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BUDDHA'S LITTLE FINGER

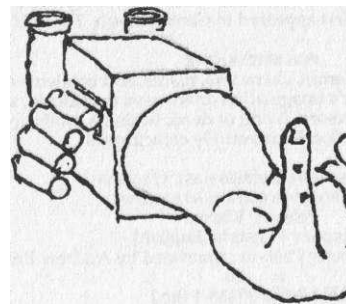
Victor Pelevin was born in 1962 in Moscow and lives today. His books include the novels *The Life of Insects*, the novella *The Yellow* story collections *A Werewolf Problem in Central* *The Blue Lantern*, which won the Russian Literature Prize in 1993. Pelevin's new novel, *Homo* published by Viking in February of 2002.

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Buddha's Little F

VICTOR PELEV

*translated by Andrew Brom*



PENGUIN BOOK

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Gazing at the faces of  
less stream of life ran  
hurtling into nowhere  
think: where am I in

---

## PREFACE

For numerous reasons the name of the true manuscript, written during the early 1920s in the monasteries of Inner Mongolia, cannot be mentioned in it as published here under the name of the editor. It was not suitable for publication. This version does not include the descriptions of a number of magical procedures which were in the original, nor does it retain the narrator's rather naive reminiscences of his life in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg (so-called Petersburg Period). The author's classification of the genre of the work as 'a peculiar flight of free thought' has been omitted: it would seem quite clear that it was not to be regarded as a joke.

The story narrated by the author is of interest as a psychological journal which, while it undoubtedly possesses a number of artistic virtues, makes absolutely no claim to anything beyond that, although at times the author does indeed discuss topics which, in our view, are in no way of general interest. The somewhat spasmodic nature of the text reflects the fact that the intention underlying the text was not to create a 'work of literature', but to describe the mechanical cycles of consciousness in such a way as to achieve a complete and final cure for what is called 'inner life'. Furthermore, in two or three places the author actually attempts to point directly to the mind rather than force him to view yet another product of the mind constructed out of words; unfortunately this is far from the task for his attempts to prove successful. Literature will most likely perceive nothing more in our work than yet another product of the critical solipsism which is so fashionable in recent years, but the true value of the work lies in the fact that it represents the first

history of culture to embody in the forms of art the Mongolian Myth of the Eternal Non-Return.

Let us briefly introduce the main hero of the book. The editor of this text once read me a tanka written by the poet Pushkin:

And yet this year of gloom, which carried off  
So many victims brave and good and beautiful,  
Is scarce remembered even  
In some simple shepherd's song  
Of sweet and soft lament.

In translation into Mongolian the phrase 'brave victim' has a strange ring to it; however, this is not the proper place to explore that theme, and we merely wished to point out that the final three lines of this verse could well be a reference to the story of Vasily Chapaev.

What is now known about this man? As far as we are able to judge, in the memory of the common people his image has assumed the features of pure myth, and Chapaev is now Russian folklore's closest equivalent of the famous Khadji Nasruddin: he is the hero of an *infinite* number of jokes derived from a famous film of the 1930s, in which Chapaev is represented as a Red cavalry commander fighting against the White army, who engages in long, heart-to-heart conversations with his adjutant Petka and his machine-gunner Anka and finally drowns while attempting to swim across the Ural river during a White attack. All this, however, bears absolutely no relation whatsoever to the life of the real Chapaev - or if there is some relation, then the true facts have been distorted beyond all recognition by conjecture and innuendo.

This tangled web of confusion originated with the book *Chapaev*, which was first printed in French by a Paris publishing house in 1923 and then reprinted with unaccountable haste in Russia: we shall not waste any time on demonstrating the book's lack of authenticity. Anyone who wishes to make the effort will discover in it a mass of discrepancies and contradictions, while the very spirit of the book is the best possible proof that the author (or authors) had absolutely no involvement with the events which they endeavour in vain to

describe. In addition, Furmanov did not mention occasions, he could not have written the book, for reasons that are not narrative. It is therefore not possible for people regard the text as an account.

In fact, it is not more than seven years since the highly active forger of the truth about Chapaev has been as possible. However, the manuscript seems to have had power on the coast.

To conclude, the book (which was 'Vasily Chapaev' confusion with the 'Little Finger' had been of the major theme of the editor did so in the Divergent Part.

We dedicate this book to the living creatures.

Gate Gate Par

---

## Buddha's Little Finger

---

Tverskoi Boulevard  
saw it, two years  
snowdrifts every  
how manages to  
women were p  
them, beyond th  
the same grey sh  
towards the earth

Some things,  
venues were scou  
I should not ha  
face to face with  
walk. The bronz  
no doubt becau  
bearing the insc  
the Revolution/  
comment on the  
event which cou  
day - just recent  
portunity to glin  
lapidary absurdi

It was beginn  
Strastnoi Monas  
in front of it wer  
strung with brig  
around them and  
could scarcely r  
general meaning  
the machine-gun  
'terror'. Two dru  
on their rifles s



hurrying towards the square, but one of them fixed his brazen gaze on me, slowed his pace and opened his mouth as though about to say something; fortunately - for him and for me - his companion tugged him by the sleeve and they walked on.

I turned and set off down the incline of the boulevard, guessing at what it was in my appearance that constantly aroused the suspicions of all these scum. Of course, I was dressed in outrageously bad taste; I was wearing a dirty coat cut in the English style with a broad half-belt, a military cap (naturally, without the cockade) like the one that Alexander II used to wear, and officer's boots. But it did not seem to be just a matter of my clothes. There were, after all, plenty of other people around who looked far more absurd. On Tverskaya Street, for instance, I had seen a completely insane gentleman wearing gold-rimmed spectacles holding an icon ahead of him as he walked towards the black, deserted Kremlin, but no one had paid him the slightest attention. Meanwhile, I was all the time aware of people casting sidelong glances at me, and on each occasion I was reminded that I had neither money nor documents about my person. The previous day, in the water-closet at the railway station, I had tried sticking a red bow on my chest, but I removed it as soon as I caught sight of my reflection in the cracked mirror; with the ribbon I looked not merely stupid, I looked doubly suspicious.

It is possible, of course, that no one was actually directing their gaze at me any more than at anyone else, and that my tight-strung nerves and the anticipation of arrest were to blame for everything. I did not feel any fear of death. Perhaps, I thought, it had already happened, and this icy boulevard along which I was walking was merely the threshold of the world of shadows. I had realized long before that Russian souls must be fated to cross the Styx when it is frozen, with their fare collected not by a ferryman, but by a figure garbed in grey who hires out a pair of skates - the same spiritual essence, naturally.

Suddenly I could picture the scene in the finest of detail: Count Tolstoy in black tights, waving his arms about, skates over the ice towards the distant horizon - his movements are

slow and solemn, like a  
headed dog barking  
overtaking him. I  
hand slapped me o

I stepped to one  
the handle of the r  
ment I saw before  
tance from childho  
dressed from head  
Mauser dangled at  
a ridiculous kind o

T'm glad you're

'Hello, Grisha/

'Why strange?'

'It just is strange'

'Where have you

'And where are yo

'From Petersburg

glad if I knew that

'Then come to m

by, with an entire

As we walked

glances, smiles an

Since the time of o

which made his f

cheeks had grow

health had benefite

of ice-skating.

We had studied

then we had seen

him a couple of tir

he had taken to w

only heightened b

irritated by his ma

constant hints at h

however, to judg

must have been tru

one time was quit

cance of the Hol

signs of belonging to the hosts of evil. But then, of course, there was really nothing surprising in this transformation: many decadents, such as Mayakovsky, sensing the clearly infernal character of the new authority, had hastened to offer their services to it. As a matter of fact, it is my belief that they were not motivated by conscious satanism - they were too infantile for that - but by aesthetic instinct: after all, a red pentagram does complement a yellow blouse so marvellously well.

'How are things in Petersburg?' asked Vorblei.

'As if you didn't know/

'That's right/ agreed Vorblei, suddenly seeming to lose interest. 'I do know.'

We turned off the boulevard, crossed the roadway and found ourselves in front of a seven-storey apartment house. It was directly opposite the Palace Hotel, in front of which two machine-gun installations were visible; they were manned by sailors smoking cigarettes, and a red flag flapped in the wind at the end of a long stick.

Vorblei tugged at my sleeve. 'Look over there/ he said.

I turned my head. On the street outside the entrance to the house stood a black limousine with a tiny cabin for passengers and open front seats, on which the snow had piled up.

'What?' I asked.

'It's mine/ said Vorblei. 'It goes with the job.'

'Ah/ I said, 'congratulations.'

We entered the apartment building. The lift was not working and we had to make our way up a dark staircase, from which the carpet runner had not yet been ripped away.

'What is it that you do?' I asked.

'Oh/ said Vorblei, 'it's not something I can explain in a few words. There's really a lot of work - too much, in fact. First one thing, then another, and then something else, and all the time you have to try to keep up. First one place, then another. Someone has to do it all.'

'In the cultural line, is it?'

He inclined his head to one side in a rather indefinite fashion. I did not try to ask any more questions.

When we reached the fifth floor we approached a tall door

on which there was a square area which seemed to have been. He opened the door when a telephone rang.

Vorblei picked up the receiver and he roared into the phone. 'Member . . . No, do you can't do that, it will be a disaster for the sailors, it will be a disaster. I must register a violation.'

He glanced sideways at me. 'When I saw him, I went through the door.'

The floor there was covered with them banned long ago. Some of them left behind by the revolution. Their lives were also very interesting. A pet hanging on the wall, decorated with enamel. As soon as I saw it I realised it must have lived there for a long time. Beside it was a site wall. And for a moment I saw something which might constitute a considerable part of the site. Under a yellow canopy a table in the centre of the room. Because of their proximity to the site, composed of esoteric Chinese symbols. A halvah tin shaped like a house. A business constructed out of another, three-dimensional opener.

Lying on the floor were whose shapes put me in mind of leg-wrappings and also a great many other things.

Shortly afterwards he came in. He took off his usually military tunic.

The things they give you to do/ he said as he sat down, 'That was the Cheka on the phone.'

'You work for them as well?'

T avoid them as much as I can.'

'How did you get involved with such company anyway?'

Vorablei smiled broadly. 'It couldn't have been more simple. I had a five-minute telephone conversation with Gorky.'

'And straight away they gave you a Mauser and that limousine?'

'Listen/ he said, 'life is a theatre. That's a well-known fact. But what you don't hear said so often is that every day the theatre shows a new play. And right now, Petya, I'm putting on a show the like of which you can't imagine .. /

He raised his hands above his head and shook them in the air, as though he were jingling coins in an invisible sack.

'And it's not even the play that's the thing,' he said. To continue the analogy, in the old days anyone who felt like it could fling a rotten egg at the stage. Today, however, it's the actors who are more likely to rake the hall with machine-gun fire - they might even toss out a bomb. Think about it, who would you rather be right now? An actor or a member of the audience?'

This was a serious question.

'What can I say? The action at this theatre of yours starts much further back than you suggest,' I said thoughtfully. 'Besides, I think that the future really belongs to the cinematograph.'

Vorablei chuckled and nodded. 'All the same, you think about what I said.'

T promise I will,' I answered.

He poured himself some vodka and drank it.

'Ah/ he said, 'about the theatre. Do you know who the Commissar for Theatres is now? Madame Malinovskaya. Of course, you never knew her, did you?'

T don't remember,' I replied, a little irritated. 'Who the hell was she?'

'Vorablei sighed. He stood up and walked across the room without speaking.

'Petya/ he said, sitting down facing me and gazing up into

my eyes, 'we keep things wrong. Wh friends, of course, b help you.'

I decided to risk

T will be honest had visitors.'

'Where from?'

'From that theatre'

'How do you mea

'Just as I said. Th introduced himself a the others had no m with me for about f they said our conv would have to be want to go to that o one from which one

'But you did com

T did not come ba from them, Grisha. from the doorman v

'But why did the got absolutely noth you did?'

T did absolutely r about it. I publishe newspaper which d one rhyme in it the Can you imagine th

'And what was th

'Oh, it was comp time washing away terns keep appearin Our memory tells r can we be sure that

pear with the first l 'I don't quite und 'Neither do I/ I s

thing I am trying to say is that there was no politics in it at all. At least, that was what I thought. But they thought differently, they explained that to me. The most frightening thing was that after the conversation with their consultant I actually understood his logic, I understood it so well that ... It was so frightening that when they led me out on to the street, I ran away not so much from them as from this new understanding of mine .. /

Vorablei frowned.

The entire story is a load of arrant nonsense/ he said. They're nothing but idiots. But you're a fine fool yourself. Was that the reason you came to Moscow?'

'Well, what could I do? As I was running away, I fired. You may understand that I was firing at a spectre created by my own fear, but that is hardly something I can explain to them at the Cheka.'

Vorablei looked at me seemingly engrossed in his thoughts. I looked at his hands - he was running them across the tablecloth with a barely perceptible motion, as though he were wiping away sweat, and then suddenly he hid them under the table. There was an expression of despair on his face, and I sensed that our meeting and my account had placed him in an extremely awkward situation.

'Of course, that makes it worse/ he muttered. 'But still, it's a good thing you've confided in me. I think we'll be able to sort it out... Yes, yes, I'm sure we can sort it out... I'll give Gorky a call straight away ... Put your hands on your head.'

I did not take in the meaning of the final words until I saw the muzzle of the Mauser lying on the tablecloth. Incredibly enough, the very next thing that he did was to take a pincenez out of his breast pocket and set it on his nose.

'Put your hands on your head,' he repeated.

'What are you doing?' I asked, raising my hands. 'Grisha?'

'No/ he said.

'"No" what?'

'Weapon and papers on the table, that's what.'

'How can I put them on the table/ I said, 'if my hands are on my head?'

He cocked his pistol.

'My God/ he heard that phrase

'Well, then/ I credible bastard were children. V think they'll give

Vorablei smiled

When we were me while he rum out the revolver haste about his m to a brothel, and ably never had to ous and common

'Unlock the do

'Let me put r whether there w cited by his own the unfolding co

'We're not goi vard. But put it o

I took the coa turned slightly to the next moment, over Vorablei - no ally thrown it rig

To this day I d but a fact is a f falling to the floo let missed my sid apartment. The fallen and I grabb ric. I managed to tol to the floor opened he had fi almost deafened

course of the stru any case, I can cl nez in the interlu

Even after he had stopped moving, it was a long time before I could bring myself to release my grip on his throat. My hands scarcely obeyed me; in order to restore my breathing I performed an exercise, but it had a strange effect, inducing a mild fit of hysterics. I suddenly saw the scene from the perspective of an outside observer: a figure sitting on the corpse of a newly strangled friend and assiduously breathing according to Yogi Ramacharaki's method as described in the journal *Isida*. As I stood up, I was overwhelmed by the realization that I had committed murder.

Of course, like anyone else who did not entirely trust the authorities, I carried a revolver, and two days before I had had no qualms about using it. But this was something different, this was some dark scene out of Dostoevsky: an empty flat, a corpse covered with an English-style coat, and a door leading to a hostile world - a door perhaps already being approached by people attracted by idle curiosity. By an effort of will I banished these thoughts from my mind. The Dostoevskian atmosphere, of course, was not created by the corpse or the door with its bullet hole, but by myself, by my own consciousness, which had assimilated the forms of another's repentance.

Opening the door on to the stairs slightly, I listened for a few seconds. I could hear nothing, and I thought that perhaps the sound of a few pistol shots might not have attracted attention after all.

My revolver was still in Vorblei's trouser pocket, but I really did not feel inclined to retrieve it. I picked up his Mauser and looked it over. It had an excellent mechanism, and was quite new. I forced myself to search his jacket and discovered a packet of Tra' *papyrosas*, a spare cartridge clip for the Mauser and a pass for a member of the Cheka in the name of Grigory Fourply. Yes, I thought to myself - that was a typical touch; but his true character had already been clear even when we were children.

I squatted down on my haunches and opened the lock of his obstetrician's bag. Inside there was an official looking file full of blank arrest warrants, another two cartridge clips, a tin box full of cocaine, some extremely unpleasant-looking med-

ical forceps (I immediately thick wad of money, with rouble Duma notes on one was all just what I needed. after the shock I had suffered cocaine into my nostrils. I razor and I instantly became made me too sentimental, control rapidly.

Taking Vorblei under the corridor, kicked open the door about to push him inside despite the devastation and noise life were still visible, illuminated before the war; it had been light bamboo railings stood there was a charcoal drawing moustache. There was a room. When I saw it, I immediately Vorblei further along the corridor real simplicity of the next room black grand piano with its stool. There was nothing else.

At this moment a strange Vorblei half-sitting in the corner. Seeing him I had been very careful not to peep out from under the door down at the piano. How strange is here - and he is not here. His soul is now undergoing a process published three years earlier in the form of a retelling of a news item of some parliament or other. Tekel Fares', the words on the wall alive; he thought; he pondered.

I turned towards the piano. A piece by Mozart, my favourite. I regret that I did not have a madcap himself had dream-

me had nothing to do with the shocking incident with Vorblei: the image that appeared before my eyes was of the small bamboo beds in the next room, and for a second I imagined someone else's childhood, someone else's pure glance directed at the sunset, someone else's world, deeply moving beyond all words, which had now been borne off into oblivion. I did not play for very long, though, the piano was out of tune, and I knew I should be leaving as quickly as possible. But where should I go?

It was time to think about how I would spend the evening. I went back into the corridor and glanced doubtfully at Vorblei's leather jacket, but there was nothing else. Despite the daring nature of several of my literary experiments, I was still not enough of a decadent to put on a coat which had now become a shroud and, moreover, had a bullet hole in its back. I took the jacket off the hook, picked up the obstetrician's bag and went through into the room with the mirror.

The leather jacket was just my size - the dead man and I were almost exactly the same height. When I tightened the belt with the holster dangling from it and looked at my reflection, what I saw was the very image of a Bolshevik. I expect that an inspection of the packages lying by the wall would have made me a rich man in the space of a few minutes, but my squeamishness won the upper hand. Painstakingly reloading the pistol, I checked that it sprang easily from its holster and was just about to leave the room when I heard voices in the corridor. I realized that all this time the front door of the apartment had been open.

I dashed over to the balcony. It looked out on to Tverskoi Boulevard and the twenty or so yards of cold dark emptiness beneath it held nothing but swirling snowflakes. In the circle of light from a street lamp I could see Vorblei's automobile, and a man wearing a Bolshevik helmet who had somehow appeared in the front seat. I decided that Vorblei must have summoned the Cheka when he was on the telephone. It was impossible to clamber down on to the balcony below, so I dashed back into the room. They were already pounding on the door. So be it, I thought, all of this had to come to an end sooner or later. I aimed the Mauser at the door and shouted: 'Enter!'

The door opened and two  
ishly flared trousers came t  
hung all over with bottle  
them, with a moustache,  
was young, although his fa  
paid not the slightest atten

'Are you Fourply?' asked  
I am.'

'Here,' said the sailor, a  
folded into two.

I put the Mauser back in

Com. Fourply! Go immedi  
pound our line. To assist  
Barbolin, experienced comm

Below the text there w  
thinking what to say, they

Ts that driver downstairs

'Yes/ said the one with t  
car. What's your name?'

'Pyotr/ I said, and then

'I'm Zherbunov/ said th

'Barbolin/ the younger  
was soft and almost woma

I sat facing them at the  
glasses of vodka, pushed o  
to my face. I realized that

'Well then/ I said, taking  
the victory of world revol

My toast was not gree

'Of course, victory's all  
about the works?'

'What works?' I asked.

'Don't you try playing  
proached me, 'Babayasin t

'Ah, you're talking abou  
the obstetrician's bag. 'W  
meanings. Perhaps you'  
James?'

'Who's he?' asked Barbolin, grasping the tin in his coarse, broad palm.

'An English comrade/

Zherbunov cleared his throat dubiously, but for a moment Barbolin's face reflected one of those feelings that nineteenth-century Russian artists loved to depict when they were creating national types - the feeling that somewhere out there is a wide and wonderful world, filled with amazing and attractive things, and though you can never seriously hope to reach it yourself, you cannot help sometimes dreaming impossible dreams.

The tension disappeared as though by magic. Zherbunov opened the tin, picked up a knife from the table, scooped up a monstrous amount of the white powder and rapidly stirred it into his vodka. Barbolin did the same, first with his own glass, and then with mine.

'Now we can do the world revolution justice,' he said.

My face must have betrayed an element of doubt, because Zherbunov chuckled and said: 'This goes right back to the *Aurora*, brother, back to the very beginning. It's called "Baltic tea".'

They raised their glasses and drained them at a gulp, and there was nothing left for me but to follow their example. Almost immediately my throat became numb. I lit a *papyrosa* and inhaled deeply, but I could not taste the smoke. We sat there without speaking for about a minute.

'We should get going,' Zherbunov said suddenly and rose from the table. 'Ivan'll freeze to death down there.'

In a state of numb torpor, I put the tin back into the bag. I hung back in the corridor, trying to find my fur hat, then put on Vorblei's peaked cap instead. We left the apartment and set off in silence down the dimly lit staircase.

I was suddenly aware that my spirits were calm and easy, and the further I went, the calmer and easier they became. I was not thinking about the future, it was enough for me that I was not threatened by any immediate danger, and as we crossed the dark landings I gazed entranced at the incredibly beautiful snowflakes swirling in the air outside the window-panes. It occurred to me that I myself was like one of those

snowflakes, and the wind in the wake of the two others were stomping down through the spite the euphoria that had been a sober assessment of an interesting observation. We were curious about how the heavy bullet harnesses were where a solitary electrician hooked on Zherbunov's belt together, rather in the manner had a vision of Zherbunov for their next killing and a cult element of their totalitarianism seemed to me yet another revolution. I suddenly understood Blok's new moods; some had escaped my throat, because

'And you didn't want a gleaming gold tooth.'

We went out into the street, the soldier sitting in the front we climbed in. The car had a rounded windscreen of snow-covered back and though our carriage was full of trolls. I thought that this was the most uncomfortable and never, who was always eating this was a deliberate act could enjoy not only the savour the inequality of

I turned towards the street and the snow falling outside beautiful. It was illuminated by the light of one of the graffiti boldly daubed on the wall: 'MERDE'.

When the automobile

a little more normal. We alighted on an unfamiliar street beside an entirely undistinguished-looking gateway in a wall, in front of which stood a couple of automobiles and several smart cabs. A little further off I noticed a frightening-looking armoured car with its machine-gun turret buried under a cap of snow, but I had no time for a closer look, for the sailors had already plunged into the gateway. We walked across an inexpressibly bleak courtyard and found ourselves facing a door surmounted by a protruding canopy with volutes and cherubs in the old merchant style. A small signboard had been hung on the canopy: 'THE MUSICAL SNUFFBOX: LITERARY CABARET'.

There was light showing through the pink curtains drawn tightly across several windows beside the door: from behind them I could hear the plaintively beautiful note of some obscure musical instrument.

Zherbunov tugged the door open sharply, revealing behind it a short corridor hung with fur coats and greatcoats, which ended in a heavy velvet curtain. A man wearing a simple Russian shirt and looking like a convict rose from a stool to meet us.

'Citizen sailors/ he began, 'we don't...'

With the agility of a circus acrobat Barbolin swung his rifle around his shoulder and struck him with the butt in the base of his belly; the attendant slid down the wall and on to the floor, his hostile face suddenly expressive of weariness and revulsion. Zherbunov pulled aside the curtain, and we entered a dimly lit hall.

Feeling myself fired by an unusual burst of energy, I looked around. The place looked like an ordinary run-of-the-mill restaurant with some pretensions to chic, and the public seated among the dense clouds of smoke at small round tables was quite varied. There was a smell of opium. Nobody took any notice of us, and we sat at a small table not far from the entrance.

The hall was bounded on one side by a brightly lit stage, on which a clean-shaven gentleman in evening dress, with one bare foot, was sitting on a black velvet stool. He was sliding the bow he held in his right hand across the smooth edge of a long saw, one handle of which was pressed against the floor

by his foot while the other hand, so that the saw vibrated, needed to dampen the vibrations of the metal, he would press his side him on the floor stool. A long, white sock protruded from the gentleman's trouser leg, and he extracted from his pocket a simple melody, but what mattered was the timbre of the note that faded away over an open very centre of my heart.

The door-curtain at the top of the Russian shirt stuck behind him. He clicked his fingers in a sign of business and nodded towards us, gave a short, formal nod behind the curtain. Immediately with a tray in one hand and a teapot in the other were identical teapots standing on the table, each held a dish of small pies, and the waiter set the cups out in front of the teapot and then froze in a rigid posture, a bill drawn at random from his pocket, a ten-dollar note. I could hear a whistle was doing on the stage, whistling from one of the corners, and the waiter come dashing over.

Zherbunov swallowed the pie and grimaced in distaste. 'This is a *khanja*, a bad Chinese vegetable pie, but I can't chew on a pie, but I can't swallow it, it's perfect on my throat of the chest.'

'What's in the pies?' Barbolin asked, disappearing these days, and he ate them as fast that way.'

'I tried it once,' Zherbunov said.

Unable to bear any more, Zherbunov and Barbolin set about stirring



Meanwhile the gentleman in evening dress finished playing, donned his sock and shoe with elegant rapidity, stood up, bowed, picked up the stool and quit the stage to the sound of scattered applause. A handsome-looking man with a small grey beard got up from a table beside the stage. His throat was wrapped in a grey scarf as though to conceal a love bite. I was astonished to recognize him as the poet Valery Briusov, now old and emaciated. He mounted the stage and turned to face the hall.

'Comrades! Although we live in a visual age, in which lines of printed words are being supplanted by sequences of images or . . . hmm . . .,' he declaimed, 'still tradition does not abandon the struggle, but seeks to discover new forms. To this day the immortal Dostoevsky and his novel *Crime and Punishment* continue to inspire young seekers of truth, both with axes to grind and without. And so now a little tragedy - that is the precise definition of this play's genre, according to the author himself, the chamber poet Ioann Pavlukhin, Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please for the little tragedy *Raskolnikov and Marmeladov*/'

'Your attention please,' echoed Zherbunov, and we drank.

Briusov left the stage and returned to his table. Two men in military uniform carried a massive gilded lyre on a stand and a stool out on to the stage from the wings. Then they brought out a table, stood a pot-bellied liqueur bottle and two glasses on it, and pinned up two pieces of cardboard at either side of the stage, bearing the words 'Raskolnikov' and 'Harmeladov' (I immediately decided that the misspelling of the second name was not a mistake but a symbol of some kind), and finally they hung a board bearing the incomprehensible word 'yhvy' in the centre of the stage. Having duly situated all of these objects in their places, they disappeared. A woman in a long tunic emerged from the wings and began running leisurely fingers over the strings of the lyre. Several minutes passed in this fashion before a quartet of individuals in long black cloaks appeared on stage. Each of them went down on one knee and raised a black hem to conceal his face from the audience. Someone applauded. At the opposite end of the stage two figures appeared wearing tall buskins, long white

robes and Creek masks. They looked at each other, but stopped. One of them had an axe hanging under his arm. The roses - I realized that he was the obvious enough without further introduction his name was hanging b

The other figure halted for a moment, began intoning in ponderous tones the same words as his partner. He confessed that he had no further. Raskolnikov's blazing eyes and the woes of the downtrodden. The suggestion that they should pursue revolutionary innovation.

The actor with the axe drained his glass and continued to look at Raskolnikov a long and confused look. Several of the images quite different from the arrogant strength of empire. He eyes and lending his face to the

On hearing the word 'yhvy' he raised his elbow.

'What d'you reckon?'

'It is still too soon,' I whispered.

Marmeladov's meaning was clear. Dark hints began to surface. In comparison of the grey St Petersburg. An axe to the back of the head. A dark closet in which he hid. This, Raskolnikov began to say, and he enquired what Marmeladov's confusion, Marmeladov's

In the meantime I surveyed the four people at each round table. A mixed bunch, but as has been the history of humanity, it was a mixture of sively dressed whores with a table as Briusov, and gazing at me. Time I had seen him, was

instead of a normal tie. The fat that had accumulated on him seemed to have been pumped from the skeletal frame of Briusov: together they looked quite horrific.

Looking further, at one of the tables I noticed a strange man sporting a military blouse criss-crossed with belts and an up-turned handlebar moustache. He was alone at his table, and instead of a teapot there was a bottle of champagne standing in front of him. I decided that he must be a big Bolshevik boss. I do not know what it was in his calm, powerful face that struck me as unusual, but for several seconds I was unable to take my gaze off him. His eyes met mine, but he immediately turned away to face the stage, where the meaningless dialogue was continuing.

Raskolnikov attempted to discover for what purpose Marmeladov required the axe and received replies couched in vague, flowery phrases about youth, the Grail, eternity, power, hope and - for some strange reason - the phases of the moon. Eventually Raskolnikov capitulated and handed over the axe. He was counting the wad of bills that Marmeladov had given him in payment, when he suddenly swayed back and froze in astonishment. He had noticed that Marmeladov was standing there in front of him wearing a mask. Still speaking in the same laboured hexameters, he began asking Marmeladov to remove the mask. I was particularly struck by one image which he used, 'Your eyes are like two yellow stars' - Briusov broke into applause at the words, but overall it was far too long and drawn out. After Raskolnikov had repeated his request for the third time, Marmeladov paused in silence for a long, terrible moment before tearing the mask from his face. Simultaneously the tunic attached to the mask was torn from his body, revealing a woman dressed in lacy knickers and a brassiere, sporting a silvery wig with a rat's-tail plait.

'Oh God!... The old woman! And I am empty-handed ...' Having pronounced these final words in an almost inaudible voice, Raskolnikov slumped to the floor from the full height of his buskins.

What followed made me blench. Two violinists leapt out on to the stage and began frenziedly playing some gypsy melody, while the Marmeladov woman threw her tunic over

Raskolnikov, leapt on to the stage, wiggling her lace clad legs.

For a moment I thought of the result of some monstrous accident. I was looking in my direction. 'My, my eyes once again...' she said in a military blouse, and I suddenly knew all about the dead woman and more serious things about her.

At that moment I caught myself from taking to my heels and decided to remain sitting at the table. I noticed several of them looking at me; but most were looking at the stage, and not at their vodka.

I had just finished my drink when I saw a woman bounding over to the stage. She was looking wildly to the insane accompaniment of her naked legs up to the ceiling. The four figures in black were present throughout the play, not only in the tunic, and only in the tunic, making that this was a woman who where there is a mention of a woman to carry away the dead person. The woman brought me to my senses. The woman was happening was not what I could possibly have imagined. It had passed - but a perfectly normal woman, suddenly deciding to accept her fate by this time retreated into the wings.

'Time to call a halt, ladies and gentlemen.'

Barbolin looked up at the ceiling.

The agents of the Emperor were in the room.

These words seemed to have caused him to strain himself because he immediately tensed up and strained him.

'Not that way, comrades.'

Meanwhile the gentleman with the saw had reappeared on the stage, seated himself on the stool and begun ceremoniously removing his shoe. Opening up my travelling bag, I took out a pencil and a blank Cheka arrest order; the plaintive sounds of the saw swept me upwards and onwards, and a suitable text was ready within a few minutes.

'What's that you're writing?' asked Zherbunov. 'You want to arrest someone?'

'No,' I replied, 'if we take anyone here, we have to take them all. We will handle this a different way. Zherbunov, remember the orders? We're not just supposed to suppress the enemy, we have to propound our line, right?'

'Right,' said Zherbunov.

'Well, then,' I said, 'you and Barbolin go backstage. I will propound our line from the stage. Once I have finished, I'll give the signal, and you come out. Then we'll play them the music of the revolution.'

Zherbunov tapped a finger against his cup.

'No, Zherbunov,' I said sternly, 'you won't be fit for work.'

An expression somewhat akin to hurt flitted across Zherbunov's face.

'What d'you mean?' he whispered. 'Don't you trust me, then? Why I, I'd ... I'd give my life for the revolution!'

'I know that, comrade,' I said, 'but cocaine comes later. Into action!'

The sailors stood up and walked towards the stage with firm, lumbering strides, as if they were not crossing a parquet floor but the heaving deck of a battleship caught in a storm; at that moment I felt something almost like sympathy for them. They climbed up the side steps and disappeared into the wings. I tossed back the contents of my cup, rose and went over to the table where Tolstoy and Briusov were sitting. People were watching me. Gentlemen and comrades, I thought, as I strode slowly across the strangely expanded hall, today I too was granted the honour of stepping over my own old woman, but you will not choke me with her imaginary fingers. Oh, damnation take these eternal Dostoevskian obsessions that pursue us Russians! And damnation take us Russians who can see nothing else around us!

( Good evening, Val

Uriusov started and I -и >y unable to place li . rmaciated face.

'Petya?' he queried. loin us for a minute.'

I sat at the table an uiri frequently enou I.нч 11 y knew one an

I low are you?' ask lately?'

No time for that no

Yes,' said Briusov . >ver my leather jacket il'le same ... But I did w ays thought highly lection, *The Poems of C lln- Kingdom of L* But I .i(ways had all those h

Conspiracy, Valery

'I understand,' said llssiJre you, I always you've changed, Petya positively gleaming . read Blok's "Twelve"

'I have seen it,' I sai

And what do you t i do not entirely un I said. 'What is Chris I )oes Blok perhaps w

'Yes, yes,' Briusov r talking about that.'

Hearing his name n lifted his cup, but it (able until he found t but before he could bl chest.

'I have heard/ I sai now he has a revolutio

Briusov pondered this for a moment, and then his eyes lit up. 'Yes/ he said, 'that's more correct. That's more accurate. And Christ walks behind them! He is invisible and he walks behind them, dragging his crooked cross through the swirling blizzard!'

'Yes/ I said, 'and in the opposite direction.'

'You think so?'

'I am certain of it/ I said, thinking that Zherbunov and Barbolin must have fallen asleep behind the curtain at this stage. 'Valery Yakovlevich, I have something I would like to ask you. Would you announce that the poet Fourply will now present a reading of revolutionary verse?'

'Fourply?' Briusov asked.

'My party pseudonym/ I explained.

'Yes, yes,' Briusov nodded, 'and so very profound! I shall be delighted to listen to you myself.'

'I would not advise that. You had better leave straight away. The shooting will start in a minute or two.'

Briusov turned pale and nodded. Neither of us said another word; when the saw fell silent and the dandified musician had put his shoe back on, Briusov rose from the table and went up on the stage.

'Today/ he said, 'we have already spoken of the very latest forms in art. This theme will now be continued by the poet Fourply/ - he could not restrain himself, and he rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, making it clear that he was about to indulge in his typically idiotic wordplay - 'hmm ... I have no wish to spoil the surprise, but let this poem serve as a kind of ... hmm ... foreplay. Your attention please for the poet Fourply, who will read his revolutionary verse!'

He walked quickly back down into the hall, smiled guiltily at me, shrugged, grabbed the weakly protesting Tolstoy under the arm and dragged him towards the exit; at that moment he looked like a retired teacher tugging along a disobedient and stupid wolfhound on a leash.

I went up on to the stage. The abandoned velvet stool stood conveniently ready at its edge. I set my boot on it and gazed out into the hall, which had fallen silent. All the faces I saw seemed to merge into a single face, at once fawning

and impudent, from the slightest doubt, the old woman, dis- dose to the stage with a monocle; be- mense red bows in 11 u>ught that she m Imovskaya. How I

I took the Mause- cleared my throat, a .i.head without exp- ever, but simply pa- poem that I had wr-

Comrades in the st-  
Comrade Fourply  
The Cheka reels no-  
At the loss of a sen-  
it happened that o-  
He paused along th-  
When a counter-re-  
Caught him clearly  
Comrades! The mu-  
The bullet smote b-  
He tried to reach a-  
But his eyes closed  
Comrades in the st-  
And show the great

With these words I-  
diately there was a  
shattered and I saw  
breach on his gun.  
more shots into the  
ing and falling to t-  
columns, and then  
ing as he walked, h-  
screached as he toss-  
ing flash of white f-  
turned, and in the

astonishment. There was an awkward pause; in an attempt to fill it at least partly, I fired several times more into the ceiling, and then I suddenly caught sight again of the strange man in the military tunic. He sat unperturbed at his table, sipping from his cup, and I think he was smiling. I suddenly felt stupid.

Zherbunov fired off another shot into the hall,  
'Cease fire!' I roared.

Zherbunov muttered something that sounded like 'too young to be giving me orders', but he slung his rifle back behind his shoulder.

'Withdraw/ I said, then turned and walked into the wings.

At our appearance the people who had been hiding in the wings scattered in all directions. Zherbunov and I walked along a dark corridor, turning several corners before we reached the rear door and found ourselves in the street, where once again people fled from us. We walked over to the automobile. After the stuffy, smoke-polluted atmosphere of the hall, the clean frosty air affected me like ether fumes, my head began to spin and I felt a desperate need to sleep. The driver was still sitting there motionless on the open front seat, but now he was covered with a thick layer of snow. I opened the door of the cabin and turned round.

'Where's Barbolin?' I asked.

'He'll be along,' chuckled Zherbunov, 'just something he had to see to.'

I climbed into the automobile, leaned back against the seat and instantly fell asleep.

I was woken by the sound of a woman's squeals, and I saw Barbolin emerging from a side street, carrying in his arms the girl in lace panties. She was offering token resistance and the wig with the plait had slipped to one side of her face.

'Move over, comrade,' Zherbunov said to me, clambering into the cabin. 'Reinforcements.'

I moved closer to the side wall. Zherbunov leaned towards me and spoke in an unexpectedly warm voice: 'I didn't really understand you at first, Petka. Didn't see right into your heart. But you're a good 'un. That was a fine speech you gave.'

I mumbled something and fell asleep again.

Through my slumber  
brnkes squealing, Zher  
FMII м >in hissing like a  
iiu unfortunate girl. TH  
m\ head I saw the blu  
Zherbunov.

'Sleep, Petka,' the fa  
ire things still to be don

I glanced out of the  
\ .ml, beside the city g  
llowly in large flakes. B  
Hvoman were already o  
hand and got out. The

I was suddenly keen  
i ns in this frozen wo  
dispatch me to the Chel  
dark sorcery of their o  
thought I will have to p  
thing I saw before I fina  
ion was the snow-cov  
I яге up very close to  
iHIned.

To be more precise, the railings were not simply close to the window, but were part of it; in fact, it appeared that they were bars across a small window through which a narrow beam of sunshine was falling directly on to my face. I tried to turn away from it, but that proved impossible. When I attempted to press one hand against the floor in order to turn from my stomach on to my back, I found that my hands had been secured behind me: I was dressed in a garment resembling a shroud, the long sleeves of which were tied behind my back.

I felt no particular doubt as to what had happened to me. The sailors must have noticed something suspicious in my behaviour, and while I was asleep in the car they had taken me to the Cheka. By wriggling and squirming, I managed to get up on to my knees and then sit down by the wall. My cell had a rather strange appearance; up under the ceiling there was a small barred window - the point of entry for the ray of sunlight that had woken me - while the walls, the door, the floor and ceiling itself were all concealed beneath a thick layer of padding, which meant that romantic suicide in the spirit of Dumas ('one more step, milord, and I dash my brains out against the wall') was quite out of the question. The Chekists had obviously built cells like this for their specially honoured guests, and I must confess that for a second I was flattered at the thought.

A few minutes went by as I gazed at the wall, recalling the frightening details of the previous day, and then the door swung open.

Standing in the doorway were Zherbunov and Barbolin - but, my God, how changed they were! They were dressed in white doctors' coats, and Barbolin had a genuine stethoscope

protruding from his pocket, and my chest heaved with the effort of that erupted from my coat of hoarse coughing. Barbolin turned to Zherbunov and began to laugh, struck by the sight of me.

I should say that I was in a situation to die was not a theatre that had a lustre performance. But my final departure to be accepted by people I hardly knew - I was not sufficiently a Christian.

'Gentlemen,' I said, 'soon they will kill you to

if not for mine, then at least if it were not for mine, then at least it over with quickly, with which I shall not be able to tell you more than an ordinary person.

'That's a bit feeble,' said Barbolin with a chuckle. 'But that stuff you were saying was something else. A man can't remember any of that?'

There was something in the way he spoke, something that must have been tiptling my

'My memory is excellent,' I said, 'the face.

The emptiness in his

'I don't know why you are so nervous,' Barbolin hissed in his thin voice, 'what he's paid for.'

'Let's go,' said Zherbunov. 'I'll see you in a moment. He came over to me.'

'Can you not at least say something to the two of you, after all.'

'Oh, yeah? And what are you doing? I cringed as though

thing. I had an almost physical sensation of the crushing weight of Zherbunov's words tumbling down on top of me.

Barbolin gripped me by my other arm. They easily stood me on my feet and dragged me out into the dimly lit, deserted corridor, which did actually have a vague hospital smell about it, not unlike the smell of blood. I made no attempt to resist, and a few minutes later they pushed me into a large room, sat me down on a stool at its centre and withdrew.

Directly in front of me stood a large desk piled high with bureaucratic-looking files. Sitting behind the desk was a gentleman of intellectual appearance wearing a white doctor's coat just like those of Zherbunov and Barbolin. He was listening attentively to a black ebonite telephone receiver squeezed between his ear and his shoulder, while his hands mechanically sorted through some papers on the desk; from time to time he nodded, saying nothing, and he paid not the slightest attention to me. Another man wearing a white doctor's coat and green trousers with red stripes down their sides was sitting by the wall, on a chair placed between two tall windows over which dusty blinds had been lowered.

Something indefinite in the arrangement of the room reminded me of General HQ, which I had visited frequently in 1916, when I was trying my hopeful but inexperienced hand at patriotic journalism. But instead of a portrait of the Emperor (or at the very least of that infamous Karl who had left a trail of indelible marks across half the kingdoms of Europe), hanging on the wall above the head of the gentleman in the white coat was something so terrible that I bit my lip, drawing blood.

It was a poster, printed in the colours of the Russian flag and mounted on a large piece of cardboard, depicting a blue man with a typically Russian face. His chest had been cleaved open and the top of his skull sawn off to expose his red brain. Despite the fact that his viscera had been extracted from his abdomen and labelled with Latin numerals, the expression in his eyes seemed one of indifference, and his face appeared frozen in a calm half-smile; on the other hand, perhaps that was simply the effect created by a wide gash in his cheek,

I through which I could see  
is in an advertisement for

'Get on with it, then/ the n  
I lie receiver back into its crad

'I beg your pardon/ I sa

'Granted, granted/ he sa  
have some experience in  
mind you that my name is

Tyotr. For obvious rea  
hand/

'No need for that. Well,  
manage to get yourself int

The eyes that watched m  
and the goatee beard ma  
porter of the liberal refor  
deal about the Cheka's  
remained unstirred by even

'I do not believe that I  
mess/ I said. 'But if that is  
I did not get into it on my

'Then with whom exact

This is it, I thought, it h

'If I understand you co  
you with details of addre  
afraid I shall be obliged to  
childhood is the story of  
and in such a context one  
terms of a general categor

'Naturally,' he said, and  
of paper. 'No doubt about  
what you say. First you te  
sent condition on your ow  
other people.'

'Oh, come now/ I replie  
my immediate equilibrium  
a contradiction. The hard  
pany, the less successful I  
recently that I realized wh  
St Isaac's and I looked up

frosty night, the stars shining . . . and I understood/

'And what is the reason?'

'If one tries to run away from other people, one involuntarily ends up actually following in their path throughout the course of one's life. Running away does not require knowing where one is running to, only what one is running from. Which means that one constantly has to carry before one's eyes a vision of one's own prison.'

'Yes,' said Timur Timurovich. 'Yes indeed, when I think of the trouble I'm going to have with you, it terrifies me.'

I shrugged and raised my eyes to the poster above his head. Apparently it was not a brilliant metaphor after all, merely a medical teaching aid, perhaps something taken from an anatomical atlas.

'You know,' Timur Timurovich continued, 'I have a lot of experience. Plenty of people pass through my hands here.'

'Indeed, I do not doubt it,' I said.

'So let me tell you something. I'm less interested in the formal diagnosis than the internal event which has prised someone loose from his normal socio-psychological niche. And as far as I can see, yours is a very straightforward case. You simply will not accept the new. Can you remember how old you are?'

'Of course. Twenty-six.'

'There you are, you see. You belong to the very generation that was programmed for life in one socio-cultural paradigm, but has found itself living in a quite different one. Do you follow what I'm saying?'

'Most definitely,' I replied.

'So what we have is a *prima facie* internal conflict. But let me reassure you straight away that you're not the only one struggling with this difficulty. I have a similar problem myself.'

'Oh, really?' I exclaimed in a rather mocking tone. 'And just how do you deal with it?'

'We can talk about me later,' he said, 'let's try sorting you out first. As I've already said, nowadays almost everyone suffers from the same subconscious conflict. What I want you to do is to recognize its nature. You know, the world around us is reflected in our consciousness and then it becomes the ob-

ject of our mental activity, the real world collapse, the psyche. And this is according to the amount of psychic energy. It's like a small atom. It is how the energy is distributed.

The conversation was taking place.

'And what channels, if I may ask?'

'If we keep it simple, it's like a ball moving outwards, so to speak, towards objects like . . . well, like a luxury automobile. Man's energy is directed towards them.'

I remembered Vorblev's words. Please do not continue.'

'Excellent. In the other case, the energy remains within. This is the case with events. Imagine a bull rushing towards you.'

'An excellent image.'

'Thank you. Well then, it's a possibly beautiful exhibit in the world. And the bull rushing towards you is psychic energy that you are here. Why you are here.'

Me really is very clever scoundrel!

T can tell you more,' I said, 'given a great deal of thought and strength to start a new life. I call them the "New Russian Revolution . . .'

'Indeed, it is quite repulsive,' I quoted the revolutionary. I believe that they called them the "New Russian Revolution . . .'

'Possibly. But the question is whether people actively strive, as I believe they do. They persist in their attempts to deal with the shadows of their own minds.'

'Now that really is magnificent.'

'Thank you once again.'



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