina once took me to visit him in his out-of-town house in Tashkent. I remember his tall figure, kind look—and rich grapevines on the backyard pergola.

Sunday, February 10, 2018

A Box of Nails

The family of refugees, derelicts, traitors, outcasts—whatever they really were—took up residence in the communal kitchen. The next-door neighbor Shushunova, with her primus stove, had been kicked out to the hall by Dmitri. Her reaction was predictable.

“Look, Paulina,” she said. “With your kids around, I can’t prevent scald accidents.”

Dmitri was a kindhearted man with a proletarian twist in his character. The idea of what an amazingly good man he was struck him each time he saw Paulina.

“For what I’ve done for you, Paulina, you should wash my feet and drink the slops,” he would say.

He was a proud father of two daughters. The elder, Marusya, stole a box of nails the first day she got a job as an assistant manager at a construction site.

“You may think my daughters are worthless,” Dmitri told Paulina. “They are not. See that box of nails?”

Yes, he was a good father and uncle. He repeatedly promised the children to take them to the Zoo. He did this so many times that, finally, the day came when it was now or never.

“Let’s go,” he said.

The company of four kids and a man in the lead were walking past Tezikov market. Three winos stood by a beer bar. The one wearing an unbuttoned shirt with nothing under was his coworker.

“Dmitri, come over,” he called. “Grab a beer.”

It was a sweltering hot day. Dmitri, who had been in a gloomy mood caused by a dumb promise, got electrified.

“Wait for me right here,” he said to the kids. “I’ll be back in just a minute.”

He returned about an hour later, disheveled and cheerful. The adventure got a fresh start. There was an *aryk* (small earthen aqueduct) on their way. Dmitri tried to leap over, slipped, and fell into water. It took the kids quite a bit to drag him out. He was finally delivered, caked in mud, to Agatha. The kids were whimpering. They had no doubt they deserved to be punished for what they had done.

Sunday, February 11, 2018

The Turner's Wife

Dmitri's wife Agatha, commonly called Agashka, being a determined woman, never had scruples about anything. In her conception of life, stealing, lying, deceiving, cheating, and never caring a shit about anything were good things. Publicly, she took pride in her husband. As a turner, he elevated her social status, and that was exactly why he was her husband.

Paulina bought a new shopping bag, which, of course, was an act of invasion into Agatha's personal space.

"Look at her," she said. "Having a new bag. Isn't that something?"

"My bag is no different from yours. You have a problem with that?" Paulina protested.

"You can't make comparisons," said Agatha. "I'm a turner's wife."

She despised her husband, called him contemptuously Yepishka—a nickname for losers—didn't even care much about cooking a decent meal for him. One time, at dinner, he dared to ask for another egg—and got lectured.

"Ain't you stuffed up yet?" she grumbled. "Look at your big middle, Yepishka."

On hearing this statement of blatant disrespect, the hard-working man went berserk. He pulled off the window curtain

and tore it to small pieces. This was not a big loss though—he knew he had to keep his rage within a certain limit of destruction. Agatha got a little bit of collateral damage anyway—an ornamental black eye.

Paulina's job was a hospital orderly, which meant the lowest wage in the country, too small even for one person. Nina and her brother Victor were hungry all through their childhood. The best festivity meal in the family was boiled potato, which was an everyday meal, too.

Shushunova, angry at herself, threw a lump of ruined dough into the garbage can. Paulina fished it out, washed and baked. It turned into a memorable celebration—real buns and flat cakes made of real dough.

In the morning, before going to work, Paulina used to leave two pieces of stone sugar for Nina and Victor. But when they got up, the sugar was gone. What was going on?

“How would I know?” was Agatha's answer.

She didn't even try to conceal her hatred toward the new family of relatives. In passing, she would slap a wet rag across Nina's face.

“Enough of your gawking.”

Agatha's kitchen table was the only place Nina could do her homework on. Lucky day, her workbook did not get a splash of something wet or bloody upon its pages.

A neighboring family were going to move out. To freshen up their beddings, they hung them for a night over the balcony handrails. In the morning, they asked Agatha if she had seen anything suspicious because the blanket was missing.

“Haven't seen anything,” she said.

“Why are you lying?” Paulina asked her.

Agatha didn't hesitate.

“They are moving out anyway,” she said. “I couldn't resist.

The blanket is so pretty.”

Agatha wanted to be looked upon as a good housewife, a caring mother, and all the rest of it. Neighboring women were discussing pie recipes—Agatha broke in, said she’d cooked tons of pies yesterday and there was still a big leftover for the kids today.

“Why are you lying?” Paulina asked her.

To easy questions, Agatha always had an easy answer.

“Big deal. Am I not as good in cooking as they are?” she said without even thinking.

Soon after the arrival of the new family from Russia, Agatha committed the worst evil act in her life—she physically abused her mother-in-law. Because of that Maria moved out. She found protection in a family of nonrelatives, not for long though. She soon got seriously ill and was taken to hospital. Paulina continued to look after her all this time.

Maria loved her daughter-in-law. She would always find a befitting moment to mention how beautiful Paulina was—which, of course, was true.

Maria died in hospital in 1945.

The White Fridge

Nina told me about kind, caring, big-hearted people she knew.

Raisa Belousova, one of the two guests at our wedding, was the head of the medical lab at the Airflot hospital, where Paulina also worked. She bought fancy shoes for Nina in a Moscow department store. The first day Nina wore them, some punks at school slashed them with a razor.

Raisa Belousova was a war veteran. When after the war she came back home, her husband had been already married to another woman. For old times’ sake, he turned the room where

they lived into two by building a wall and cut another entrance door for his former wife.

There was also the Ivanovs couple, Nina, who was a nurse at the Airflot hospital, and Valentin, her husband, an Airflot pilot. They helped Paulina in many ways, especially in the matter of nourishment of her children.

Nina Ivanova was sixteen when she joined a guerilla detachment fighting against Germans in Belarus. Her parents were killed by the invaders in front of her eyes.

Poverty is a denigrating thing. The more worthy of admiration is a person who tries to rise out of it, shake off the ugly complexes of being forever at a disadvantage.

Nina put on the only dress she had and went to the Airflot agency to apply for a job. The flight attendant manager Nelly Nikiforova, a spunky young woman of a big heart, looked up from a mystery novel she was reading.

“We are not hiring,” she said.

Nina turned around and walked away. Nikiforova followed her with thoughtful eye. Then she made a decision.

“Bring the girl back,” she called to her assistant.

This is how Nina got her job as a flight attendant, which meant plenty of independence.

* * *

When I first entered the room where Nina lived with her mother and brother, I walked over right to the white fridge, which looked grossly out of place. The thing—things meant a lot in life at that time—told me that someone in this family was fighting poverty and that that someone was Nina. I hugged the fridge, seeing in it a symbol of a noble, ambitious character.

She Took It Away

Thursday, February 15, 2018

Thank You, Guys

I asked myself if my life was worth anything. Thoughtless sitting on my hands for so many years had brought me to a dead end. Something had to be done.

Start with poetry. From zero. Write a full book of poems. Finish it in a year's time. You had been doing things like that when you were just a kid. Do it now. Make the cut.

A year passed. I went to Yuri Mikhailik who, I believed, was the most talented poet in Odessa. He seemed to like what I showed him, memorized some of it right away but said there was not a chance the book would ever be published. First, he

said, it looked like it was written by a man of intelligence, which would be taken as an offense. Second, the communist party was not even once mentioned—which was a crime. Third, an outsider would never be recognized by the literary mafia.

However, he recommended me to Derevyanko, chief editor of the *Evening Odessa* newspaper. Derevyanko greeted me from behind his desk, asked how I was doing, and said that *there's no way you can do everything you can do*. After that I left. A minute later, Mikhailik came out.

“Everything’s fine,” he said. “You’ll come up in tomorrow’s issue.”

Not long before our visit, Derevyanko had authorized the publication of a highly patriotic poem. Several days later, the Jewish author of that poem emigrated to Israel. It began to look like the chief editor had been promoting traitors. One more poem of that kind—and his career was finished. Yuri had to prove I was not a Jew. And the best proof was, of course, face recognition. Derevyanko wanted to see my physiognomy.

And yet, I made a stupid decision to go all the way down the line—I sent my poems to the mafia. The answer was signed by the astronaut Shonin’s wife. The ignorant woman wrote about the lack of patriotism and poor knowledge of grammar. That was my last try.

It beats me why they were so adamantly against the publication of some little, unimportant book by a pathetic wreck—why not let him enjoy a moment of bliss in his misery. But No. No way. Never. Ever.

On the other hand, however, thank you so much, guys. You liberated me from a dopy commitment to waste my time. I don’t even know why I had gone into that kind of crap. Why am I still keeping those worthless versifications? Maybe because they are so absurdly memorable as witnesses of a futile attempt

to make my life more interesting.

Friday, February 16, 2018

Lucien Dulfan

In all the years of my life in Odessa, I never met a person whom I would like to open my heart to, speak freely with. The only thing Yuri Mikhailik and I had in common was poetry—any deviation from that subject would bring us into a state of stupor. Yet, he was the one who introduced me to an unusual person.

One day, I found myself in a new art store on Kathrine the Great Street. One small painting drew my attention. On it was a musketeer with his back turned to the viewer. He wore a feather plumage hat and was looking into the sea bay. On the horizon there was a sail ship. The ship was moving away with someone on board who had broken the musketeer's heart—or whatever. I bought the picture.

A few days later, Yuri took me to a cellar on Lermontov Lane, which was the studio of Lucien Dulfan, the creator of the painting. Then he brought Lucien to my home where, upon seeing his picture on the wall, Lucien got real high. He ran out to the edge of the Langeron cliff, and fired a flare gun. This is no exaggeration.

Lucien likes people around. But while conversing with him, it is crucial to be on guard when he starts telling stories about his countless friends who are absolutely brilliant in everything they do. One story goes after another, each splitting into several unrelated tales. The chain reaction goes on and on until it eventually turns into a stupefying mess with no point of arrival to be seen.

Lucien is also the author of small-scale phantasmagorical stories. The odd thing is he doesn't care a bit about grammar,

punctuation, and all other nice and easy laws and rules of the art of letters. He himself is just like that—he can't wait.

Lucien wants you to believe that he is a freak. He creates grotesque situations and then makes sure they float around as legends. At the same time, he is ingenuous and apparently ignorant about the fact that his childish trickery is not an enigma to anyone. On the day we first met, he pulled up his pants legs and exposed the mismatched socks—the sign of a genius. I don't care what kind of games he plays. I like him for who he really is—an artist.

In old times, in Odessa, he would come over, randomly, and poke his head in through the window.

“Momka, can I have my leftover?” he would ask Nina.

Once he invited us to join him for a bite to eat baked goose of his own cooking. He tore up the bird's body with his bare hands and gave out the best lumps to the most respected guests.

In America I occasionally sing praises to his name in humorous epigrams, which sends my memory to the good old days when I had been doing the same thing. Lucien lives in New York with his wife Dina, who is a pianist.

Saturday, February 17, 2018

Get the Hell out of Here!

In Odessa, Nina began to look for a job. A construction firm needed an accountant, and Nina applied for the position. But when the secretary Galina wanted to introduce her officially, the boss went into frenzy.

“Who is this?” he yelled. “Get the hell out of here!”

“Don't panic. The sweet man is just a little inebriated,” Galina explained calmly. “Come tomorrow.”

When next morning tall, slim, blond Nina entered the office, she was heartily greeted by a short man wearing small

friendly eyes and rosy cheeks on a happy face.

“Welcome,” he said in an oily voice. “My pleasure.”

Nina didn’t stay there long, though. Her next job was at a government economic planning agency where she met Tonya Grigorieva, a World War Two veteran. Tonya was eighteen when she was trained as an anti-aircraft artillery fighter. To avoid the danger of being raped, she became the girlfriend of a Georgian lieutenant with whom she gave birth to two boys and a girl, all three exceptionally beautiful.

Tonya lived round the corner on Lermontov Lane, and we sometimes visited each other to talk over a bottle of cognac. Her younger son came from Saint Petersburg and noticed a framed portrait of Stalin on her bed stand.

“Take it away, Mom,” he said. “Please.”

She took it away.

The Procurator of Judea

When Paulina first saw her grandson Constantin, her heart melted, her eyes lit up. She realized that her life was now going to have sense, that she still had so much love to give.

The next morning after our arrival, Constantin walked out to the yard, his hands clasped behind his back. He was wearing a red T-shirt and blue shorts; his sandals had golden buckles. He looked like a live mini copy of the procurator of Judea.

“Who is this little boy?” the neighbors were wondering.

The List of Names

After my return to Odessa, I went through a lengthy period of gray existence marked by the complete lack of hope to find logic in anything. My interest in people was still there, but I couldn’t understand them anymore.

For years, I’d been the academic administrator at the

Odessa State Language School. I liked my job where the sovok madness was minimal.

However, by the end of the 1970s, the pressure began. KGB goons came, browsed through the students' files, and wound up with a secret list of names. This frightened the School director Arkadi Martyniuk so much his health quickly deteriorated into a very bad state. Actually, he'd had a history of epileptic seizures—now it escalated to dangerous suicidal tendencies. He resigned.

I was called to the Department of Education where they showed me the list of Jewish students who were targeted for dismissal. I was supposed to make a choice—do what I was told or watch the School going down the drain. I decided to risk it, said that the students would stay.

Then came the consequences.

A Perfect Sovok

It was the time when the country's social system couldn't make sense anymore and an increasing number of persons prone to lunacy began to come to the surface.

The School got a new director named Vladimir Kurbatov. Waldemar, as I called him, went bonkers over the splendors of the administrative power right away. The first thing he wanted to obtain from his new job was a place in *nomenklatura*, a privileged group of highly positioned Soviet bureaucrats. There was no way he could get it. As a Russian saying goes, his snout didn't fit the piggery.

Waldemar somehow obtained—highly likely stole—a lapel pin badge of the Supreme Council Deputy and wore it at airports, train stations, department stores, and elsewhere to show his superiority over the crowd of ordinary people.

He never answered the phone. He instructed the secretary

Lydia to tell callers that at this very moment the director was busy discussing some matters of importance with the city council at the mayor's office. If someone still insisted on personal interview, he would say, "Come right now," leave the office and lock the door behind.

When Waldemar had been a university student, his English professor Bella Lebedinski used to give him flunking grades. Now, to his greatest delight, he discovered her among the School faculty. He began to visit her classes, day after day, scribbling nonsensical remarks in his notebook about her imaginary flaws. He won, eventually. Bella resigned.

His knowledge of English didn't improve since the F's Bella had been giving him. Nevertheless, he proudly demonstrated to the faculty his educational doctrine of four positions.

First. Every statement the teacher makes should bear a communist idea.

Second. A good teacher shouldn't necessarily be a well-informed specialist (evidently meaning himself).

Third. The students do not need English. Teach them Russian instead.

Fourth. The teacher must keep a file of every student.

Lydia Lugovtseva couldn't resist.

"Are we a KGB department?" she cried out.

When I told him to stop the idiocy, he threatened me with dismissal. On that, I had certain words with him in my good old army expletives. He turned out to be a coward and never talked to me like that again.

Eventually, Waldemar flipped out. He ran away right from the School office. He was being searched for, found, got loose again, and then disappeared.

A Way of Thinking

Sunday, February 18, 2018

Plan B

As an academic administrator, I had twelve hours of class teaching a week—not much, but it still was a taxing burden. It became obvious to me that I was not a natural born teacher. To ease it, I developed my own technique and then typed on my Erica typewriter fifteen copies of the workbook.

It began with a short dynamic narrative taken from British or American newspapers and magazines, and a miniature story by James Thurber—this went along with word games, mad libs, interviews, press conferences, court trials, writing letters, singing rock operas and other such things.

Usually, it was a group of 8-10 students, mostly Jews who

were about to emigrate. Lucien was one of them. He would come late and peep through the window. I led classes at home.

“Jews, huh?” he would shout out. “Here’s one more.”

I Plead Guilty

In the late 1980s, *perestroika*—political rebuilding—shattered the country.

Sergei Sannikov, a pastor of the Baptist church in Odessa, approached me with an unusual request to translate, into Russian, American study materials on the Bible book of Jeremiah. He’d probably heard something about me. I gave him my consent as an ordinary thing. It was strange I did not think first. I just went with my instinct. On parting, he invited me to his church.

Right by that time, all my hopes and expectations had been gone. My will, my strength diminished to the point where I was not able to use them efficiently anymore—I was totally drained—I was ashamed of my own image in the mirror—I became a moral bankrupt, the glorious author of my own out-and-out failure. As a last hope, I heard Mowgli saying in a voice-over, *Is the world really such an empty place? Look closer.*

At the church, I met simple, seemingly undereducated people who spoke broken Russian. But I felt a true sense of belonging to them. My troubles and torments suddenly became meaningless. I crashed on my knees and did my penance. I pleaded guilty. *A wretch like me.*

Tuesday, February 27, 2018

It is warm outside; the trees are blooming. Mexican workers trim the lawns across the Village of Ashwood, spreading mulch around trees and shrubbery. The air has a dreamy smell of freshly shredded bark. It feels good.

The Year of Grace

Sannikov decided to start a Baptist Seminary and invited me to be a part of it. I was translating various biblical study materials, lecturing on Jan Komenski, a medieval philosopher and pedagogue—that was fun—teaching English, interpreting sermons delivered by American pastors. Everything was new to me—new surroundings, new talk, new people—it beguiled me. The year of grace 1989 would be memorable.

Sannikov wasn't happy about my idea to emigrate. To keep me at the Seminary just in case would've been a much better option. But his thought could be less practical, more religious. I don't know. Anyway, when later in America I was working on *The New Testament Scriptures*, the Seminary issued a statement that recommended to ban the publication. *How could I dare!* But by that time Sannikov and I had already found ourselves disconnected from each other.

Dealing with an Excessive Spirituality

On the outskirts of Odessa, in the house of a Baptist believer, whose name was Radziewski, a soul saving heart-to-heart was taking place. The small room was packed with guests who were sharing their spiritual experiences. As I heard them spilling their guts to total strangers, an uneasy feeling began to worry me.

It was getting stuffy, and I excused myself for a minute. Radziewski escorted me across the kitchen garden all the way to the privy. I stepped inside. Radziewski turned on the regular visitor's automatism, slammed the door, and bolted it in the mode of finality—I heard the clank from the outside. I hollered, "Hey!" but he was already treading away.

As I was taking a whizz, my brain began to burn in a hell of

fire. Having finished, I shook the door, testing it for strength, made a wide step back and with the war cry “What the hell!” kicked the damn thing out. This scared off the remaining flurry of spiritual butterflies, and I entered the house in a cheerful state of mind.

On Odessa Vernacular

Like all decent people on the planet, the citizens of Odessa are not deprived of the sense of humor. The dialogue below took place at the Privoz market over eggplants—*blues* in the local vernacular—displayed on a counter.

“Seems like your blues look kind of flabby,” Nina said.

The seller, a middle-aged woman, smiled.

“Don’t we both look a little that way, too, sweetie?” she said.

The attitude changes radically if the person behind the counter is government. Mom was buying tomatoes from a state-owned street vendor. She didn’t want rotten vegetables and put them aside, one by one, saying, “This one isn’t good.” A line of rage suddenly landed on the saleswoman’s blank face. She grabbed the crate loaded with tomatoes and smashed it against the pavement. She also uttered a few specific words defining the situation.

The lingo of the citizens of Odessa reflects their everyday life in a way that looks like a twisted reality.

They are not kidding; they just think that way. They invent shocking adages like, for instance, this one—*Disgrace doesn’t kill*. Isn’t that nice? A similar phrase, *Smoke burns your eyes, shame doesn’t*, came from another place, Russia, though. It seemed like people in Odessa were purposefully ruining their language. Of course, I knew where things really stood, but sometimes it was hard to believe in seriousness of all this.

A Visit to Dacha

On a hot summer day, Nina and I set out to Yuri Mikhailik's dacha, as invited. We didn't know that in the local vernacular a spoken invitation is just a demonstration of good manners, no more than that. Now we quite unexpectedly barged into Yuri's dacha at the Sixteenth Station of Great Fountain.

Yuri was sitting under a tree at an empty planed-board table. A bit cornerwise, his wife, Era, straddled a stool, scratching out the remnants of yesterday's buckwheat kasha from the bottom of a deep saucepan.

"Do we have at least any leftover?" Yuri asked her.

"Just finishing." Era said honestly.

"Drinks?"

"Last seen yesterday."

We put a bottle of champagne on the table. Era abandoned the excavation, brought four glasses, and the wine was poured out. We shared with each other our admiration of "Scumbria in Tomato Sauce," ironic rhymes by Polish poet Galchynski. Then Yuri said that Akhmatova's poems "are reeking of sex." I was not sure about that, said nothing. Soon after that we left.

Yuri is a genuine poet. His "Gamla," for example, is a masterpiece. He emigrated to Australia and under strikingly different circumstances continues to write good stuff as usual.

No Need To Go Anywhere

Diplomatic Corps

The Head of the Diplomatic Agency in Odessa was Alexei Levchenko, a hard-liner and a World War Two veteran. Nina was his secretary.

Levchenko replaced the agency's modern furniture and other big and small pieces of office decor with cheap, shabby stuff of his own. Delicacies like cognac, coffee, chocolate, and red caviar were privatized by him as well. The three consuls in Odessa representing Bulgaria, Cuba, and India had traditional sweet tea and were served with teaspoons to stir the sugar.

Levchenko was sent to retirement the day he reached the service-age limit. He got angry, said he was badly mistreated, and threatened to write an unmasking memoir—which he never did since he had neither proper writing abilities nor anything significant to tell.

He was replaced by a young bureaucrat Vasili Shevchenko, who had a clear tendency for a more progressive thinking—Tanya Golikova, an agency’s employee and our good friend, argued that in case of anything, he would eat up his party card and say he’d never been a communist—but practiced the same addiction to using his position for personal gain.

Unfortunately for him, the country began to rebuild itself politically and ethically. As the process of rebuilding went on, his name was rather pointedly mentioned in a local newspaper.

“But to no avail did he pretend to be an innocent elementary schooler,” the article read.

The media attack did not affect him much, though. He had a good supply of survival skills and did maintain his position as the Head of the Diplomatic Agency. Attaboy!

Halva

The only professional as well as knowledgeable diplomat at the agency was Ghena Odaryuk, who was also a glutton. Tanya Golikova dubbed him Cleaner for his readiness to eat up the leftovers right after the table had been abandoned. According to Ghena’s own words, he was able to polish off a full bucket of food at a time.

Nina brought a piece of halva leftover in a customary newspaper wrapping. Ghena unwrapped the package, took a bite, and invited the coworker Ludmila Neverova to join him. Entered Levchenko, saw the two leaning over a lump of something indescribable on a crumpled, oily newspaper, and crinkled his nose in disgust.

Ghena had an insatiable desire to learn languages. He knew quite a number of them, mostly for the sake of making a collection.

He Won't Sign It

As we were getting ready to leave the country, Vasili's progressive thinking helped us complete the bureaucratic paperwork sooner and much easier than was expected. We'd had an important signature from Sasha Danilov, a young Rebuilding sympathizer, who'd just been appointed to a high position in the City Council. But we still needed one more signature from Vasili.

"He won't sign it. He won't sign it," clucked Lyudmila Neverova, who also had a nickname Mother Hen.

The old hard-liner Levchenko wouldn't have signed it for a hundred years, but Vasili did. He signed it not because Nina slapped onto his desk a luxurious volume of a rare edition of the Bible but simply out of his progressive thinking. I prefer to see it at this angle.

The Garrison Canteen

Ghena Odaryuk had always wanted to be a diplomat. After school and then after two years of mandatory service in the army, he applied for Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). He knew that MGIMO students were exclusively sons and daughters of high-ranking bureaucrats and that, as an ordinary guy, he didn't have a chance. He kept applying anyway. On the fourth try, the admission was finally granted.

He was an excellent and promising student. He learned the languages, quickly got to grips with the crafty diplomatic disciplines, was a devoted communist—but still remained an outsider. After graduation, he was given an insignificant position at the Russian Embassy in Indonesia where the KGB immediately used him as a sacred offering in a situation when a certain

Russian agent was being arrested at Jakarta airport. This annihilated his diplomatic career overseas for good.

Ghena had a dream of being the father of a big family. Knowing this, Nina would give him a children's book on his birthdays. Already in his forties, he showed no sign of urgency, though. Dates were often being rejected because they were either indifferent to his culinary preferences or failed to be a good cook or refused to get up early to go get milk from the nearby store. Tanya Golikova asked him once if he'd taken his date out to a restaurant.

"No," Ghena said. "She eats too much. The garrison canteen has fitted her just right."

Friday, March 2, 2018

Tanya Golikova

Our friend whip-smart Tanya Golikova professed a realistic philosophy. Her reaction to the insane system we all lived in was a flow of cynical quips. Here are some of them.

Her political views. *I don't care whether it is fascism or communism. What I really care about is a bottle of champagne, a cigarette, and a cup of coffee.*

Her guideline. *After reaching forty, do not resist your temptations—give way to each and every one of your sweet quirks.*

Her standpoint. *I accept romance only if it is accompanied by a substantial material support. The ideal husband would be a blind, deaf, and mute merchant ship's master.*

Tanya was a chain-smoker. She once remarked that a vague feeling of discomfort begins to worry her the moment her cigarette is coming to be half-smoked.

She had a boyfriend, Misha Mannikov, a doctor, who loved her no matter what. In my view, Misha's exterior was kind of weird; he never smiled, but his seriousness raised doubts as to

his real intentions—he could be kidding all along. Tanya had a little attitude toward her lover.

“Manya, what’s your ancestry?” she would say. “What tribe are you from? What’s your nation after all?”

The male parent’s line in Mannikov’s birth certificate was left blank. But he never took the trouble to find out who his father was, showed zero interest in the mystery of his birth as if he were an immortal without the beginning.

Manya was a hotshot in forging IDs. He did it in a barbaric way just tearing off the original photo and slapping on a new one. He made himself a veteran of two wars—the World War Two and the Afghan war. His looks befitted both. He was deeply bald, his black hair hanging from behind the ears down to the shoulders. His beard suited both his old age, which was not true, and a young people craze, which was not true either.

It seemed like he truly believed in the authenticity of his fake IDs. He was disappointed when a gas station attendant rejected his request for a discount.

“Can you imagine, sweetheart,” he complained to Tanya, “they stopped offering a discount to us veterans. I had to pay the effing full price.”

Three Thousand Years

After graduation from Medical School, Mannikov landed a job as a district physician. Not for long, though. The death rate among his elderly patients hit the roof. Tanya began to call him Doctor Mengele. Joking apart, things were getting nasty, and eventually Mannikov had to resign.

He had no regrets though. On the contrary, he was elated to find himself unchained from the government. Taking advantage of freedom that came with the Rebuilding, he opened a used books store on Garden Street and hired his paramour to

sit behind the counter. Tanya demanded a humongous wage, extended lunch break, and the right to drink and smoke at workplace. He gave her all this and more.

Manya was also an avid swamp hunter, which one day almost cost him his life. He was being sucked down into the mire when, by a sheer fluke, his partner returned to the car and heard his desperate cries. If not for the rain and his partner's raincoat left in the car trunk, Manya would have been gone. Tanya made her comments on it.

"Manya, you made an effing dumb thing having allowed your friend to pull you out," she said. "You lost a chance to make your death cheap and honorable. Free funeral is such a rare thing. But that's not the only benefit here. Standing upright in the deep mire, you would have been revealed to the world in a pretty good shape when three thousand years later archeologists would dig you out. Imagine the sensation."

Slava's was there too, listening. Her eyes watered.

"What is it?" Nina asked, alarmed. "What happened?"

"I feel sorry for Manya," Slava said.

"You don't have to be sorry. Here he is, well and alive."

"I know. But this is so sad—to see him standing in the mire for three thousand years."

Our Superb Family

In September 1987, Slava married a brave, handsome young man, Andre Varava. A joint meeting of the two families had taken place, and an agreement had been reached. But Slava was still hesitant about going to Saint Petersburg where her fiancé was completing his last year at a military academy. Muffled in her lap robe, she settled herself comfortably on the sofa, feeling sheltered, snug, homey. Why should she go so far away to a boy whom she barely knew?

It didn't take her long, however, to start moving. Then there was Golitsyno in Moscow outskirts. Their daughter Polina was born who grew up into a gifted, lovely girl. Things went on. It was their own life which isn't my story. They established a splendid family—we are so proud of them.

Constantin had been a college student in Moscow and later continued his education in Odessa. He was recruited to the army from the second academic year. My eyes were wet when I wrote letters to my son. I knew how hard, ugly, and dangerous the army service could be. I was so afraid of losing him.

Back from the army, Constantin remained silent for about a year, didn't tell us anything. We held our breath. Finally, he shook off the nightmare and became what he had always been before—a loving, witty, open-hearted, very gentle boy. He met Lily, a beautiful, intelligent girl. Nina first saw her in the church choir.

“I wish Constantin would choose that girl,” she told me.

He did. Lily became our beloved daughter. Soon we all moved to America. Julia was born, a wonder child, our playful marvy granddaughter.

We love them all so much. Our superb family.

The Voice of the People

Saturday, March 3, 2018

Aunt Pasha and Commodore

I feel like I need to say a few words about our neighbors at 14 Black Sea Street in Odessa, Ukraine.

Janitor Pasha Kravchenko had a tendency to fight. Major Balkin, who was much older than Pasha, told her once,

“For more than ten years, I have respectfully called you Aunt Pasha. Not anymore.”

Pasha was a vigilant person. She believed that her duty was to make sure the visiting relatives were immediately registered as required by the law. All other visitors were regarded by her as suspicious. Our American guest David Beaty evoked in Pasha queer, confusing emotions, unknown to her before. She

began to babble gibberish.

“What did she say?” asked David.

Nina turned to Pasha.

“Where are your good manners, Pasha?” she said. “Look at yourself. You should be ashamed of being dressed like that before a foreigner.”

Pasha’s husband was a small, cross-eyed man. His overall look clearly revealed his criminal past. His name was Nickolas, but we dubbed him Commodore. Igor used to sit with him on the wooden single-board bench in the courtyard and talk. What could a professor, Doctor of Sciences, and Commodore, just recently released from prison, have in common?

A pine floorboard had been stolen from Zhora Zarudny’s garage. Neighbors were interviewed and asked if anyone had seen anything suspicious last night. No witnesses came up.

Pasha couldn’t keep it long to herself.

“It’s Nickolas and I who stole the board last night,” she confessed to Paulina. “Nickolas has already nailed it to the floor and painted.”

Who’s Going To Die Next

Myuda—which is short for International Youth Day—a pretty, mysterious woman, broke the latest news.

“Emily told me who’s going to die next,” she announced.

Poor Myuda, she didn’t know she was talking of herself.

During the World War Two she’d been a slave at a German farm. The farmer’s kids would come to see how she ate. They had been told that Russians were animals and ate from the ground. That was where Myuda met a Frenchman, also a slave. The master caught them together, and the Frenchman was sadistically beaten. Myuda heard him screaming. Since then, they were forbidden to see each other. When

the war ended, he invited her to go with him to France. She declined the invitation.

Emily and Kim

Emily was a physician who was responsible for the health-care service within the area where we lived. Being a frequent visitor to her clients, she was rather open with them, and the story of her life was known to all of us. Her mother, a Cossack woman, kicked her out of the house for marrying a Jew although she herself had a Jewish husband named Izak—and that was exactly how Emily had been born. Ironically, Emily’s mother-in-law Fanya hated her for being an incomplete Jew and abused her physically. Kim, Emily’s husband, declined her plea to emigrate to Israel—Fanya said, *No*.

One day, Kim and Emily came to the Diplomatic Agency for some papers to be signed. Talking to Nina, Emily suddenly pulled the hat off Kim’s head.

“Look!” she said.

Kim’s gray hair was sticking out in rare, short tufts.

There was also a pediatrician named Seletskaya. She prescribed calcium chloride to the kids in the three houses no matter what the sickness was.

Suicidal Mother-In-Law

Zhora Zarudny’s mother-in-law had suicidal tendencies. He got fed up with saving her life so many times. One day, he called out the residents to the courtyard, pushed her forward, and read out from a document,

“By the authority of the High Court of the Three Houses, citizen Helena Tishchenko is sentenced to be hanged by the neck until dead for the crime of terrorizing the family members by continuous and stubborn attempts at committing suicide.

The High Court orders the immediate execution of the sentence.”

Out of his bosom, Zhora pulled a noose that looked very much like a professional thing, and raised it high above his head. His mother-in-law stood frozen.

There were no more suicide attempts.

Where've You Been?

Fyodor Vasiliev was a maniacal collector—his two-room apartment was encumbered with piles of rotten newspapers up to the ceiling. All along the outside walls, he stored various useless things, such as metal bars, broken bricks, fragments of wood boards, other construction and non-construction waste.

He kept dogs. At first it was Zhuk, then Bim, both of mixed breed, who filled the apartment with horrible stench. The dogs were extremely vicious, which was strange because their master was a kindhearted man, reclusive and taciturn. He wasn't even capable of formulating his questions in a right way since he wasn't always sure what exactly he wanted to ask about. Residents of the three houses were gossiping about our pending departure to America. One day, he met us on Bathing Lane.

“Where've you been?” he said meaning to ask if we were going to emigrate.

“In Moscow,” I said.

“Aha,” he said.

Vasiliev was a lawyer, and it was probably one of the reasons he liked to collect signatures. In our courtyard there was a blind wall which belonged to a house from the adjacent street. The residents of that house wanted to cut a window in that wall. Vasiliev collected signatures to impose a ban on the window. He hated noticeable changes.

Vasiliev's son Vitka would come to the center of the court-

yard and announce that his mother had just died and that he was responsible for the funeral. It meant that he was out of cash for wine. He would also warn us of a catastrophe—earthquake or landslide—which was about to happen and kill us all. But this kind of messages was usually delivered gratis.

Vasiliev's wife Zina couldn't stand the triad of the two crazy men and a vicious dog, who created a filthy hell in the apartment. She'd moved into her father's old dacha in the Fountain coastal area. On those rare days when she visited them, Vasiliev knew that whatever she was going to tell him might destroy his peace of mind.

"Shut up, babbler!" he would say.

A Good Egg Layer

Sometimes, on sunny days, retired major Balkin would bring his old military jackets and high boots covered in green patina out to the courtyard to give them some fresh air. He would adjust himself on a wooden stool behind the exposition and play balalaika.

A woman from the adjacent Observatory Lane won a live chicken in a Privoz market lottery. Being unable to step over her good nature, the woman let the chicken live. She shepherd her new friend on the green Langeron slopes. The chicken turned to be a good layer.

The woman got sick and was taken to hospital. Balkin picked up the chicken. He built a coop for her and continued to shepherd the bird on the green Langeron slopes. The woman returned from hospital and demanded her property back.

"My doctor proscribed me fresh eggs," Balkin said. "The chicken lays them every day. Why do you want her back? This isn't fair."

And the woman gave in.

A Bayonet Charge

Popkov, a retired lieutenant who was our next-door neighbor, had been at the frontline all through the World War Two. He was a real hero, a warrior. In everyday life, however, he was an insipid, hopelessly boring person. It was under his supervision that the three crooked houses had been built at 14 Black Sea Street. In summer, he wore a fur *ushanka* hat because, he explained, he had a freezer inside his head.

Popkov took a few bricks from under Visiliev's window to build a wall around the water pump in his back yard, which caused a big fight. Popkov aimed the garden hose at Vasiliev and opened the valve.

"Bayonet charge!" he shouted a terrifying battle cry. "Do you know what Germans did when they saw me? They ran."

Popkov's wife Galina was quite open about her feelings toward her husband.

"Had he not saved me from prison, I would have never married him. I hate the bastard," she said.

It happened on Sakhalin Island. The girls who worked at the local fish factory, accidentally spoiled a batch of smoked fish. At wartime, such things were regarded as sabotage, and they would most probably be sent to prison. Then the garrison officers married all those girls and in this way saved them from punishment.

Galina used to come to Paulina for salt or sugar in her husband's long underwear with laces.

Tootler

On the second floor of our house lived Anatoli Klimashewski called Tootler because he was a trumpet player in the Odessa garrison orchestra. He had a crush on Nina.

Every evening, on his way home, he staggered, pretty schwasty, past our windows, holding on to the wall.

“That’s my Queen,” he would murmur.

A Clean Place Is Not Where You Clean

Vasili Puzin was a man of an epic physical strength. A huge tree had dried up in the courtyard. Six men were trying to get it down in a joint effort, all in vain. Puzin came up, gave the tree a shove—and it fell.

Puzin liked to instruct, supervise, administer, and in general keep the world around him under control. He was the Langeron Beach manager.

“The best piece of the Black Sea is yours!” he would holler Nina and me as we were going down to the beach.

He wore a jacket and a tie all through the summer. No one had ever seen him wearing a swimming suit.

One day, he brought a big metal signage board with a nicely written motto:

“A clean place is not where you clean, it’s where you don’t litter.”

He nailed the thing to the wall near the window which had been eventually cut despite the protests organized by Vasiliev. To see this nonsensical crap each time I was coming home was more than I could bear.

One morning, Puzin descended from his second floor and discovered that the board was gone. After some thinking, he came to a comforting conclusion that the beautiful motto had made such an impression on some people that they ventured to steal it, and so it was now shining somewhere in a better place.

An earthquake happened in Odessa, of low magnitude but still rather shaky. The residents of the three houses ran out to the courtyard. A portion of the brick chimney had fallen down

from the roof of the house with the controversial window. It was unclear if the rest of the chimney was going to go down too. When panic subsided, Puzin summoned young and strong population, sent two husky boys to the roof, and organized a safe area around the debris. The boys pushed down the rest of the chimney. All was done quickly, professionally, and in an elegant way. Pleased with the results, Puzin retreated home.

In his youth, Puzin had suffered humiliation. There was a bunch of bad Kalmyks around. One of them lashed him across the back with a long leather whip. All through the war, Puzin had been looking for the Kalmyk asshole to shoot the villain at sight. He had never found him. “That was a disappointment,” he said.

The Inflection Point

Sunday, March 4, 2018

A Face in the Window

At twelve, Slava suddenly began to experience pain in her head, a terrible, excruciating pain. She could hardly see, talk, or move. The hospital doctor was one of my students—with her help we got permission to visit our daughter. I was asked to take Slava to the medical lab for a test—all the way downstairs to the first floor and from there to another building a distance away. They didn't have elevators or gurneys or wheelchairs. I had to carry my daughter in my arms or on my back. She was crying and screaming—I feel her pain right now when I'm typing this.

The death of my mother-in-law Paulina in 1979 dashed me down in a big way. I'd been inattentive to her needs, negligent

of her health, unable to help. She'd never had even a minimal privacy. She died sharing the bed with her grandson. I began to see her in my nightmares, she was staring at me through the window. There was a lot of guilty dreams. I was feeling low, psychologically run-down.

Cry Me a River

In my childhood, I had been trying to build a functional hyperboloid, being fully aware of how stupid it was. Now again I knew that in spite of whatever I did there was no way I could make my life better. I'd reached the dead end.

I remember well a trivial act of little drama at the Privoz market. A woman with a puffy face and black eye sits on an empty tomato crate by a vegetable stall, waiting for a small cash handout from the seller. She narrates a long story of her miserable life to an African student, who leans on the counter, listening. The story goes on and on. He listens and listens as if hypnotized by the sound of the senseless foreign speech.

I turn to this scene whenever I feel a desire to lament my life.

One-Way Journey

A shaky chance of independent existence began to show up. It seemed like there appeared an opportunity to print my own textbook and open my own school. The problem was I couldn't stay in this crowd, in this town, in this country, tolerate the everyday ball game of deceit and pretense any longer. My friend Yaroslav wanted to join the Hungarian rebels and fight, weapon in hand, against communists. Others preferred to stay away from big life hiding in solitude.

I was not one of those resolute fighters who went through tortures or persecution. I had never taken part in an organized

protest. I just had a feeling of aversion and estrangement. I had no more patience left.

No more willingness to live the way I'd lived.

In the early 1980s, I had a chance to visit America as a tourist. The City Council sent two application forms, to me and to my co-worker Vera Chub, to fill out. The forms were actually several pages of absurd, insulting questions. Twenty-four passport photos were required, too. I fumbled with the forms and said I wouldn't go. Vera was surprised.

"Why not?" she asked.

"If I ever set sail for America," I said, "it would be a one-way journey."

What Are You Doing Here?

In the Gorbachev time, Igor and I were in Samara, visiting Mom. A gray crowd of angry men were desperately forcing their way into a grocery store through the narrow back door. In there, they hoped to exercise their right to buy cheap wine, one bottle per person. It took my brother, a delicate, intelligent personality, talented scientist, all he had to get in. Sweaty and disheveled, he was now shoving out with a bottle of chardonnay in his raised hand—and a happy smile on his face.

Was there any way out of this?

Helen Schissel, one of my students, read my thoughts.

"What are you doing here?" she said. "You have to have been gone out of here long time ago."

On the last days of September 1990, two of my students, Oleg Klinov, and his brother-in-law, Flischenbaum, came to me unexpectedly and said that today, right now, this very hour they were going to go to Moscow for immigrant visa applications—the American Embassy would begin giving them out to public on the first day of October—and asked me if I was will-

ing to join them. Flischenbaum hurriedly departed to the train station to get a ticket for me—and an hour later, we were on our way to Moscow.

The Historical Morning of October 1, 1990

There was a sea of people around the American Embassy. *Centurions* were holding up signboards with handwritten *centum* numbers. With a heavy sigh, I entered my name on centum 163. Sixteen thousand three hundred impatient applicants ahead of me. How many days would it take me to walk the full length of the line?

Wise head Oleg Klinov knew the answer. An hour later, I was already filling in the applications. Oleg also had a secret knowledge how to send them directly to Washington, DC. A week later Nina, Constantin, and I received an invitation to come to the American Embassy for an interview.

Wednesday, March 7, 2018

Yesterday morning, Constantin drove me to the Memorial Hospital. At 11.30 am, I found myself on a cot and at 1.30 pm was moved to the operating theater. Two hours later, I woke up and by 6 pm was back home. I must use the catheter up to ten more days. Fine with me. Almost.

The Interview

It's wintertime. Nina, Constantin, and I are standing in the line along the metal guard rail. We slip on ice and grab at the rail, trying to stay on our feet. We feel like using a restroom would be great. There isn't any nearby, neither we have time for that. A person opens the door from the inside and tosses his briefcase out onto the lawn. Hand baggage is not allowed.

We were interviewed by consul Robinson. I told him I had

left the communist party and lost my job. He said he needed nothing more. We started to leave the room, couldn't open the door, began to fumble at the lock. The consul got up behind his desk, smiling. Finally, we discovered the secret of the American locking device and left the room.

In the evening there was a big crowd outside a fenced corner of the Embassy. An official cried out my name and threw a paper over the rail. The paper showed our status, refugees. Indescribable joy.

Kalanchoe, Aloe, Geranium, and Jasmine

At first, I had been thinking about doing the immigration paperwork through the Passport and Visa Agency (OVIR), but it turned out that the agency would never let us go. We weren't Jews and we had no relatives in the US. Case closed.

Mom was not happy about my decision to move to a far-away capitalist country but didn't show her feelings. She was sure about my ability to make the right choice. What she was not ready to accept was her communist ideals being scorned and dumped like garbage.

"All that had been done was done right," she said. There was a tear in her eye.

On the windowsills of Mom's one-room apartment were flowerpots with kalanchoe, aloe, geranium, and jasmine.

Two Lines

There were two passenger lines at Sheremetyevo airport. American citizens, businesspeople, and tourists formed one line. In the other line stood the emigrants with OVIR documentation in their hands. *Which line is mine? Neither one.*

All emigrants had gone through the customs. The line disappeared. I was still hesitant, standing alone. The customs offi-

cer looked around.

“Anyone else?”

If not now, then when?

The customs officer asked how long I was going to stay in the USA, briefly looked through the baggage, praised the books I was taking with me. Next was a young official in civil clothes, a KGB man, and behind him, a girl fumbling with papers.

“They don’t have the OVIR documentation,” the girl cried out in a happily birthday to you voice.

The young man turned to her. I stopped thinking.

“Let them go!” he said.

He turned back to me, looked into my eyes.

“If I were you, I would never come back,” he said.

I could not believe I was hearing this.

We went through the passport control and entered the territory of the United States of America. On the very same day, the PAN AM *Clipper Water Witch* took us to New York. It was March 13, 1991.

We were flying across the Atlantic Ocean. Sitting in front of us was a family of Pentecostal believers. A woman turned to me over the seatback.

“America,” she said. “Where is it?”

Here, in Chattanooga

Wednesday, March 14, 2018

Yesterday, we celebrated the twenty seventh anniversary of coming to Chattanooga. That day I felt very sick and very happy. I inhaled the air of freedom, and my head swirled. I was pretty sure I'd done all that had to be done. I was free now. My life was over.

Many years later, doctor R. Curtis McKoy pushed a stent into my heart and on my silly question how long it would keep me alive said, in a jocular way, that I'd already stepped over the threshold.

Many years have passed one more time since that conversation, this book is quickly moving toward the last chapter, and many other things are probably going to happen. Well, maybe not that many.

* * *

Yesterday morning, I had a visit with doctor Kymber Habenicht. Severe bleeding again. I'm going to see her one more time tomorrow. There's no hope. There's no gloom either. Nina isn't having much sleep, but she still wants to be with me all the time. Tomorrow, she is going to accompany me to the doctor again.

Thursday, March 15, 2018

The catheter has been removed, finally. Phew! *Thank you very much, doctor Kymber Habenicht.*

A Magic Seal

Constantin remained in Odessa. He had to complete the paperwork for Lily, then go with her to the American Embassy one more time for an interview. On July 1, they finally joined us in Chattanooga. Andre, Slava, and their daughter Polina would come over two and half years later.

Both times, our friends from LaFayette, GA, drove to the airport to take a look at Russians setting foot on American soil for the first time in their lives and to join us in our jubilation. Polina was five years old. LaFayette kids surrounded her, and they began talking. Little kids have their own international dialect for unordinary situations.

Back to the beginning. The American Eagle with Nina and me on board landed in Chattanooga at about 11 pm. Pastor Ernest Groce (Preacher) and missionary David Marcum met us at the airport with flowers. Buddy Nichols came a bit later. We were not sure if anyone was going to meet us, so we had some simple bedding for travel in our baggage for the first homeless night, just in case.

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

Buddy Nichols played a pivotal part in all this from the very start. We first met back in 1989 when he was in Odessa with a group of church leaders. At that time, he was the president of Titus International, a small missionary organization located in Chattanooga. When next year Buddy came again, he handed me an invitation for a job at Titus. The document had no judicial power and was, in fact, just a welcome letter, but it had a beautiful, awe-inspiring seal embossed on golden foil, the thing unfamiliar to the then Russian eye. It might have done magic work as we were crossing the border. The words *Let Them Go* are still ringing in my ears.

LaFayette

That night Preacher drove us in his Ford Taurus to LaFayette, GA, a pretty town forty miles south of Chattanooga. For seventeen days, we lived with the Groces like we were one family. I was very sick. Too much stress and severe cold made me unable to see things clearly. Preacher's wife Wanda would give me NyQuil in the bottle cup, and for a while I felt a little better.

I'm in a lot of gratitude to this family so generous, caring, and noble. Nina and I had been so much loved and supported. I thank Preacher and Wanda as well as the rest of the family—Tal and Sherry, David and Karen, and Dana, the youngest daughter—for their thoughts and prayers and understanding. I'm forever in their debt.

Wednesday, March 28, 2018

Our first day in America. This is South, but fair weather is yet to come. It was cold in the bedroom during the night. The window was letting in fresh spring air from the grass fields—giving me a new, delightful sensation. I got up before dawn and

turned on the TV. Journalists and politicians were discussing the latest news from Russia.

In the morning, Preacher and Wanda were teaching us to make a hamburger, asking what kind of sauce we preferred. As if we knew. The unfamiliar flavor of yellow mustard made me a little nauseous—the same classic yellow mustard which is now my favorite.

Thursday, March 29, 2018

On April 1, we moved into a two-room apartment on Chamberlain Avenue in Chattanooga. Our LaFayette friends came to help us clean it. But cleaning the mess that was discovered there was mission impossible. The rooms were teeming with roaches, millipedes, dozens of other revolting insects—worms, slugs, various kinds of bugs—running, jumping, crawling, wriggling, flying—a real treasure for an entomologist.

The walls were barely holding themselves. I pulled at the small floor carpet to move it a bit aside—a portion of the dusty thing remained in my hand. I swept it out with a broom and put a chair on its place. The chair legs went down half an inch into the floor.

A few years later when the house couldn't keep itself in a vertical position anymore, it was demolished. It belonged to Arthur Ittermann, who died in 2014 at the age of 106.

David Marcum brought a bag of clothes from his church and dumped on the floor things we had never seen before—cowboy boots, old-fashioned suspenders, underwear items looking like diapers. David drove us to places we needed to visit and was very efficient in getting us to understand things around.

Walking in Chattanooga

Fifty dollars in cash was all I had to start a new life with in

America. I didn't count on the welfare program, didn't even know if there was any in Tennessee. There was not. On top of it, I had to start paying out \$3,000 for the plane tickets right away. In fact, the help was huge. So many people cared about us. Judy Van Hooser brought us to the Lutheran church in downtown Chattanooga where Nina chose a whole lot of good clothing from the donation closet.

In August, a church gave us a magnificent Oldsmobile Delta 88 Royal Brougham sedan—which required everyday repairs. There's not an iota of sarcasm here or anywhere in my description of our first months in America. The limping gift didn't mar our gratitude at all. It was a car. It helped, enormously. People were really caring about us.

We are forever grateful for the outpouring support we received from so many loving friends. Tal and Sherry Larson bought two pair of shoes for me—at that time, it was a big sacrifice on their part. David Beaty, who had evoked suspicion in Pasha while visiting us in Odessa, paid for a nice jacket for me. Wanda took Nina to the Hamilton Place Mall.

We began to look like decent immigrants.

For more than three months, David Marcum, Thelma Van Hooser, her daughter Judy, as well as Wanda and her daughter Karen drove us to grocery stores, hospitals, and all other places we needed to visit. All of them and others, not mentioned but remembered with much love, who were helping us with transportation—resented our attempts to walk. Who is walking on foot in Chattanooga? Now I would have laughed at us trudging down the street, shopping bags and packages in hand.

First Journeys Across the Country

Buddy and his wife LeeAnne visited us on Chamberlain Avenue. LeeAnne looked around and said, "Nice."

Nina offered her a seat.

“No, thank you,” LeeAnne said.

Herman and Beverly Pinion came, too. Beverly walked up to the center of the room and began to cry.

“I’m ashamed of this,” she said.

A few weeks later, the Pinions furnished our new abode on Vance Avenue. At the same time, our splendid friends from LaFayette, Bud and Jeannie Martenn, lent us an ornate retro-fancy sofa.

When I think about Bud and Jeannie, I cannot explain why I feel like we are kind of kindred spirits. It could be something geographical—Jeannie’s and my ancestors came from about the same area in Eastern Europe. The reason could be more visceral, it could be about their turbulent youth similar, in part, to my life experience. I don’t know. And I doubt they feel about it the way I do.

The Pinions invited us to visit them in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. They showed us their business *Pinion Greenhouses & Garden*. We found ourselves in the center of conservative America, acquired a gratifying knowledge of it.

Buddy Nichols drove us across America—to Chicago and Oswego, Illinois, then to Macon, Georgia—to get a taste of the North, then a taste of the South.

Preacher and Wanda took us further South to Panama City where we enjoyed swimming in the Gulf of Mexico. I paid the hotel bill to thank them, if only in a small way, for all they had done for us.

Spiros Zodiates—I’ll return to him later—decided to include me in his team at the annual missionary conference in New Holland, Pennsylvania, in the hope to boost the financial support by demonstrating a new Russian guy. Russia was in fashion in a big way. A huge crowd of American missionaries

rushed to Russia with Bibles and tracts explaining in simple terms how to come to Jesus and be saved.

I am not sure if I was of any help—could be just the opposite. I was telling my lumpish soul-searching stories; my choice of words was a disaster. I had always been a miserable speaker. In the meantime, I got the first pleasant encounter with the Amish culture. Pennsylvania is their state.

Irv Daugherty, the CFO of AMG International, performed Christian songs before the audience of contributors. His magic voice made me so blissed out I came over to Jeannie Chandler, the secretary who played the piano for Irv, to express my admiration.

“I would like to sing a song, too,” I said as if I were saying it in a dream.

“Are you sure?” Jeannie said absently.

I was terrified. She could have said, “Go ahead.”

In May, we moved into 1612 Vance Avenue. Previously, it had been a frat house which belonged to the Temple University where Buddy Nichols was now president. Despite the mess the students had left in the house, it was much better than what we had on Chamberlain Avenue. We rented it for the same monthly payment of \$250. *Thank you, Buddy.*

Saturday, March 31, 2018

Misha Vishenchuk came from Toronto, Canada, to see us for a day. Lily had a workday. After breakfast at Cracker Barrel, Constantin left us with Misha in our condo. Sitting on the couch, we talked for about three hours. Misha had turned to a vegetarian diet and looked lean. He’d gotten his job back at the bank, said he was happy now. I gave him one of my paintings of his choice.

I’m having anemia. Feeling totally drained. A wet towel

thrown on the floor, that's how it looks like.

Sunday, April 1, 2018

I feel terribly weak, worn-out, unable to read or write or sit or lie. How about to live? Can do, for a while.

Wednesday, April 4, 2018

Yesterday, I was in the hospital for an infusion, feeling weak all through the day, could barely move. There's going to be one more infusion next Tuesday. I'd lost a lot of blood when in and out of hospital. Anemia.

It's warm outside. I wish I could take a walk. Nina makes five circles around the Village.

Slava called from Providence, RI, showed us Katya on the phone. Charming baby, our sweet great granddaughter.

Constantin came over. He'd had busy weeks at the University. I gave him Akunin's last novel *I Do Not Say Goodbye*. Lily is working late evenings; we rarely see her.

Saturday, April 7, 2018

I got an e-mail from Bolotov,

Get well, old man.

How young we'd been! Look at us today.

Anyway, the vegetation is blooming.

Attached to this was his photo showing his white beard—and pot flowers on the windowsill.

It's getting cold outside. I'm still feeling weak and helpless.

Sunday, April 8, 2018

Nina is seventy-seven. I see her there under the tree, young,

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

graceful, beautiful. *Can't tear my eyes from you.*

Constantin and Lily came with a huge bouquet of red roses. Last Saturday, they were in Nashville and rented an apartment for Julia and Aaron. Julia will move there from Memphis this summer.

Tuesday, April 10, 2018

I had my second infusion today. My young doctor Owen Speer said last time I would be fine after the second infusion. I want to believe him. He is a good doctor.

Slava returned from Providence, told us little stories about Katya.

* * *

I'm back in 1989 now, in Odessa. Herman Pinion and Michael Bentley, a missionary to Israel, asked me to arrange a visit to see Nikolay Boyko, who had spent ten years in prison for his Pentecostal belief. The meeting took place at Boyko's house. Boyko stood in the middle of the room all the time, never offered us a seat. So, we all were standing. I was interpreting. After a while, I began to feel like I was unable to wake up. My speech became slurred, difficult. I looked at the Americans. Michael's eyes were squinting. Herman was definitely fighting to stay awake. Something was happening.

There could be two explanations to that. Either for some reason Boyko was trying to hypnotize us or his story was unbearably dull. But why to hypnotize us? That would be absurd. On the other hand, why should a story of suffering for Jesus Christ be so wearisome? Was it something in the air or was it Boyko's voice that made us so dozed?

One time, in Chattanooga, Herman and I were talking, and

we recalled the strange sleeping incident. Herman went adrift in his thoughts.

“What was it?” he said after a pause.

Monday, April 16, 2018

Julia called from Memphis right after the White Coat ceremony. A few years earlier, Polina had put on her white coat at that Medical School too.

Are You Saved?

Carte Blanche

For about a year, Nina and Lily worked for Gateway Hosiery Mills on Holtzclaw Ave. Then Nina got a job at Precept Ministries International, a missionary organization in Chattanooga, which, among other things, produced religious literature in the Russian language.

Nina worked for Precept Ministriesl for twelve years, during which time she translated over forty books written by Key Arthur, the leader of the organization.

I worked for AMG (Advancing the Ministries of the Gospel) International, a non-denominational missionary organization headed by Spiros Zodhiates. For some short time, Constantin

was my assistant. Missionary life was not a big dream in Constantin's vision for future. He began to look for something else and soon quit. He and Lily started it all over again from zero with a low-paying job in Soddy-Daisy which is about sixteen miles north of Chattanooga.

I translated several books by Zodhiates. But when I showed him the product, he was taken aback.

"Why? Who will read this?" he said.

"That I don't know," I said. "But what am I supposed to do if not this?"

Dr. Spiros Zodhiates, bless his soul—he was a good man.

"Do whatever you think you have to do," he said.

This is how I got carte blanche for my life's work, *The New Testament Scriptures and Selected Old Testament Books*, with shorter title *Selected Bible Books*. It took me fifteen years to finally complete it at my own Russian Bible Center in Chattanooga.

* * *

There were four native Greeks at AMG International. Beside Spiros Zodhiates, I had the honor to know Symeon Ioannidis, his wife Anna, and their son Anastasios (Tasos). Before we got the Oldsmobile in August of 1991, Tasos had been driving me and Constantin to work and back home in his car. He was a bright young man, a computer buff, kind, caring—he helped me a lot even at the expense of his own time. In 2013, he became the president of the organization. With this, I'm sending him my belated congratulations and best wishes. *Thank you so much, Tasos. Ευχαριστώ πολύ!*

AMG International was engaged in evangelism and charity across the world—child sponsorship, disaster relief, medical care centers, nursing schools, clinics, hospitals including huge

St. Luke hospital in Greece—as well as in publishing Christian literature. It was and still is a well-reputed organization which is doing a fantastic job. I'm proud of having been a part of it for almost twelve years.

Monday, April 23, 2018

Yesterday, there was a family gathering on Brass Lantern Way. Slava prepared some yummy dishes. We looked through the photos that had been taken in Providence. Two days ago, Lily's old Lexus (97,000 miles) had been exchanged for a new one with the latest gadgets.

It rained all day long. I was looking out the window with joyous nostalgia.

Monday, April 30, 2018

Constantin got a B.A. in medicine. I'm so proud of him. He has a subtle, intelligent mind, and his intuitive psychological evaluation of people is amazing. He is such a natural talent. Our son, we love him so.

Dinner with Spiros Zodhiates

Spiros Zodhiates and his wife Joan invited our family for a dinner. We sat on the backyard terrace. The conversation was slow and messy. We could hardly find anything in common—there was stark difference between us in cultural background, life experience, fancies, way of thinking.

Spiros had diabetes. Joan gave him a shot of insulin, and he began to gobble the food like crazy—which, of course, is normal for diabetics.

There was a dessert. Following Joan's directions, we were tossing the watermelon rinds over the terrace rails down to the backyard lawn. It was kind of hard to see the point, but maybe

there was some sense in it.

Later that summer, it turned out badly. Yellow jackets landed onto the sweet waste, suddenly got panicky and attacked Joan, who was badly allergic to them. She was taken to the emergency room where her life was saved at the last moment. It was that close.

Sunday, May 13, 2018

We celebrated the Mother's Day on Brock Road. Lily made lasagna, and Slava brought a bowl of salad.

I'm getting well, gradually, and now able to make three circles around the village.

Katya is nine months old.

Tuesday, May 18, 2018

I went to Firestone Auto Care to change oil in my Buick Rendezvous and paid over \$1,000 for brakes and other unexpected repairs.

Slavka Bogomolov

In 2000, Nina went to Tashkent to visit her brother, who was dying of lung cancer. Victor was a gentle, simple man, he never wanted anything for himself, didn't care a bit about success in life. He loved his sister very much, was proud of her. They had a lot to talk about, and they did. That was the last time Nina saw her brother.

Nina was also glad to see her old friends, former neighbors and acquaintances in Tashkent. Quite unexpectedly, she came across her classmate Slavka Bogomolov.

"Nina!" he greeted her, beaming, arms outspread.

He was surprised to hear that Nina did not remember they had sat together in class.

“Do you know that I was in love with you?” he said. “You were a tall girl. I was short, didn’t have the courage to open up. But tell me about yourself. Do you have a family?”

Nina told him her story.

“You know what,” he said, “I still love you. I’ve never stopped loving you. I had a wife. She died. But you are the girl I loved all my life. I don’t mean anything, but if your husband— if you are alone, would you consider coming over?”

Nina told me how Bogomolov looked like.

“Not so much handsome,” she said. “There was just that manly grace about him.”

“That’s my man,” I agreed.

Friday, May 18, 2018

Greek Words

Every day, from 8.00 to exactly 8.20 am, Spiros Zodhiates used to give us a teaching session on linguistics. He argued that not even a single word of the original New Testament written in Koine Greek had been interpreted as it should be. And he was giving us examples.

At 8.20 am, a ring was turned on, and Zodhiates cut it off in the middle of a word as if trying to underline how precious our work time was. Sometimes we giggled behind his back, but the usefulness of his short excursions into Greek was certain.

He touted an idea that Bible texts should be taken literally. Everything that was written should be understood as it is written. In heaven, you would eat food you eat on earth.

One of the greatest Bible parables talks about a thirsty rich man in Hell, who wanted a poor man named Lazarus to let him lick his damp fingertip.

If there is water on a fingertip out there, other similar substances must be present as well. That was his ideation.

In early 2000, Spiros Zodiates had a stroke that seriously affected his speech and memory. He tried to fight it—and one morning we saw him again at the pulpit. He spoke slowly but soon began to stumble and then stopped. Tears welled up in his eyes.

“I don’t know why God punishes me,” he said.

That was his last appearance before our eyes. We all felt sorry for him, deeply.

Monday, June 18, 2018

Yesterday, we gathered on Brass Lantern Way for Father’s Day celebration. Andre demonstrated a Stradivarius violin he’d gotten at an estate sale for ten bucks. He said it was a fake. What if it wasn’t?

Last Monday, Julia came with a sad news. Aaron’s grandmother Avril died. We had known Avril since Julia’s graduation in Johnson City last year. She was a nice old lady.

I sent Bolotov a song which had this statement: *Yesterday’s gone, and tomorrow may never come, but we have this moment today.* His answer was he had another heart attack.

Cowards

Lieutenant Druzhynin, a giant with a round head and diastematic teeth, took my place after I left Cuba. I had come to know him when he was one of the interpreters in Odessa military academy.

I met him at the entrance of the department store “Beryozka,” which offered cheap foreign-made clothing to Russians who returned from abroad with certificates which are fake dollars. To my *Hello*, he dashed aside as if I threw a grenade at him. What the hell! I wonder why those cowards were so afraid of me.

The Crains

Our old friends, missionaries Mike and Naomi Crain, visited us yesterday. They came from South Carolina with peaches and a watermelon. Mike donated \$100 as a payment for five copies of *Selected Bible Books*. I pay about \$25 to send a copy to Russia.

Mike and Naomi are on their way to Cuba again. It's their twentieth missionary trip to that communist country.

When in 1993 me moved into a new house at 8735 Holly Crest Drive, they raised money, added what was lacking, and bought a king-size bed and the rest of the bedroom furniture for Nina and me. *Thank you so much again, dear friends.*

* * *

I wish I knew more good words than I can manage right now as I try to describe my gratitude and appreciation to those people in LaFayette, GA, and Chattanooga, TN, and elsewhere who helped me, in many ways, to start building my life in America. I have mentioned some of them before.

I also express my deep respect and admiration to Melvin Hand, Andy and Carrol Pappas, and many others, anonymous or not, alive or not, as well as to the congregation of Grace Baptist Church on Shallowford Road and personally to pastor Steve Euler. Without them my translation, *Selected Bible Books*, would have never been published.

With much love I want to mention Beth Butzer and Ron Bishop, who visited my mother in Samara.

My special thanks go to Dianne Richardson, who sends me Christmas cards every year since last century. *Thank you, Dianne.*

Our family is in a lot of love for Marilyn Schneller, Robert

and Anita Vetter, Franklin and Cleo Asher, Lester and Peggy Morris, Donnie and Mary Estus. Nina and I became so close with Frank and Cleo that I think there might be some ancestors to share. I know Frank is gone, but he is forever in my life.

Jim Nation took us in his Cessna Skyhawk up into the Chattanooga sky. Since I was no longer young, heights didn't scare me much. We flew over the Lookout Mountain, the Tennessee River, the Missionary Ridge—the land I already loved with all my heart.

* * *

Nina and I were sitting in the back seat of a Ford Taurus. Pastor Groce was driving, Wanda was in the passenger seat. It was midnight, the rain was pouring down like hell. The car caught up with a lone man walking in the middle of the road, totally soaked. Pastor Groce rolled down the window.

“Are you saved?” he asked the man.

Who Is There?

Trip to Israel

In 2006, Nina and I spent twelve days in Israel, took a day tour of Petra and on our way back, Paris.

In Israel, we visited En-Gedi—*A bouquet of flowers in the gardens of En-Gedi*—had a boat trip across Lake Tiberias, lingered on top of Masada, observing the hills of Judean Desert in a kind of dazed state of mind. It was so unreal. The next day, Nina had a few minutes of swimming in heavy waters of the Dead Sea. We wandered among the ruins of Sepphoris—*the city on the mountain*—and had a teatime inside a tent in the Negev desert as a hint on Abraham's travels. Of course, we visited the Wailing Wall, Mount Moriah, and Gethsemane. Caesarea and Herodion were of special interest to me.

We had little contact with Israelites—with us, a group of tourists from Chattanooga, was only our Jewish guide Eli. But the impression was overwhelming. Kind of disappointing was to see Jerusalem crammed with so many churches, chapels, shrines, and other religious sites. Crowds of tourists were dashing from one holy place to another. What were they looking for? Unlike Greek or Roman historical sites, none of those religious structures has anything to do with reality—people just want them to be authentic. They are not.

I had a short lucky moment of taking a photo of stone stairs that led to the gates of an ancient town of Abraham's time. It was just what I needed for an illustration to Genesis.

The Mediterranean cuisine is super. Petra made little impression—a meretricious toy of an unclear designation in the middle of nowhere. Paris entranced me by its historic might and drop-dead beauty.

Saturday, July 14, 2018

Transcendentally minded Tanya Shundrina, daughter of my beloved cousin Tanya Sr., wrote this in her e-mail to me about my portraits of Civil War soldiers:

An interesting thought concerning the portraits you are painting occurred to me. The area where you live has a powerful egregore. Your mental disposition lies within the range of the collective psychic entity. You've entered the area of resonance. This is how egregore is communicating with you. Awesome.

Wednesday, July 18, 2018

Three days ago, doctor Bierly removed a cataract in my right eye. Colors are refreshed and bright like new. *Thank you, doctor.*

Miracles and Other Trivialities

The workers of AMG missionary organization were thoughtful, kindhearted people, many of whom became my good friends. I owe them a lot for being my first wise educators in the American culture.

In the time of being with them—which is a little less than twelve years—I witnessed a number of amusing and not so amusing incidents. Gin Chasteen announced that she'd been diagnosed with cancer. Everybody began to pray for help from heaven. A week later Gin came jubilant—tumor was no more. Rapid recovery. Miracle.

Jack Mason, a quiet, handsome young man with flaxen hair and flashing smile, got interested in my work as a Bible translator and was incredibly supportive in sending copies of *Selected Bible Books* to Russia. *Thank you, Jack.*

We sang hymns first thing in the morning. I was gibbering softly in Russian as lyrics were unknown to me. Jack looked at me in surprise, then smiled sensitively.

Warren Baker, chief editor of Spiros Zodhiates' *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* and a desktop publishing software whiz, was always ready to assist me whenever my QuarkXPress crashed. I'm profoundly grateful to him for his invaluable help, and I'm ashamed of having taken so much of his time. *Thank you, Warren.*

Warren had a wonderful personality. He sang like an angel and behaved like one. I am blessed to have known him.

Tim

Tim Rake was an assistant editor of Zodhiates' books—bright, unpractical owner of an optimistic sense of humor. We soon made friends. Tim and his wife Tracy lived a block away

from our house, and we used to pay visits to each other. They had just gotten a new-born baby Rachel.

Tim had a twin brother, Tom. As it goes with twins, they were, of course, each other's perfect spit and image. Both were extremely amative, adventurous, and restless. Tom got a crush on a sixteen-year-old schooler. His persistent efforts to let her know about his feelings brought him, after a chain of ugly occurrences, to a restraining order, which he ignored. He went on stalking the girl, tried to break into her house, and finally found himself in prison.

Tim made unsuccessful attempts at journalism. This depressed him but probably not much. After a conflict with Zodhiates, he left the organization. He then was the pastor of Praise Lutheran church in Maryville, Tennessee.

He visited us from Maryville with his family, which was bigger now. Tracy had given birth to two sons, Austin, and Cameron. Then, Tim came alone. He complained he'd been troubled with something similar to his brother's problem, said he wanted to straighten things up but couldn't. That was the last time we saw him. It seemed like he changed the church, then left it, and eventually got a job as a property attendant at Value Place, Louisville, Tennessee. Or he could be elsewhere.

I beg your forgiveness, Tim. I might have wronged you somehow, dear friend. Come, please. Give me a hug. I've become very old, small, and sentimental. I wanna see you.

Tuesday, July 31, 2018

Yesterday, doctor Bierly removed the cataract in my left eye. There is no end to my thanks to him.

Monday, September 3, 2018

I had a dream near the morning hours. Little Constantin

was crying behind the door. I opened the door and saw Nina holding him.

“What is it, *moy malchik, my little boy?*” I asked him. He showed somewhere behind his little shoulder.

“Is it your back?”

“Yes,” he answered.

I woke up in tears.

About two weeks ago, I saw my brother Igor in a strange dream. His face was white like it was made of marble stone. His hair was also white. His light-blue eyes had a mysterious gaze. He was silent, looking straight ahead. As if under a spell, I kissed him on the cheek.

Friday, September 21, 2018

Last Wednesday, Constantin came with great news. He had passed his last exam for a new position in oncology—Certified Dosimetrist. He feels encouraged. Nina and I are so happy for him.

Today, Constantin and Lily are going to fly to Washington, DC, for an excursion. They will be back on Wednesday next week.

Slava visited us yesterday and showed a marvelous photo—Polina is walking down the street, holding Katya’s hand. Katya is making long steps and laughing.

Julia created a blog. This is what I read in it:

I was once asked the question, “What would you do if you had a million dollars?” I replied, “I would have my own vineyard and go out on my balcony each evening, drink my own wine, and simply look out onto my vineyard.”

That’s my girl.

Monday, October 22, 2018

Mom's Friends

Mom had friends in Samara. There was a side in her personality that attracted young people. I don't remember her ever saying she was old or tired. When we happened to walk together, she would make a little jump to stay in step with me. Lucy's classmate Violetta Shishkanova was her best friend.

Mom had her life-long buddies, too. There were the Romanovs, whom she had known since her communist youth. Shura Alyonushkina, her last surviving friend, was the ex-wife of my Uncle Akim Vishenchuk. Their son Vladimir, a tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed young man, visited us in Samara a couple of times. He was much older than me. We rambled around the town, and he treated me with *zhygulovski* beer, his favorite. Since that time, the aversion to beer has become one of the items in my collection of ugly sensations.

Alyonushkina was an adventurous old lady. A ball of yarn rolled off her lap and disappeared under the chair. She bent over trying to reach it, missed, and made it roll a little away. She bent over again, and yet again, and eventually performed a somersault.

While trying to adjust a window curtain, she stepped on the edge of the stool and made it fall. As a result, she found herself hanging on the curtain rod.

But it seems to me the old girls were inventing such stories only to have a reason to laugh at themselves and have fun.

Thursday, November 1, 2018

Kto Tam? Who Is There?

Halloween is over. No kids have come. They are rarely seen in the Village of Ashwood; the residents here are all old folks.

Constantin and Lily were sitting on the front steps of their

house on Brock Road with packages of sweets. Some neighboring kids came. There was a toddler. His parents put him on his feet right out of the car. He waddled across the driveway, took a package, and retreated without saying a word.

Last year, kids knocked on our door. Nina forgot what it was about and asked through the door, “Kto tam?” When she opened the door the kids were gone.

Sunday, November 4, 2018

The Gaze of a Foreigner

Before we left Lazorki, Aunt Lydia had gone to Odessa. Igor was with her. Something went wrong, and they soon returned to Lazorki. But even in that short time, Igor was able to turn into an indigenous Odessite. He was now using a queer vocabulary and singing exotic songs like “On Deribasovskaya Street a Beer Bar’s Now Open.” I was struck by a mysterious line in that song, *He was among us like a perfect classy foreigner. A foreigner. I had never seen a foreigner.*

Many years later when Igor and I were meandering around downtown Odessa, he showed me the house where he and Aunt Lydia had stayed. It was a magnificent house located near Sabaneyev bridge. We entered the inner yard, and Igor pointed to a narrow ledge running up there under the windows. Their apartment was on the third floor. Accidentally, the door had shut behind Igor, and he had to step on the ledge and walk all the way to the window to get inside. I cowardly imagined myself standing on it, leaning against the wall, looking down, dead inside.

Now, the foreigner. He first came up in my life not long before Mom and I moved to Samara. We had a new student at school. His name was Gourrarier. I smelled something fishy right away—Thenardier! After school, we walked together a

couple of times. His name didn't lie, he was French and came right from Paris.

In Volgograd, in the late 1940s, I saw German POWs. They were foreigners, too. I remember how one of them looked at me. It was the gaze of a foreigner.

Thursday, November 22, 2018

On Thanksgiving Day, we got together on Brock Road as usual. The Zmijewskis came and joined us. Julia came over, too. Aaron is supposed to join us tomorrow.

It's funny to observe little Katya's gestures, mimics. At the very early age, kids behave like our ancient biological predecessors. Katya grabs an unfamiliar object and takes it away to be alone with it—meaning, *This is mine, I'll fight for it*. Her facial expression may change in a second, she utters strange sounds, shrieks—all this for no perceivable reason, possibly as a reaction to her subconscious imagery. It would be interesting to know what she has in her head before she is able to say it in words.

Saturday, November 24, 2018

Julia and Aaron came over. As we talked, I said that during my illness I kept a diary, which I'm going to publish. Julia was curious if I mentioned her in the diary. Of course, I did. She is my precious granddaughter, isn't she?

Monday, December 10, 2018

Constantin, our beloved son, has turned fifty. In America, he'd grown into a real man. He has extraordinary abilities and lives an admirably full life.

Every year, in December I order the next new volume of *History of the Russian State* by Boris Akunin for him. Volume six

is now on the way.

There was a big birthday party on Saturday, December 1. On December 4, Constantin dropped by, and we had a chance to tell him again how much we loved him.

Last Saturday, Julia and Aaron came over with their puppy Lemon, a cute Pomeranian-Chihuahua mix.

Last week, I gave my thirty-four portraits of Civil War soldiers to Dima Proshkin, who has a gallery on Market Street. I need dough to publish the diary.

A Bit More Than That

Andre and Slava arrived in the US with good proficiencies in technical (him) and linguistic (her) areas of knowledge. It all came in handy, but their natural talents helped them even more than their college education.

Andre had an interview for an engineering position at Chattanooga Cement Plant. There were other applicants, but the job was given to Andre.

“Why I’ve chosen you—I saw the callused palms of a worker,” his interviewer told him in later days.

Slava took her master’s degree at the Laval University in Canada. For many years she’s been teaching French at Chattanooga School for the Arts & Sciences. She is a courageous woman and a staunch advocate of American democracy.

Constantin and Lily were quick to adapt to sudden changes in their life, took up the Anglo-Saxon mentality. Lily had been given a chance to be the first to get her education. She became a licensed stylist. Her evident ability to move on helped her find herself in the position where she could rightfully be proud of herself. Although Constantin’s education had been abruptly terminated in Odessa as we emigrated, he completed it successfully in America.

Mom would say:

“Everyone in our family is a good-looking person.”

Maybe, a bit more than that.

A Precious Stone

Animals!

On June 6, 1996, Julia was born, the first American girl by birth in the family. Nina and I were with her all through her early childhood.

Nina and Julia together played cards, checkers, volleyball, horse race. The living room was spacious enough for all kinds of activities. I would sit there at my computer, the ball hitting me in the head from time to time. Lol.

The local dogs admired little Julia. They used to lie in the sun on the slopy lawn of their master's house. Seeing her on the road in the buggy, they would rush down the slope to welcome her by wagging their tails, sniffing, running around in circles.

We were on the way to LaFayette when Julia saw cows grazing in the field.

“Look,” she cried out in euphoria. “Animals!”

We were about to go somewhere, and Julia said,
“Is Ninoka coming with us?”

That was when we all first got to know that Nina’s real name was Ninoka.

At school, the five-year-old Polya had gone through bullying—kicking under the table, sneering, open contempt.

When Nina first brought her to the school front door, Polya said:

“Granny, don’t leave me alone.”

Nina felt her fear.

“Let’s go back home,” she said. “You need a little more time. School will wait.”

“No, I have to go in,” Polya said.

Saturday, February 23, 2019

Last Thursday, Constantin gave us a new vacuum cleaner. He also handed me a check of \$1,000. Despite our protests, he’d been doing this since 2006 when we moved into a condo in the Village of Ashwood he had bought for us.

Constantin and Lily are going to take us to Carrabbas for dinner tomorrow. We love this Italian restaurant.

Yesterday, Slava came over. She’d had a visit with her doctor. Didn’t stay to eat with us. Suffered a bad headache. Had a cup of coffee and left.

Sunday, March 3, 2019

A Grim Discovery

Tanya Shundrina wrote in her today’s e-mail,

Dear Uncle Geli,

I remember Granny telling me about your dad, “Those sadists hung him head down and beat him with a stick. His kidneys were bleeding.

Finally, they let him go, saying, He's offal anyway."

A new, stunning turn in Dad's story! Granny might have told me that, too—I hadn't been listening! They just threw him out of prison like garbage, being sure that after what they had done to him, he would soon be dead anyway.

It explains many puzzling details, if not all of them. That's why there was no official rehabilitation. That's why he was given a paper note confirming his arrest instead. That's why he came home at night in such a bad shape. If this is true (and I think it is), it probably wasn't a heart attack that killed him. They found him again.

According to Granny, Dad kept saying to his torturers, "Why are you doing this to me—you, my friends? Don't you know me?" His "friends" did him a favor. They didn't kill him right away. Instead, they let him go to die like an animal on his way home.

Dad survived. He was hiding. He left Petropavlovsk where he had been arrested. In Penza, he changed his address at least three times.

Dad was thirty-seven when he died. The story of his life took just one and a half pages of an official autobiography he wrote for the Big Brother. His siblings were lucky to have lived a part of their lives in the time of an auspicious civilization. Simeon became a lawyer, Pavel—a doctor. What Dad, the youngest of them, got in his lifetime was a communist party membership and the death sentence—*rasstrel*.

Friday, March 8, 2019

Gypsy Mystery

Another surprising e-mail came from Tanya Shundrina. Another mystery about my grandfather.

Granny once told me that her father-in-law was a buoyant personality, prone to drinking. His son (Stephan) lived in a Gypsy camp for some time and could speak their language.

What? Grandad lived among Gypsies—his story about the Gypsy baron could be the evidence—and spoke their language? I need to recheck my DNA.

Monday, April 8, 2019

Today is Nina's birthday. Greetings came from Lucy in Samara and my other Plastikov relatives in Volzhsk, a town on the Volga River, and Odessa.

In the evening Constantin and Lily came with a bouquet of roses, chocolate cake, and ice cream. They returned from New Orleans yesterday evening. They found it cheerful, colorful, and a bit untidy.

Tuesday, April 9, 2019

There was a ruffled letter from Lucien in my mailbox. He is sending such letters to all his friends from time to time scolding them for not reacting.

He is apparently unaware of the fact that they are either too old and feeble for that or already dead. Here's a portion of his letter:

Let me say this right into your face, I like myself. I like myself a lot because I am witty, I have invented the theory of Dulfanism. Do you know what I think? I think that your silence doesn't mean you are hiding great ideas—it may mean that you simply don't have any. I have fun with Lucien Dulfan. I share my happy or sad thoughts with him. Good or bad, this is life.

Lucien

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

Attached to it was a photo of an abhorrent inside view of a public toilet in Odessa.

I don't believe Lucien Dulfan is a charlatan, as some people who do not know him well would assert, or his trickery is something he wants to gain publicity with.

There is absolutely nothing to be like that about him. I have known Lucien since we met in Odessa in the early 1980s. I remember a quiet, humble intellectual who was not wearing glasses. It seemed like he didn't want to look excessively philosophical having them on his nose. But the real reason for that was that no glasses, long-sighted or short-sighted, could help him in any way simply because he was stone blind. While painting, he would just smudge the canvas at random. Every so often, he wanted me to take a look at his new masterpiece, which he had finished just yesterday, and tell him what it was about. After I gave him a description, the expression on his face was like he was suddenly struck by the idea that he was actually a genius.

They say he was never seen without a dagger on his belt, which might give a wrong impression that he was dangerous. In fact, it was just a nice and handy scabbard in which he kept a teaspoon to stir sugar into his tea. Since he practiced the outlandish Kyrgyz tradition of drinking tea, which was without sugar, he pretended to stir sugar simply to demonstrate he was a civilized individual.

People wondered why he was wearing a Turkish fez. Was he a Turk? No, he had simply been forgetting to take off his nightcap. Sometimes, he was also seen walking out of his apartment in a long nightshirt—the reason was he didn't know he hadn't changed, so people mistakenly thought he was masquerading as an Arab to amuse them.

On one winter day, he barged into my office on the third

floor, wearing a shaggy bear fur coat. While entering the building, he stumbled, fell on all fours, and in this position, looking like a zoo animal, crawled up the stairs all the way to my office, scaring off the students and the faculty.

He was a gentle and selfless person. His friends and numerous guests knew they could freely come to his studio and take a leak into the sink. Public toilets in Odessa were not to be found easily, and if by chance they were, the unimaginable filth and horrible stench would make the visitor gag or faint or run away. Lucien recognized the needs of human beings and did not object.

All this as well as tons of other nice things about my friend, which are not mentioned here simply in lack of time and space, are a good proof he is one of the most modest and unassuming persons on earth endowed with numerous talents—all of which is well attested by the following verses:

*I like my Chattanooga,
I like my cardigan.
I like Lucien. He's genius,
He's glorious Dulfan.*

This is a made-up tale. However, most of the details, except for Lucien's blindness, are probably even more true than life itself.

Sunday, April 14, 2019

Today there was a gathering on Brass Lantern Way to mark our birthdays. Slava made red fish, mashed potato with mushroom sauce, cabbage salad, and herring under a fur coat. Julia is in Nashville. The Zmijewskis are in Providence.

The war-time song, which I placed at the beginning of the

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

book, had been published after all. I found it in the collection *Big Ocean Ships Came Visiting Our Harbor*. The text is a bit different, but it still is the same song.

Tuesday, April 16, 2019

I'm So Stupid!

Constantin came over today. We discussed Julia Latynina's new book *Jesus* and talked about the fire of Notre Dame de Paris.

My niece Valya called from Canada. She told me that back in the late 1970s I gave her a little money, which she used for the iconic movie *Andrei Rublev*. She also said it was me who advised her *Little Lord* by Johan Borgen and *Steppenwolf* by Hermann Hesse, the books that later helped her rise to the upper level of esoteric reading. Well, I'm glad I'd done this.

Valya lives in Toronto with her husband, son Kostya, and mother Aida. Valya's husband, Misha CK (Seekay), is a Silicon Valley computer whiz. He is also a savior of old and sick dogs, whom he takes from a dog adoption center and then takes care of them to their last days.

Valya and CK smoke e-cigarettes, which they hang on them like a necklace. They both are a bit outlandish. CK is a man of few words, he mostly smiles and listens. Valya has a funny sense of humor. Most of her stories are about her own life experience. Telling them, she would say once in a while, "I'm so stupid."

Wednesday, April 24, 2019

A Gemstone

Nina told me a little story of old times.

A passenger of the airliner, where Nina was serving as a flight attendant, a young handsome man, offered himself to her

as a tour guide around Moscow. Nina had spare time and accepted the offer.

“I came,” she continued her story. “He was there, waiting. We walked through the Kremlin, then he showed me Moscow sights which I had never seen before. It was fascinating. He was a good guide. And I kind of liked him.

It was getting dark, we were in a bus, going back to the airport. He gave me his phone number; said he would be happy to take another tour with me. It never happened.”

Nina breathed a small sigh.

“I lost his phone number,” she said.

She gave me a little look, and I realized one more time how beautiful she was.

“I was married,” she said.

When I tell Nina that I love her so much, I also add something like this:

“I see you as a little girl walking across a flowering field toward a river. Your head is white, your eyes are blue. It’s not exactly a river, it’s rather a creek—quiet, deep, and dark. And the water is warm. Now you sit swinging your feet in water. I am waving to you from across the creek. You give me a little smile.

I also see you sitting in the shadow of a blossoming cherry tree. You have a jewelry box on your lap, and you fumble with all those emeralds, sapphires, pearls, moonstones, jades. They look so pretty in your hands, in your ears, around your neck.”

Nina’s story was one of those precious gemstones.

Epilogue

In the summer of 1993, a little more than two years after we came to Chattanooga, we bought our first house at 8735 Holly Crest Drive. The day we moved in and were sitting on the upper deck, Nina cried out of fear that we would never be able to pay off that house. The house is no more. It was destroyed by tornado in April 2020. By that time we had long moved out. Julia had spent her childhood in that house. Now the evidence is gone. That's weird.

But back in 1993. Our friends from LaFayette came to the housewarming with their kids, and I took a picture of them. There sitting on the couch were, left to right, Faithy Wood, Nicola and Alisa Larson, Andy Wood, Eric Larson, and Polina Varava, the new arrival from Russia. I painted them on canvas

in oil, wrote, “Great Kids of LaFayette, GA” underneath, and put the work on display at a one-time art exhibition organized by the Memorial Hospital. Someone from LaFayette recognized the kids. Now the picture is in Preacher’s possession in his church office.

The house was paid off in six years, just before the new century began to roll out.

Lvov survived the sovok without much trauma, they say, and is now as beautiful and amiable as before. I wish I would come and walk along its mystic streets again, looking around through my tears. I wish I would come and watch *Sun Valley Serenade* there on my laptop. I wish I would come. Maybe I will.

Are you sure?

You know what, the dreams I was dreaming, they all have come true. Isn’t that funny?

I Say Goodbye

My fate’s locomotive has taken me through my life and is now slowing down. It’s time to finish my story. I say goodbye to my past and greet a new life that had begun on that blessed day of March 13, 1991, when a whopping hulk of *Clipper Water Witch* lifted off the tarmac of Sheremetyevo airport and set course to America.

Dad's Autobiography

(An official document)
Abridged

I was born on September 28, 1905, in the village of Volkovichy, Brest region, Russia, into a poor peasant family. My father's entire property was one workhorse.

In 1915, the family was evacuated to Siberia, away from the War. For two years, we lived in Samara region, where my father worked as a shepherd. I assisted him. After my mother died, we moved to Chelyabinsk region, where, in the beginning of 1918, my father died. I began to work at a milk factory.

In 1922, my elder brother Simeon took me to Syzran, a town on the Volga River where, in 1926, I graduated from a

factory school. I got a job as a mechanic at a railroad depot. In 1925, I joined the communist party. Since then, I began to work at various communist party committees and organizations as an assistant, instructor, and secretary mostly in the country areas of the Lower Volga region and Kazakhstan. In 1932-1933, I was a student of the Academy of Marxism-Leninism in Leningrad.

In 1937, I finally decided to leave Kazakhstan. I thought I had spent enough time there. Instead, I was sent to Petropavlovsk, Northern Kazakhstan, where I began to work as an assistant of the first secretary of the regional communist party committee.

In 1938, enemies of the people came up with a vicious slander against me. I was expelled from the communist party and arrested. For a year, I was kept in custody. No charges were placed against me. In May 1939, I was released. In November of the same year, I got my party membership back and was completely rehabilitated. I went out of prison in a very bad shape and had to leave for recovery—that's why the rehabilitation didn't happen earlier.

The real enemies of the people were brought to trial and rightfully condemned.

Michael Vishenchuk
December 14, 1941

A Memoir

Written by my grandmother Eudokia Plastikova
Abridged

November 30, 1959.

I was born on August 6, 1887, in Nedostoevo, a village near Ryazan, Russia. My Grandad was a peasant. Dad worked for the Orthodox priest. His earnings were twelve rubles a year. With the Grandad's permission, Dad went to Moscow and started a new life there as a pavement worker. Then, a Siberian merchant offered him a position in his household. For the next ten years, Dad was his obliging servant. The merchant assigned a teacher for him as well as for his kids. Seeing Dad's progress

in learning, he gave him a position at a logistics agency.

I was twelve when Grandad died. The property, though miserable, was sold, and the entire family moved to Moscow. It was a big family—father, mother, aunt from father’s side, and five children. The elder brother was an office clerk with the eighteen-ruble earnings a year. Dad was getting twenty-five rubles. Not much. We all enthusiastically waited for the next holyday to come—New Year, Christmas, Easter. Dad would give greetings to his superiors and get tips that were used to buy clothing and shoes for us children. I was not ready to start working since my education was just three years of elementary schooling. I was a good student though and was awarded with a Gospel, which at that time was an honorable commendation.

It was hard to keep such a big family, and it was decided to marry me off, for one thing. I was sixteen and a half years old when I married Stephan Plastikov, a telegraphist from Syzran, a town on the Volga River. On January 25, 1904, we had a church wedding and, soon after, left for Syzran. Ten months later, our first daughter Varvara—Barbara—was born.

In the fall of 1904, a railroad strike broke out. My husband was a devout revolutionary. He was one of the leaders who organized opposition meetings. The meetings usually took place on the other bank of the Volga River—there were also participants from other towns, such as students from Saratov. There was Ukhtomski, too, a mechanic, and Alexander Sopolyakov, who was under police surveillance. At that time I didn’t care much about all this. Then my husband explained to me what the purpose of the strike was, why it was necessary. I began to give it a thought.

In February 1905, a special commission arrived from Moscow. Those who had taken part in the strike were fired or brought to trial. The head of the telegraph service Hirbich

called my husband for an explanation.

“Why did you join the strike?” he asked.

My husband did not hesitate.

“Because it was the right thing to do,” he said.

“I have known you since seventeen years ago when the railroad just started functioning,” Hirbich said. “You have always been a person of good repute. You are going to remain your job. But not here. You’ll go to Ruzaevka.”

We arrived in Ruzaevka on February 25, 1905. House accommodations were not available within the train station area, so we rented a house from landlady Kopteva in the nearby village of Klin—a little over a mile away. It was a nice location. Right outside, there was a small pond and a drainage ditch overgrown with thorn bushes and cherries. Next came the railroad and a river. Across the river there was a wattle barn and beyond it, a wheat field and a meadow with tiny rivulets here and there. Beyond all this was a forest with an abundance of berries and mushrooms.

In the morning, we would go to the Pishlya River and catch some fish for breakfast. After breakfast, we would go to the forest to gather berries and mushrooms, as well as firewood, and grass for the cow.

Once a month, my husband had to report to the police. Rittmeister Drozdowski or wachtmeister Kleshchev often suspended him from work just for nothing—like for being too slow to take off his hat on seeing them. He was permitted to get back to work only after they had a nod from Moscow officials.

I began to sew for the owner of the house, saved some money. We bought a cow for twenty-two rubles, and chickens, and ducks. It was now a nice, big household. One thing was really irksome. In springtime, the river flooded, and water reached our house—with it, came mice, rats, lizards, and

newts. Snakes, too.

The owner of the house sold it to us for 175 rubles. We were paying by instalments without any paperwork. In 1914, we pulled the house closer to the train station.

The Revolution broke out. On January 30, 1917, I gave birth to a baby girl. We called her Anne. At about the same time, the first revolutionary meeting took place. My husband and I and our five children, wearing red bows on our clothes, joined the meeting. It was also a religious celebration—a priest led the procession, and there were many icons. People were spitting at the gendarmes who escorted the crowd, kicking them. We said prayers and then started to sing revolutionary songs. It was so much memorable.

Rittmeister Drozdowski fled to Kazan and remained in hiding as a locomotive stoker until he was accidentally recognized by a man from Ruzaevka. He was shot right on spot without any order. Wachtmeister Kleshchev as well as three other gendarmes, the train-station-bar owner, and an office clerk Obukhov were all shot in the ravine near the forest. We saw it from our house.

The dead bodies were left down there without burial. Some soil thrown on them, that was all they got. In the spring, the flood washed the bodies out. And then only it was at last permitted to bury them. They were buried right where they had been shot, down there in the ravine.

In 1917, our family joined the railroad workers' collective farm. That year, the crop was scanty, but by the end of the next year, we gathered plenty of potato, cabbage, kohlrabi, carrots, beets, cucumbers—filled up two outside cellars with them. There was no bread on the table, though.

For as long as five months, the whole family was being sick with typhus. The first member of the family who got sick was

our six-year-old boy. He died in August 1918.

My husband was all out to do his best in the revolutionary business. He was, in turn or all at once, the secretary of a revolutionary committee, the head of the local department of public education, the manager of a publishing house and library, the chairman of a housing board, and a member of a military commission. That was too much for one person. His health deteriorated, and he occasionally began to lose his memory. The doctor recommended to change the environment, find a better place where revolutionary activity would be minimal.

On May 5, 1919, we moved to a small train station called Bazarneya. We had sold our small house and arrived there in two boxcars—one for the family and the other for the possessions. For two months, we lived in the boxcars, waiting for a better abode.

It was a bad year. A drought almost destroyed the crops. To get grass for the cow, the children would go to the woods, where they also gathered mushrooms. Mushrooms were the staple food—I dried or pickled them. For wintertime, too. We also ate turnips, carrots, beets. Dry rinds of all kind and acorns were ground and used for flour. The biggest prop, of course, was the cow. But nothing could save us from typhoid. In Ruzaevka, we had typhus. Now three of the children got typhoid. A ten-month-old boy did not make it.

Four of the children were going to school. A neighboring Mordvinian was a bast shoemaker—we were buying footwear for our children from him. My husband was also wearing bast shoes. His feet were swelling, which was caused by poor nourishment.

We were given two bags of black rotten potatoes. The children would eat boiled potato and then sing and dance—I wondered why. It turned out that there was alcohol in the potatoes.

The doctor said it had saved our lives.

My husband was assigned to go with a group of volunteers to Siberia for bread. The agents returned empty handed. They barely got out of there alive. Siberia was engulfed in a civil war.

Our children were all diligent students. The eldest daughter, Varya, was in the ninth grade. Helping me in housekeeping took a lot of her time. She would have her little brother in one hand and a study book in the other.

In May 1921, my husband was assigned to a new job as a railroad inspector. We had to move to Ulyanovsk. It was a pity we couldn't stay longer in Bazarnaya. We said goodbye to the beautiful scenery with the forest all around and the mild climate we had been enjoying for the whole three years—and left for a new place again.

There was no dwelling in Ulyanovsk for us to move in—so we settled down in barracks at the train station Kindyakovka-2. Here, we planted a small vegetable garden. It was the time of the great famine. The children were admitted to the American Relief Administration kitchen. Soon we all got malaria which made us feel weak all the time. It was going on like that for two more years.

Eventually, we moved to Sura train station and lived there in barracks again. It was abandoned military barracks with an unrepaired roof. With snow falling from above on our heads, we had to keep fire in the stove all along, day and night, to warm ourselves.

We didn't stay there for long, though. My husband was appointed the head of the telegraph service in Syzran, and the family moved to that big town again. Varya got a job as a school inspector, Viacheslav painted telegraph poles and was in the seventh grade at school. They both were members of the young communist organization. Our daughter Lydia and son

ALL THE WAY TO CHATTANOOGA

Vasya were young Russian pioneers. Anne was a wolf cub. Yuri was just a little boy.

The year of 1933 was most unfortunate. My husband got paralyzed—he was not able to go to work for six months. On top of that, it was a bad harvest—we had nothing to eat.

Life went on anyway. In 1934, we finally settled down in Penza, where my husband got a job as the head of the telegraph service at Penza-4 train station. Our kids had grown up. Viacheslav was in the military service in the Far East. Varya got admission to the Hertzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad. Vasya joined the Navy in the North Sea. Yuri was yet a schooboy. Lydia became a supervisor at the Tractor plant in Volgograd. When the German army came, she was one of those who defended the city.

I took an active part in social activities. Along with being the head of a local women's committee, I was also a member of the Red Cross organization. When the war broke out, I organized a team for unloading wounded soldiers. Our job was to take the wounded from the train cars to hospital. Starting 1943, they were not that many, so we could take care of them all along until they were discharged.

In the summer of 1944, our youngest son Yuri was killed at war.

(The writing stops here)



Eudokia Plastikova, 1887-1973



Stephan Plastikov, 1879-1959



Eudokia and Stephan, 1904



With daughter Varvara, circa 1916



Mom with her brother Yuri, 1929



Dad



The Vishenchuk siblings: Dominika, Pavel with wife Valentina, Dad with Mom, and Simeon, 1930



Dad with us, 1936



Mom with us. Dad gone, 1937.
On right, family of friends



Claudia Agafonova (on left) and the Plastikov family: Eudokia (Granny Dusya), Vasili, Mom with Igor, Anne, Yuri, Lydia, and Grandad Stephan, 1931



With Grandad Stephan. 1946



The Leikin family: Grandad Greg, Grandmother Maria with her grandson Victor, and their son Ivan with wife Paulina, 1940



Ivan Leikin (on right), 1934



Philip Glazkov (on right), circa 1916



The Glazkov family: Philip (on right) with wife Katerina holding their daughter Paulina, 1915



Pavel Vishenchuk (Uncle Pavlusha), 1945



Yuri Plastikov with friends Klava and Galya,
1944



With Igor holding his daughter Marinka, and Zhora, 1962



With Aunt Valya



With Mishka Karyaev, 1957



With Vovka Malyuk, 1957



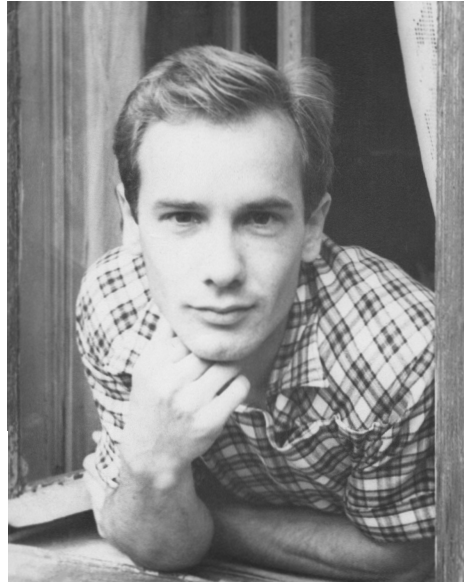
Left to right: Slavka Samokhvalov, Valka Muravyov, Edka Anokhin, and Gelka Vishenchuk, 1953



Peter Agafonov, Lucy, Mom, and self, 1957



Igor



Looking out the window, 1956



Sitting (left to right): Zasorkin, Oshurakhunov, Makarov (head of the interpreters bureau who replaced Mostovoy), Kozanchuk, Bolotov.
Standing (left to right): Gorlashkin, Shakhov, Khrizhanovski, Orel, Kaliev, Mazur, and self.
Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 1964



Nina as a flight attendant, 1962



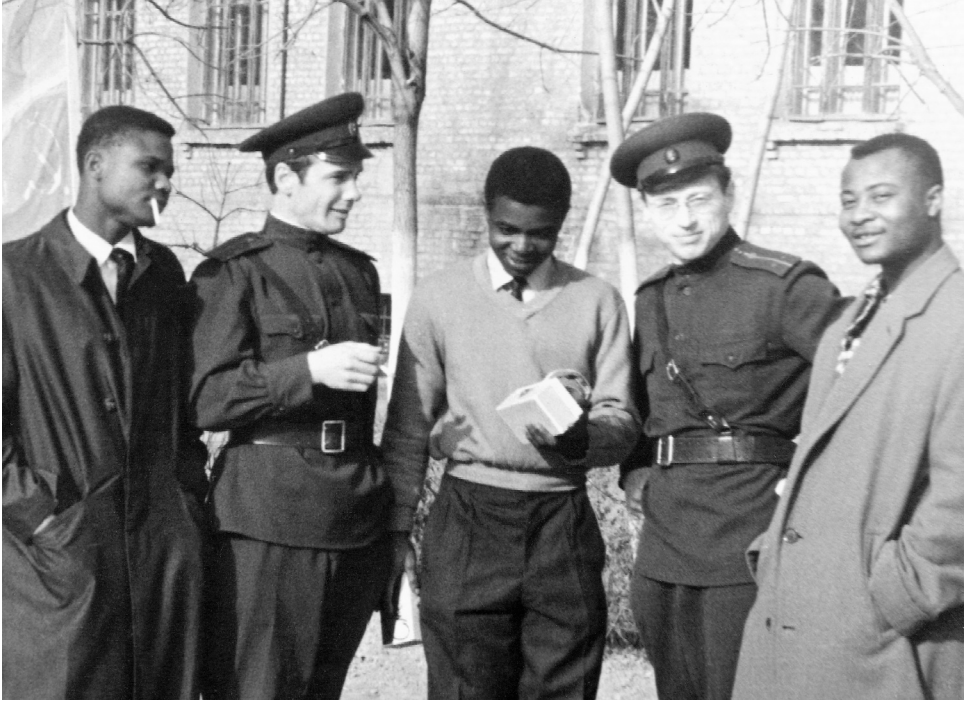
Nina, 1962



First military photo, 1962



On the wedding day. Dec. 16, 1962



With Ghana cadets



With Somali cadets, standing with a friend on right off center



With the two Moms, Varvara and Paulina



With Eudokia and Eugene Polyakov, Igor in center, Moscow, 1963



Nina in white socks, 1946



On right: Agatha, sitting. Standing behind her, right to left, Nina and Marusya.
Nina is about twelve.



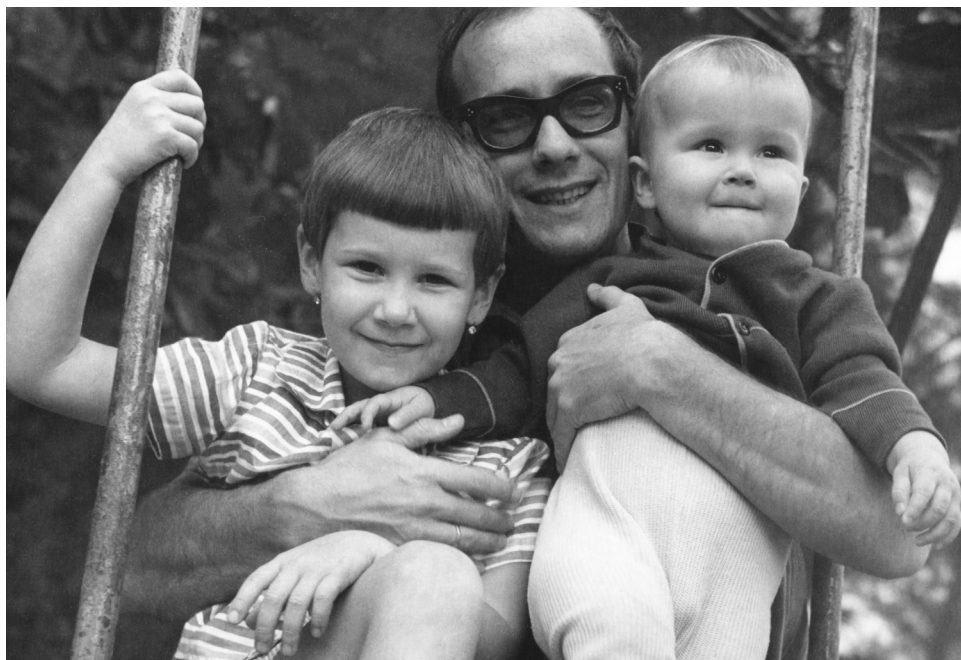
Nina, second on right. Behind her, right to left, are Dmitri, Alexander, and Katerina Morozova



Standing on left is Deryuzhkin. Standing second and third on right are myself and Alberdin.
Sitting second on left is Chujkov. Others are not mentioned in the book. Cuba, 1970



Guanabo, Cuba



With Slava and Constantin. Cuba, 1970



Back home from Cuba



Our kids are growing



On top: commander Constantin



Slava and Constantin, 1987



Tanya Golikova



Lucien Dulfan



Sitting: Nina, self, and Julia.
Standing: Polina, Andre, Slava (Anita), Constantin, and Lily. Chattanooga, TN, 2002



Buddy Nichols with his family, 1991



Left to right: Slava (Anita), Constantin, Lily, Jeannie Martenn, Nina, Bud Martenn, self, Preacher, and Wanda. Chattanooga, TN, 2016



Left to right behind anonymous group of three: Constantin, Tim Rake, Warren Baker, and self.
AMG International, Chattanooga, TN, circa 1993



Joan and Spiros Zodiatis, and Symeon Ioannidis playing with a child, during a Racoon Mountain outing. Chattanooga, TN, 1991



Here we are, 2002



Polina and Tom with their newly born child Katerina, and Polina's parents Slava (Anita) and Andre, 2017



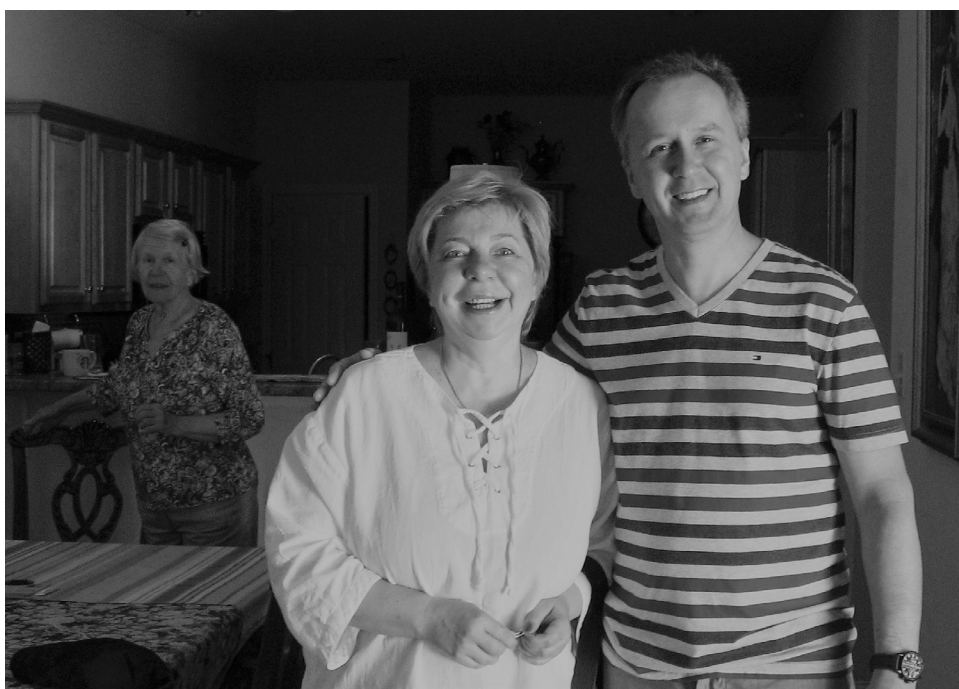
Julia with her parents at ETSU Graduation Event. Johnson City, Tennessee, 2017



Polina with her husband Tom and daughter Katerina. Polina is Doctor of Medicine in surgery.
Providence, RI, 2021



Misha Seekay, Aida, Lily, Constantin, and Misha Vishenchuk. Toronto, Canada, circa 2016



Valya with Constantin and Nina in the background while visiting us in Chattanooga



Julia with her parents after the White Coat ceremony, April 2018



Julia, on left, with her friends after graduation ceremony for Doctor of Pharmacy

