

The Anonymous Novel

Sensing the future torments

by Alessandro Barbero

Translated by Allan Cameron



Vagabond Voices

Sulaisiadar 'san Rudha

Translation copyright © Vagabond Voices Publishing Ltd 2010

First published in September 1998 as *Romanzo russo. 'Fiutando i futuri supplizi'* © Alessandro Barbero

Vagabond Voices Publishing Ltd.
3 Sulaisiadar, An Rubha
Eilean Leòdhais / Isle of Lewis
Alba / Scotland HS2 0PU

ISBN 978-0-9560560-4-7

The author's right to be identified as author of this book under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 has been asserted.

Printed and bound by Thomson Litho, East Kilbride



The publisher acknowledges subsidy towards this publication from the Scottish Arts Council



This translation has been funded with support from the European Commission.

This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

For further information on Vagabond Voices and its publications, see www.vagabondvoices.co.uk

Contents

Prologue 9

I. *A suitcaseful of tomatoes* 15

II. *Love in the morning* 28

III. *Old newspapers* 39

IV. *Mahogany* 50

V. *The tenants of Chkalova Street* 62

VI. *Nazar Kallistratovich Lappa* 75

VII. *The Astafyev affair* 86

VIII. *The thaw* 101

IX. *At Cinema Minsk* 112

X. *Chimut-Dorzhev* 126

XI. *Yellow flowers* 143

XII. *Fish soup* 152

XIII. *Strangers on a train* 164

XIV. *Amongst the believers* 180

XV. *The Sura of the Spider* 192

XVI. *Koshchey Bessmertny* 203

XVII. Nazar's trip to the country	215
XVIII. <i>The Accountant's bolt-hole</i>	232
XIX. <i>A conspiracy of women</i>	250
XX. <i>The exhumation</i>	260
XXI. <i>The red wolves</i>	271
XXII. <i>Cooking the lamb</i>	284
XXIII. <i>Tricks of the heat</i>	297
XXIV. <i>The toffs' talking shop</i>	313
XXV. <i>The purple notebook</i>	327
XXVI. <i>Animals in the city</i>	341
XXVII. <i>The conversation</i>	352
XXVIII. <i>In the steamroom</i>	366
XXIX. <i>Tennis</i>	379
XXX. <i>A dead man beckons</i>	392
XXXI. <i>Foul weather has the wolves wandering in</i>	400
XXXII. <i>The new world</i>	414
XXXIII. <i>A funeral in Baku</i>	425
XXXIV. <i>Matroskaya Tishina</i>	434
XXXV. <i>The glory of empire</i>	448

The Anonymous Novel

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Prologue

When you land in Moscow at night and the plane slowly banks around the city while awaiting permission to land, your gaze through the side window can hardly avoid the university's skyscraper standing on the Sparrow Hills. The lights from the innumerable windows are weak, it is true, but they shine in the dark, and on the highest spire the red star glows, as it has for so long. The skyscraper is still there – for the moment. It may well be that one day they will demolish it with dynamite, and in its place, who knows, maybe they'll dig a hole and make a swimming pool: I don't think anyone is seriously talking about this yet, but it would be a pity. A fanciful foreigner once compared it to a medieval castle covered with alembics and observatories, while in its dungeons computers palpitate and alchemists wear white overalls. Crows make their nests in its battlements and bats drowse in its towers, their heads hanging downwards. And perhaps there really are witches and fairies who endure tiresome lives in one of its forgotten storerooms or amongst the dusty showcases of its museum of natural history. Many people dislike it. They find it architectural nightmare and, indeed, a reactionary monument: "the quintessential..." how did he phrase it? I have the cutting here; give us a moment, he put it so well! Yes, here it is: "the quintessential schizophrenia in town planning that plagued us in other times". Sorokin, however, says that this building was not built for men or by them, but rather by the state for the state: what a pity then that people actually study there! It would be better if it existed solely for itself and that no one lived there except Hegel's ghost. The Thing in Itself... Of course, Sorokin can write and you have to take your hat off to him for that. And yet, take a look at a photograph of the skyscrapers that the Americans were building at the same time, and tell me that they don't resemble each other! You could switch the central spire of our one with, say, the one on the Chrysler Building, and most people would never notice the difference. Damn it, now I've got this nagging doubt: perhaps that style, which we have always taken for Stalin's unmistakable hallmark, was simply a product of contemporary tastes that were the same around the world. Here in Moscow, just as in New York, Sweden and, God knows, Australia...

There is always something to do there. If you don't need a book from the library, you can go in search of some acquaintance, sit down in the café with a fruit juice, join the queue for the barber's or go for a swim in the pool. Why not snoop around the dormitory corridors and put your ear to the doors so that you can hear what is going on behind them, especially ones through which a couple have just gone hand in hand? I too have lived there – for three or four years; I shared a room with Alekseyev; you know the guy? He's a painter. One of his paintings was hung on the further wall just behind our foldaway beds. It was a metre high and two wide. At that time it was the only place in the whole of the Soviet Union where they would have allowed him to hang it. It depicted a man seated on a toilet bowl, intent upon reading a copy of *Pravda*. All you could see of the man were the hairy legs with his breeks down by his ankles and the brim of his hat protruding at the top. The paper was of its actual size and produced by collage; you could have read it, if you wanted to – it was all there! There was a photo of an eighteen-year-old Uzbek weaver on her first day of work at the carpet factory, and another of a Ukrainian foreman who had committed himself to fulfilling a contract for 16.3 quintals of corn per hectare. There was even the interview with the commander of MiG-23 squadron stationed in the GDR. I can still recall how it started, and the title was "On the Front Line": "As I walked with Lieutenant-Colonel Vladimir Mamaliga at the edge of the runway, another fighter was taken out of its hangar. Military service in the Soviet Armies in Germany is difficult. There can be no easy tasks in Germany, but still less here. A simple statement of geographical significance: our community's frontier, the last outpost, is barely ten kilometres away." I well remember Alexseyev producing that painting right there in our room at the dormitory. We were both first-year students, and he would sit at the easel next to a pile of old newspapers, as he looked for choice articles. This caused a difference of opinion amongst our little group of friends: was the artist right to reconstitute the page of a newspaper with cuttings from different issues, or wouldn't it have been better to take any whole page at random and stick it up there exactly as it was? The result, most of us argued, would have been the same. You cannot improve on nature's work...

But this is just a jumble of words. It makes no sense, someone will object. For instance, what has Alekseyev to do with it? Well, quite a bit, actually. He was the one who came up with the idea of going to Zyuzino a couple of years ago. This was still the period in which the Muscovite Underground had to be understood literally: everyone was going mad for that Mother Earth stuff – the vital humidity of the world underground. Misha Roshal staged an open-air performance in which he had himself buried, and the title was of course Underground. Monastyrsky thought he was a shaman, and wrote poems to his woman in which he invited her to join him in his tomb and gnaw at his bones. And Nikita, that's Alekseyev's name, painted a colonel in uniform with chicken's claws, and entitled it "Humid Mother Earth". He then organised the exhibition for the underground world at the Avant-Garde Club. We went in procession to Zyuzino, one miserable afternoon under a leaden sky that promised the first snow: naturally it was All Souls' Day. Nikita had managed to bring together quite a few people who had a car, even journalists: there's never been such a happening, he said, even in America... Someone brought along the shovels, which had probably been stolen from a cemetery. Once we got to Zyuzino, we dug a large grave and we buried dozens of books and manuscripts. Misha Sukhotin had brought all his drafts, carefully arranged in a cardboard box file with a "For Correction" label. At the last moment he decided that he too wanted to be buried with them: this way, he said, I will finally have time to correct them. He was drunk, and it took all Alekseyev's authority to dissuade him...

Exactly six months later, after the First of May, we returned to disinter our works. After a public reading of manuscripts which were filthy with earth and soaking after the thaw, all the material was carried off to be filed away in a cabinet at the club. Everyone who had brought something was able to rediscover their buried work, and then this manuscript turned up which no one knew anything about. It was a large package of extra strong paper typed with single spacing in two copies. The whole thing was well protected in its cardboard packing, but it lacked both the author's name and the title. What were we to do with it? Alekseyev stuck it inside his anorak and took it away. Then one morning he rang without so much as a by-your-leave and ordered me to join him at his studio. As we all know, conditions had

changed considerably since dormitory days: for some perhaps, things had got worse, but for him they were unquestionably better, what with all those dollars the Americans were pushing his way! He'd bought a studio on the Arbat, this Nikita of ours. And when you consider that I am still having to manage with sharing a room which comes with use of a kitchen. Forget it. I went to see him and found him sitting in a rocking chair, a bag in his mouth and an ashtray full of butts. You could have cut the smoke-filled air with a knife. "It's not at all bad, you know," he mutters as soon as he sees me.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The manuscript, the one without a title. Go on, read a bit!"

I start to protest. I say that I don't have time, and it's true. I have to see somebody on the other side of the city. Nowadays, you know, it is not like it once was, when those who couldn't be bothered simply didn't go to work. Now we've got capitalism, we're obliged to knock our pan out just to put lunch and dinner together.

"Tolik," he replies sharply, "am I wrong in thinking that you work for a publisher? Do you not understand that this is work too? Stay here and read." What can I do? I obey. I stay there reading until the evening, drinking coffee prepared by one of Nikita's girls and eating Napoleon cake. When I finish, Nikita looks at me and grumbles without removing the cigarette from his mouth: "Well, are you not going to thank me? Now run off and take it to your boss. Down there, they'll think you're God Almighty; they'll be desperate to get a novel like this published." It is not easy to find a reply. Nikita has become too accustomed to having a following wind; some things he simply cannot understand. Yes, I work for a publisher, but our publishers are not what they used to be. They only publish pornography, and if things go well, a few detective stories. But here you have someone who even talks about politics. Imagine that, and then there is the way that he does it! Well, I've done my bit: I gave my boss the manuscript, and for a year I haven't heard a word about it. Then the other day I open the broom cupboard to get a roll of toilet paper, and there's the package – unopened. They didn't even take a look. This is what it's like now. Once you could at least get a manuscript abroad, and there they would pay its weight in gold; now the

West couldn't care a damn about us – they don't even know that we're alive. What can I do? I go back to Zyuzino by bus and cross the park sodden with melted snow. I dig a hole with a garden spade, and I bury the manuscript once again; only this time I add a note because I want whoever finds it to know how it all went and what manner of times we are living through. Above all, I want to make it clear that I didn't write this fucking novel. In fact I don't want to have anything more to do with it and you won't be hearing another word about me. And the way things are going, it'll take all my energies just to avoid the hassles.

Moscow, spring 199...

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

I
A suitcaseful of tomatoes
Moscow, November 1987

Our story commences on a dark Moscow evening, when the snow and the frost could freeze your blood. And the place? Well, you can get to it by taking any of the underground railways to the city centre, but you wouldn't find much when you got there. Any sensible person would stay at home, snuggled up close to the stove. In any event, you would have to change for the circle line and get out at Krasnaya Presnya. Then you go left as far as Malaya Gruzinskaya, turn right and then left at the first lane. At this stage you find yourself in front of a long, eight-storey, dirty-white building, which is rather imposing from the outside, but in reality is falling apart: it has been a long time since the walls and the stairs last exuded the smell of fresh paint. Enter at number 90, and if the lift is working, go up to Flat 48 on the sixth floor. If I remember correctly, it is now the home of Ivan Dedyukhin, who works the petrol pumps on Kotelnicheskyy Street on the riverside, and his wife, who, when she is not at work in the factory, wanders around the flat in a dressing-gown with nothing on underneath and the windows open – something of a scandal. But at the time when our story took place, this petrol-pump assistant was not living there. No, it was home to an insignificant little man with glasses, who on the evening of 7 November 1987 was sitting in the kitchen and watching the parade in Red Square on television for the second time, and dining despondently on a few slices of salami. Tanks paraded across the television screen; they pointed their steel machine-guns to the sky, and red stars appeared on the armour-plated sides; on each one a soldier protruded in a rigid, straight-backed salute as they passed under the rostrum, and military bands blasted out the Soviet Union's anthem or, at the critical moment, the Internationale. Who could have imagined then that there would only be another three parades to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution? And if anyone had foreseen it, he would have been taken universally for a fool and a fantasist.

The kitchen was so small that the television was half a metre from its solitary spectator, who did not however find it a problem as he suffered from acute myopia. A small dirty frying pan, a plate, a glass, a knife and a fork were piled into

the sink and awaited the householder's routine evening washing-up. On the other wall, a fridge that was nearly always empty served as a bookshelf. Indeed books had even colonised the other two rooms in the flat, where they had long ago outgrown the shelves designed to hold them and now covered the carpet and the sofa. The cursed things protruded from under the bed, and could even be found in the bath, which, it has to be said, was very rarely used. The owner of both the books and the apartment, Viktor Nikolayevich Obilin, the director of the Institute of History of the CPSU at the State University of Moscow, chewed on his last slice of salami and reflected sadly on the inconvenience of holidays in a well organised calendar. The arrival of this particular festivity meant that the institute and the library were closed, and Professor Obilin was obliged to spend the entire day at home. The woman who came every day to wash his clothes and prepare his food had not, of course, turned up, and as his culinary abilities only stretched as far as fried eggs, he had eaten two of these for lunch, and was now working hard on the mastication of left-over salami.

The realisation that the following day was also a holiday only came to him in the late evening, or in truth, the middle of the night. Since he had reached fifty, this was when he suffered insomnia – yet another vexation. Too tired to get up to work, Viktor Nikolayevich tossed and turned under the blankets, and it was while he suffered this torment that the imminent approach of this deplorable reality suddenly made itself felt. Clearly the day after the October anniversary would be a holiday this year as it was in any other one, so that people could get over their hangovers from the night before. In any case no one would have turned up to work, so it only made sense for the state to demonstrate its generosity. Therefore Zoya Filippovna would not come and the corner shop would not open. There was nothing to eat in the house, and this terrifying thought drove Obilin from his bed to check out the situation. He put on his dressing-gown and shuffled into the kitchen, where he opened the fridge and was relieved to discover an open bottle of milk and a carton of yogurt that he had previously overlooked. Moreover there were two lemons on the lowest shelf. This was better than nothing. In extremis, he could satisfy his hunger: better a tub of yogurt than lunch with his sister in Medvedkovo. Then a vague recollection suddenly came to him. Full of

hope, he closed the fridge and went to the cupboard at the other end of the flat. It was dark and he couldn't see a thing. For weeks he had been meaning to change the lightbulb in the hall, but then Zoya Philippovna had assured him that there were no lightbulbs in the shops. He took a chair from the kitchen and clambered onto it so that he could fumble around on the highest shelf in the cupboard. Amongst a thousand other worthless things, his hands finally encountered a large, round, glass object, and then another. They were there! He took them down so that he could see them: a jar of cucumbers and a jar of dried tomatoes that had been waiting in the dark for who knows how long and were now ready to offer up their treasure in order to quiet his hunger. Obilin lived a frugal life: lunch and supper were guaranteed for the following day. He returned to bed a comforted man.

In the life of Viktor Nikolayevich, 8 November in no way differed from the previous day. He woke early, he put on his misshapen slippers and the old jacket he wore about the house, he drank a cup of tea, into which, while chomping on a pickled gherkin, he dunked a piece of dried bread that good fortune had hidden in the kitchen's recesses, and then he went to his study and worked until three in the afternoon. He held a book open in front of a pile of blank sheets of paper, on which he scribbled his notes. He turned the pages of the book one at a time, and occasionally sighed. Rewriting this textbook was no joke, and it was not just any textbook: History of the Soviet Union for secondary schools, initial print run one million copies... Take this for example, on page 263 it says (and you can check this out for yourselves): "The kulaks were given plots of land some distance from the collective farms. Many kulaks were moved to remote parts of the country. However, experience showed that you had to act decisively when dealing with the kulaks. Those guilty of terrorist acts were punished with the full force of Soviet law." Well, at one time there was nothing wrong with writing such things, but now even a child can see that this is no longer the case: even a short while ago, perhaps you still could, but no more! Okay... but how were you now expected to write? Perhaps something along these lines: "the imposition of *administrative methods* in the countryside did not produce the hoped-for results." Or perhaps you could go as far as "gave rise to malpractices and illegality". "Indeed, it would appear that it gave rise ..."

Now you understand that this was not the kind of work you could do in any old fashion – just as it comes into your head! Viktor Nikolayevich therefore worked to a very severe routine, which is more or less what he had done throughout his life. His alarm clock ticked away the hours at his desk and was set to inform him of the arrival of lunchtime. At three o'clock, he stood up and went into the kitchen, where he switched on the television and ate cucumbers, tomatoes and yogurt. He drank the milk and watched the military parade in Red Square for a third time. After lunch he went to sleep for an hour; young people might ridicule such behaviour, but at a certain stage in life, it becomes a necessity. On reawakening, he went to the bathroom to freshen up and clean his glasses, and then he returned to his desk and worked until eight. In the afternoon his brain found it more difficult to work than in the morning, and increasingly Viktor Nikolayevich had to suppress a yawn. The volume of screwed up pieces of paper thrown in the wastepaper bin grew more rapidly, so by the evening it was full, but the professor was a stubborn man and continued to work until the appointed time for ending his day's labour. Only when the clock rang out its eight chimes did he move to the kitchen, where he switched on the television and finished the milk and cucumbers. In truth, he was still slightly hungry after he had emptied both jars. He briefly wondered whether it was worth returning to his desk. As he flicked through newspaper cuttings he had put aside for a chapter in his textbook, he came across a statement by the economist Tikhonov, which had caused him some mental confusion. The economist claimed, difficult as it is to imagine, that the kulaks never existed; those who went under this name were not capitalists at all, but simply those who had worked a bit harder in the period following the Revolution. Whatever next? These tricksters were constantly shifting their ground and suddenly black was white and white was black. He had to sleep on this one, as it would take more than an evening to sort out such a vexed question. Besides, wasn't it supposed to be a holiday? He finished drying the remaining dishes, and then sat at the table and switched the television back on.

The next morning Obilin got up in excellent mood: thanks be to God, the holidays were over, and the institute, the library, the canteen – that is everything a man needed to

pursue a civilised existence – had returned to normal operations. He drank his tea and took nothing to eat, while vaguely considering the possibility of stopping at the institute's store to buy a few doughnuts. He left home and marched through the snow in complete darkness until he reached the underground station. He would have liked to have bought his usual newspaper at the news-stand in Malaya Gruzinskaya, but on this occasion he had to forego this particular element in his daily routine: there was a queue of about seventy or eighty people, and of course all of them would be wanting to buy that same damned magazine. While he was waiting for the train within the crush of passengers, he saw it again: many were holding *Moscow News*, and he tried to catch the headlines. Naturally he had never bought the magazine; indeed he was stunned that they didn't ban it, but it was good to keep oneself informed. He was just able to make out the cartoon at the bottom of the first page: a radio journalist presses his microphone against the glass of an aquarium and asks a fish, "Could you give us your opinion on transparency!" Of course, who talks about anything else these days? But no one seems to know what it means. Everyone likes to fill their mouths with the stupid word: We want transparency! As he considered these changes, the train arrived with a blast of its horn, and the crowd carried him in, where good fortune allowed him to sit down on a seat just vacated by a departing passenger. Obilin could count on the fingers of one hand the times that he had managed to find a seat throughout the year, and for a short while, he allowed himself to relax and savour the pleasant sensation of being rocked by the gentle movement of the underground train as it sped noisily through Moscow's subterranean world. But then he started to feel the heat. The morning crush filled the carriage, and he wouldn't have relinquished the prized seat he had secured even if threatened with a knife. To take off one's coat would have been unthinkable; as for reading a book, that was entirely out of the question. People were already frowning at him because of his black leather briefcase which he kept at his feet, where it took up vital space. The situation was aggravated by the fact that it was clearly of foreign manufacture. There was nothing to be done: he had to sit there and sweat.

Viktor Nikolayevich was thin, below average height and generally inconspicuous. That day, he was wearing a brown

suit under his coat; it was worn at the elbows and the seams, and unkindly drew attention to its owner's narrow shoulders. The cuffs of his shirt were frayed: when it came to washing and ironing his clothes, Zoya Filippovna would go as far as replacing his buttons, but she did not consider it her duty to tell him when an item was too worn to be put on in decent society. The only showy object he possessed was his briefcase, and when he finally got out of the underground station, Obilin discovered to his horror that there was a hole in it the size of a five-rouble coin, which had not been there when he left home. More terrible trials awaited him that day, but as yet he was unaware of this, so he already felt that he had suffered intolerably. Once he was in the open, he walked in a purposeful manner, holding his briefcase so that passers-by would be unable to notice the tear, and he reflected on the possible causes of such a disastrous turn of events. Could a briefcase ruined by the slightest scratch be made of real leather, as the gypsy in the Budapest subway had assured him? While he pondered this question, a car passed dangerously close and someone threw a cigarette butt at his feet. Obilin watched the car with loathing as it disappeared into the traffic, and then resumed his stride. After he had taken a few steps, he once more had the sensation that all was not as it should be. But this time, the problem did not concern his briefcase, but his person, or to be more precise, the bottom of his trousers, from which a narrow wisp of smoke was rising, as he was to ascertain with a bitter pang of resentment after a more careful examination of the crime scene. The still burning cigarette end had been caught in the turn-up of his trousers and, within a few seconds, had created a small hole into which Viktor Nikolayevich could insert his little finger, after he had extracted the butt with an expression of disgust. Horrified by the way fate had decided to persecute him, he scurried as fast as he could across Manezh Square towards the safe haven of his institute.

Although part of the University of Moscow, the Institute of History of the CPSU was located in a large aristocratic building in Herzen Street, a few blocks from the Kremlin. Who knows what's there now? Probably Dresdner Bank. Obilin was out of breath when he got to the stairs. He ran up the stairs as far as the neoclassical colonnade, under whose shadow he opened a heavy, dark-walnut door. Here

he almost bumped into two small mustachioed men, who appeared from nowhere in that instant. Their clothes were threadbare and their shoes muddy. The shabbier of the two was dragging along a suitcase tied together with string. Judging by their appearance, they must have passed the previous night in a train or an airport waiting-room, and had not had time to tidy themselves up. While they apologised for the incident, Viktor Nikolayevich felt he recognised one of the moustaches as belonging to the director of some institute in Baku, whom he had met years before at a very select seminar; he recalled kebabs and swimming in the sea – the last time he had done so in his life. It must have been the case, because the man rewarded him with a wide smile full of golden teeth, kissed him and embraced him. He declared that he had come from his distant home to Moscow for the sole purpose of finding Obilin. The second moustache was of the same race and muttered an incomprehensible name while hurriedly shaking his hand.

Obilin took his guests into the cream-coloured corridor, which had recently been painted. Next to the last issue of the institute's wall newspaper, which had yellowed with age over the year it had hung there, someone had put up a poster to celebrate the Great Patriotic War, carefully framed and protected by a pane of glass: mother and child clung to each other as they confronted the threat of a Nazi bayonet dripping blood, and cried: "Soldiers of the Red Army, save us!" The two mustachioed perused the manifesto quizzically and then burst into ill-mannered laughter. While they waited for the lift to come clattering down, Obilin stubbornly looked at his feet. Baku! A voice within him said that he should not expect anything good to come from down there, but he could not put his finger on why. Having at last reached the third floor, they came out of the lift and walked down the deserted corridor. It appeared that there was no one in the institute. Not a very good impression for the guests, Viktor Nikolayevich thought; people should get in a little earlier! He pushed the glass door and entered the waiting room for his office followed by the two men from Baku, who showed a great interest in their surroundings. Fortunately, the elderly scientific assistant Valentina Leonidovna Stark had turned up. When she saw her boss, she put down her knitting, opened her bag and handed over two packets

wrapped in greasy paper, which suggested that they contained caviar.

"These were left by Dekanozov," she said.

Obilin's mouth watered, and the memory of the cucumbers he had eaten the night before made his stomach feel empty. If he had been alone, he would have immediately opened one of the packets, but now these two tiresome visitors had turned up, such an indulgence was unthinkable. He remembered with regret that there were also those doughnuts from the institute's store, and he hesitated: they were special doughnuts with caraway seeds that smelt particularly good. But there was no dignified way out of this predicament: first he had to receive the unexpected guests.

After having closed the office door behind him, he propped his briefcase against the wall, hiding the recent tear as he did so, he hung up his coat and hat on the hatstand, slipped the packets into the bottom drawer of the desk, and asked the visitors to sit down as he in turn sank into his office armchair. The second of the two men with moustaches put down his suitcase tied with string close to the door, and sat down without a word. The first imitated him, then cleared his throat, smiled and started to talk. Or rather he launched into interminable preliminaries, during which he assured his host that he had not come to waste his time and dwelt on many superfluous details of their previous meetings. Obilin remembered the kebabs, the disgusting sheep fat that ran down his fingers, the swimming costume he was obliged to borrow which smelt musty, the water of the Caspian Sea that was as warm as soup and on which small oil slicks floated, and the tar that clung to his feet while he paddled around the shoreline. For some bizarre reason all these memories did not appear unhappy ones; indeed, they were almost worthy of nostalgia. But there was something else which meant that nothing good could come out of Baku, and yet he could not remember what it was. His guest talked and talked, while his companion nodded his agreement with every word, but his expression was completely blank – so much so that Obilin wondered whether he understood Russian. Then his ears pricked up like a dog's, because the speaker had suddenly come to the point.

"Viktor Nikolayevich, as I have already told you, we have not come to waste your time. As the poet said, 'There is indeed no worse death than waiting!' I have only one

question to ask you, and you will understand that it is not a matter of secondary importance, if we have gone so far as to disturb you; besides, we know that we can always count on your understanding. Well, you have assigned to one of your institute's researchers a thesis entitled, correct me if I'm wrong, 'Party Cadres in the Baku Region between 1945 and 1953'. Or perhaps I haven't remembered it correctly?"

That's it, thought Viktor Nikolayevich. I told Tanya Voznesenskaya! He raised his eyebrows to create an expression of surprise and he took his time, "What can I say? You have caught me on the hop, and I have no memory of it at all, but I can always find out."

He opened a drawer, took out a metal box file that contained a pile of rectangular, rigid, white cards, and quickly flicked through them. He then took one out, replaced the box file in the drawer and leant back into the comfort of his chair. The two guests followed him with their eyes, clearly unimpressed by these manoeuvres.

"This would appear to be the case," Obilin finally admitted. "There is such a thesis. It was requested by Tatyana Borisovna... Voznesenskaya," he muttered, briefly checking the card as though it were the first time he had come across that name.

"You'll excuse me, Viktor Nikolayevich," exclaimed the first of the two with unexpected forcefulness, "is it not possible that this young woman find a more appropriate subject for her doctorate? You will of course have reflected on the complications that research of this kind could throw up. Let's face it: that was a very difficult period! There surely can't be any need for us southerners to explain such things to someone like you. And then, my esteemed Viktor Nikolayevich, if only it were some thesis cobbled together while sitting comfortably in the Lenin Library! You lot in the capital are very lucky; here, you have everything. You just have to look up the catalogues, and they bring you the books to your table. You want to study? Then go ahead; God forbid that we should interfere! But no, this girl comes to us and demands her right to stick her nose into our archives. And with the current legislation, as you well know, this is no joking matter: when someone turns up, you have to let them in. Just try saying no! So it is up to you, here in Moscow, to weed out what is unacceptable. But in this case no one could argue that this business is very clear. Is it really

appropriate that people go around muckraking in times like these? Is this the way in which our people should behave? I think not. But do you know what transpired, when we got round to carrying out a cursory investigation into whom we were dealing with? Don't make me say it, my esteemed professor; you know better than I do! Viktor Nikolayevich, please understand me; we are certainly not accusing you, but someone has been a little careless."

Professor Obilin was not stupid. His works were as dull as ditchwater, it is true, and his line of argument was often obscured by tortuous syllogisms, but he usually re-emerged unscathed. His endnotes were put together meticulously and, although they tended to be excessive, they were proof against all criticism. The manner in which he expressed himself was not crystal clear, but he observed all the rules of grammar and syntax, something that could not be said of all his colleagues. For example, the academician Abrikosov wrote in an article... Well, I won't go into that now. Obilin was profoundly surprised and increasingly unnerved by the frenetic way in which his historian colleagues greeted that third year of Gorbachev's perestroika. But equally it would have been too easy to pretend that nothing was happening. Viktor Nikolayevich knew very well that in such cases it is not wise to rush ahead, but equally one should not lag too far behind, because it is quite possible that, once things have settled, someone starts to rummage around and then traps you in a difficult corner: look at what you wrote in 1987! But if you rush ahead, you might find yourself in the wrong with no way out: they'll make mincemeat of you and feed you to the wolves. So when the best of his students asked permission to study *that* argument during *those* years, Viktor Nikolayevich reflected at length on the question. And what years, 1945 to 1953! Obilin knew from his work on the textbook that these were years you hurried over without going too far into the details: you just gallop along until you get to Sputnik and Gagarin into space. Then you can breathe freely again. In the end he had decided to see how it would turn out. Now that this was how it was turning out, he couldn't complain that he hadn't been aware of this eventuality. This was the fun his cunning had earned him!

"My esteemed Abdul... Tokayevich," he started hesitantly. With forenames and surnames of this kind, who knows if he remembered the man's name correctly.

"My esteemed Abdul Tokayevich," he repeated more decisively once he had noted that the man's mustachioed face showed no sign of surprise or disapproval at being addressed in this manner. "Voznesenskaya is a highly promising scholar, in whom the institute has the fullest confidence! No one here believes that her family background should constitute a reason to mistrust her." And this was the absolute truth. Times had changed, and the arrest of a relation – perhaps even one you did not get on with – was no longer enough for the state to withdraw all trust in you as a Soviet citizen! Anyway what was that business in Tanya Borisovna's family? Wasn't it the paternal grandfather, or even the great-grandfather, or perhaps a great-uncle? No, this was all water under the bridge. Only in Baku would they still be worrying about such things. Viktor Nikolayevich continued to talk and became increasingly convinced by his own arguments. But then he noted the appearance on his guest's face of that well-known objection capable of resisting every argument. It showed in the contemptuous twist of his mouth and heaviness of his eyelids: yes, yes, you can chatter on as long as you like but, my friend, that girl *is not one of us!* However the expression of the man on the other side of the desk was not what he would have expected. Although it was hardly encouraging, its hostility was not familiar. As for the other guest, he appeared completely uninterested in the conversation; he was more concerned about his briefcase, which he stroked absent-mindedly while looking towards the ceiling. Suddenly Obilin understood: it was all a pretext. Those two couldn't care a damn about Tanya Borisovna and her family; they simply didn't want anyone from Moscow ferreting around in their archives, even if that person had been Obilin himself. They didn't want outsiders prying in their affairs; it was as simple as that. They must have had good reasons if they had come all that way to tell him. As this conviction became more firmly established, his eloquence dried up and finally he went quiet.

"Most esteemed Viktor Nikolayevich," the first visitor again took up the conversation with a sigh, "we fully understand your motives, and we would be very upset if you were to think that we are meddling in the institute's work. But I feel that you should meet us half way. These are matters of a certain gravity, which should not be examined for the first

time by such a young student. Believe me that things are no longer the same where we live either. Perestroika has reached us too, and we have not been left behind. We too could have allowed many theses on arguments such as these, but we chose not to. Why, do you suppose, did we do that?" The orator paused and stared gleefully into his eyes, while Obilin's brain was struck by a disturbing thought: had he heard someone express themselves with these same words? Of course, he knew. The answer came instinctively. It was *him*, Stalin, whose *Short Course* was entirely written in that rhetorical style. "For we would not want our work," his guest continued triumphantly, "to become entangled with what we might call meddlesome petitions from outsiders. Something that would in-ev-it-ably occur, if things continue in their current direction. You will excuse me if I repeat myself, but there is no need for me to explain such things to a man like yourself."

"Of course, I understand perfectly," Viktor Nikolayevich replied as he shifted uneasily in his armchair. "But I have no idea how we can stop this study at this stage. The dissertation has been approved by the competent bodies, the permits to consult the archives have been granted, and the work is already underway. There is simply nothing I can do."

The guest smiled and clasped his hands together on his stomach, to reveal the large gold rings that decorated them, as Obilin was able to observe. He smiled good-naturedly, just as one might smile at an old drinking partner with whom one has gone swimming in the sea.

"Viktor Nikolayevich," he finally said. "Surely there must be some little thing that you need? Particular conditions are required for a responsible job like yours to be carried out in a manner that fully reflects your abilities and learning, and we are very keen to create the ideal conditions so that our people can work in the appropriate manner and show up the degenerate West. Think hard! Would you like a flat?"

"I already have a flat," Obilin muttered, almost choking with surprise.

"Perhaps something that could assist you more directly in your profession? Foreign publications? Or a trip abroad? They say that the American libraries are quite fantastic; it is hard to believe that their research is so backward."

"I don't need anything," Obilin whispered, increasingly at a loss.

There followed a moment of silence. As Viktor Nikolayevich looked at his unwanted guests, he realised he had not said enough and wondered what else he could add to soften the unpleasant sound of his last words. He almost regretted the fact that he had disappointed them; they seemed so obliging. It occurred to him that there must be something that after all might be useful to him, but what? He was just about to break the silence and exclaim: What should I do? You make a few suggestions! But then he felt ashamed and held his tongue. The first mustachio also went silent, and appeared unhappy with the turn of events. The unpleasant silence continued for more than a minute. The second mustachio was restless and, without saying a word, took out a black plastic wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket, and a card from the wallet. He held it out, but then seemed to reconsider his move, and before Obilin could take hold of it, he returned it to his wallet and put it away. He then looked venomously into Obilin's eyes and pronounced very purposefully without the trace of an accent, "Obilin, do you understand Russian? Keep your filthy nose out of our affairs!"

He then thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and extracted a ripe tomato, stretched his arm across the desk to a pile of corrected drafts and crushed the tomato on top of them with great emphasis. Next, he grabbed Obilin's tie while continuing to stare him in the face, and used it to clean the tomato juice very carefully off his hands. He stood up and dragged the suitcase towards the door. The first speaker also got up, and threw Obilin a strange glance, half apology – "you see what people we have to deal with!" – and half reproach – "you, my friend, really asked for that!" They left the room, and Obilin was unable to move for several minutes, as though dumbstruck. Eventually and at the same time that the others had stopped a taxi and were heading towards the fruit and vegetables market with their briefcase which, it will now be clear, was full of tomatoes, Viktor Nikolayevich with trembling fingers started to undo his tie. Once he had it in his hands, he stared at it for a long time, and then almost without wanting to, he dipped his finger into the liquid which was dripping onto the desk and tasted it: with a little salt, it would have been delicious.