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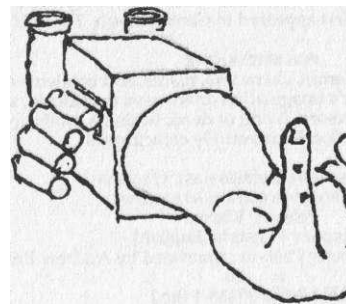
BUDDHA'S LITTLE FINGER

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.

Buddha's Little F

VICTOR PELEV

translated by Andrew Brom



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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 the text published here under the name of the editor. The text is published here under the name of the editor for publication. This version does not include the additions of a number of magical procedures which were in the original, nor does it retain the narrator's rather detailed 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 should not 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 discuss topics which, in our view, are in no way of 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 record 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 text than yet another product of the critical solipsism which is so fashionable in recent years, but the true value of the text 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, on occasions, he could not, book, for reasons that are not narrative. It is therefore people regard the text as an account.

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

To conclude, the (which was 'Vasily') confusion with the 'Little Finger' has been of the major theses that the editor did so, the Divergent Path.

We dedicate this to the living creatures.

Gate Gate Paradise

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 bronze
no doubt because
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, but 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

'I'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

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, 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 fo 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 dreamt

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 men in shabby, slightly flared trousers came through. They were hung all over with bottles and glasses. One of them, with a moustache, looked at me. He was young, although his face was lined. He had not paid not the slightest attention to me.

'Are you Fourply?' asked the man with the moustache. 'I am.'

'Here,' said the sailor, and he took the Mauser and folded it into two.

I put the Mauser back in its holster.

Com. Fourply! Go immediately to the kitchen and pound our line. To assist you, I have brought Barbolin, experienced comrade.

Below the text there were two men sitting and thinking what to say, they looked at each other.

'Ts that driver downstairs?' asked the man with the moustache.

'Yes/' said the one with the moustache. 'In the car. What's your name?'

'Pyotr/' I said, and then I looked at the other man.

'I'm Zherbunov/' said the man with the moustache.

'Barbolin/' the younger man said. 'He was soft and almost womanly.'

I sat facing them at the table. The man with the glasses of vodka, pushed out his hand to my face. I realized that he was looking at me.

'Well then/' I said, taking a sip of vodka. 'The victory of world revolution is ours.'

My toast was not greeted with enthusiasm.

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

'What works?' I asked.

'Don't you try playing the piano. I have already proached me, 'Babayasin t...'

'Ah, you're talking about the obstetrician's bag. 'What are the meanings. Perhaps you're talking about 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 electric hook on Zherbunov's belt together, rather in the manner had a vision of Zherbunov for their next killing and a cult element of their totalitarian seemed to me yet another revolutions. I suddenly Blok's new moods; some escaped my throat, because

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

We went out into the street, a soldier sitting in the front we climbed in. The car had a rounded windscreen of snow-covered back and though our carriage was trolleys. I thought that this was the most uncomfortable and never, who was always eating this was a deliberate and 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

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, each other, but stopped had an axe hanging under roses - I realized that he obvious enough without his name was hanging b

The other figure halted began intoning in pond the same words as his confessed that he had no Raskolnikov's blazing eyes woes of the downtrodden suggested that they should revolutionary innovation

The actor with the axe drained his glass and called nikov a long and confused eral of the images quite arrogant strength of empty eyes and lending his face

On hearing the word his elbow.

'What d'you reckon?'

'It is still too soon,' I w

Marmeladov's meaning Dark hints began to surf parison of the grey St P an axe to the back of the with a dark closet in which this, Raskolnikov began and he enquired what M confusion, Marmeladov

In the meantime I saw four people at each round mixed bunch, but as has history of humanity, it was sively dressed whores w table as Briusov, and g time I had seen him, wa

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 t

For a moment I thought of the result of some monstrous act. I was looking in my direction. My eyes once again met his. He was wearing a military blouse, and I knew new all about the dead. More serious things about

At that moment I caught myself from taking to my heels. I tried to remain sitting at the table. I tried to breathe calmly; several of them were shouting at me. I tried to change the subject, but most were already drunk on their vodka.

I had just strangled Fokas. He bounded over to the stage. He was wildly to the insane. He was carrying her naked legs up to the stage. The four figures in black were throughout the play, not covered by the tunic, and covered by the tunic. I was thinking that this was a mistake. Where there is a mention of carrying away the dead person. I brought me to my senses. What was happening was not what I could possibly have imagined. It passed - but a perfectly calm. I was immediately deciding to accept. I was by this time retreated into

'Time to call a halt, I

Barbolin looked up at

The agents of the Empire. I was in a state of confusion.

These words seemed to be the cause he immediately turned to. He strained him.

'Not that way, comrade

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 m 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 screamed 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 >lin 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 very bad way in my situation to die was a matter of course. I had to leave a theatre that had given me a brilliant performance. But I had to leave my final departure to be accepted by a group of people I hardly knew - I was not sufficiently a Christian to be able to do that.

'Gentlemen,' I said, 'I am very sorry, but soon they will kill you to avenge me. If not for mine, then at least for mine. It is over with quickly, with a minimum of pain. I shall not be able to tell you anything more than an ordinary person could tell you.'

'That's a bit feeble,' said Zherbunov with a chuckle. 'But that stuff about the end of the world was something else. A man who has lived through it must remember any of that?'

There was something about the way he spoke, something that made me think that he must have been tiptling with drink.

'My memory is excellent,' said Zherbunov, looking at the face.

The emptiness in his eyes was a warning. 'I don't know why you are here,' Barbolin hissed in his thin voice. 'I don't know what he's paid for.'

'Let's go,' said Zherbunov, looking at the face. 'He came over to me to see you.'

'Can you not at least tell me what he's paid for?' I asked.

'Oh, yeah? And what are you going to do? 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?'

'If we keep it simple, it moves outwards, so to speak, towards objects like . . . well, 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 certain events. Imagine a bull rushing towards you.'

'An excellent image.'

'Thank you. Well then, possibly beautiful exhibit in the world. And the bull rushing towards you is the 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 it 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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