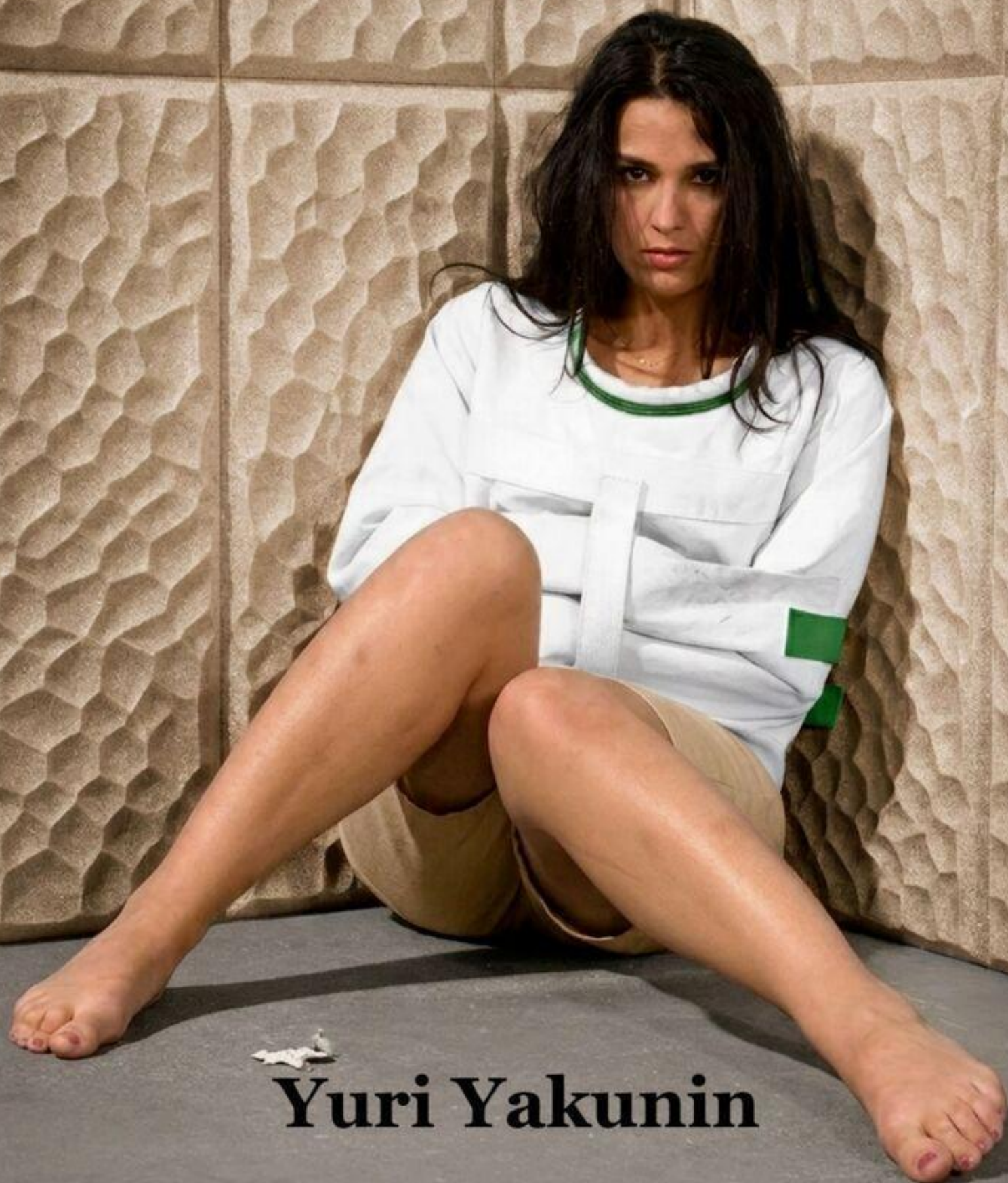


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Agent's Revenge



Yuri Yakunin

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Agent's Revenge. Novel

«Издательские решения»

Yakunin Y.

Agent's Revenge. Novel / Y. Yakunin — «Издательские решения»,

«Agent's Revenge» emerged from a five-minute talk through a psychiatric clinic window. This emotional encounter inspired an action-packed novel spanning 50 years. It features love, betrayal, the KGB, and the struggle between integrity and villainy. Originally a TV screenplay, the story became a fast-paced novel after the client vanished. No fillers, no slow moments — just a gripping drama packed into a sharp, cinematic read.

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Agent's Revenge Novel

Yuri Yakunin

Иллюстрации Vivago

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Agent's Revenge

Foreword

— Agent's Revenge — is an example of what can result from a chance encounter and a five-minute conversation by the window of a psychiatric clinic. The meeting was so emotional that it resulted in an action-packed novel spanning a period of fifty years. The novel features love and betrayal, decent people and outright scoundrels, the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, murders and their punishment, and of course — salvation. Actually, a script for a TV series was commissioned, but the client, unfortunately, — lost to a heart attack — and the result was a novel without long-windedness or delays. It is something between a screenplay for a film series and a play for the theater.

About the Author

If you are inquisitive, active, mischievous, curious, a cheerful visionary with a sense of humor, emotional, and impressionable — all events become brighter.

The train of life rushes fast, sometimes bypassing small stations. Here you are a capable boy, almost a natural talent, then a power engineering student, then a philandering womanizer, then occupied with scientific developments, then the owner of your own real estate company, then a stop and a forced disembarkation at a siding due to an incurable disease, but once again — not broken and starting everything from scratch.

It was the illness that allowed me to look at life from a slightly different angle, to slow down, to think about many things, to remember what flickered in the window of the life train, and to review and rethink a lot of things in general.

As you have understood — the result is before you.

Liana Tabidze

Characters

Evgenia Petrovna Margelova — the main character
Roman — a student. One of the main characters
Nina Vladimirovna Meskhi — one of the main characters
Dali Melitonovna Pertaya — Nino's mother
Meliton Georgievich Archvadze — major, pilot, Dali's father
Mary (Agent «Sova» [Owl]) — Dali's mother
Margo Pertaya — Mary's mother
Pyotr Margelov — Evgenia Petrovna's father
Archil Vekua — captain, head of the hospital department
Georgy Ivanovich Merabov — colonel, Khutsiev's cousin
Vakhtang Glonti — lieutenant
Nugzar Varlamovich Khutsiev — major, special department officer (osobist)
Natella Varlamovna Khutsieva — Merab's wife
Irakli Nugzarovich Khutsishvili — colonel, Merab's son
Lali Irakliovna Khutsishvili — daughter, David's fiancée
Merab Lezhava — colonel. High-ranking official of the Ministry of Internal Affairs
David Lezhava — Merab's son
Lieutenant Semyon Zakharchenko, Gela and Koba — KGB officers
Zurab — a doctor at a regular hospital
Guram Ivanovich Yashvili — head doctor of the psychiatric hospital

A Cigarette

What drives us when we take an untrodden path? Who knows where it leads? Sometimes, it can drastically change the fate of not only the traveler but also those he doesn't even know. Others' fates often depend on our seemingly accidental choices, but nothing in life happens by chance; all coincidences are regularities. The main thing is what stands behind the regularity — good or evil!

For several days, I talked through a window with a «mentally ill» woman. If I had known what this conversation would lead to — maybe I wouldn't have talked! But who knows if we would be better or worse for it?

My classmate ran away when we were getting some vaccinations at school, and while crossing the road, he was hit by a car. I don't think the vaccination was worth spending the rest of his life in a wheelchair and ruining the lives of the driver and his family.

It was in the mid-seventies. I, a student at the Polytechnic Institute, the life of the party, a favorite among my female classmates, was doing my pre-graduation internship at a thermal power plant. Opposite it was a psychiatric hospital. Several Tsarist-era buildings, enclosed by a fence with iron gates. A small part of one building overlooked the embankment. Apparently, after the expansion of the embankment, due to a lack of space, there was no fence or sidewalk there — and besides, who would walk there? Just the embankment and cars. At that spot, instead of a fence, a pair of barred windows on the mezzanine of an old brick building with thick walls faced the embankment. These two small windows, almost invisible in the gooseberry bushes, would hardly have ever attracted anyone's attention.

Usually, after classes at the plant, students walked to the metro station by the opposite route leading away from the embankment, which was closer to the metro and more convenient.

On that day, for some reason, I walked along the embankment. A long, deserted road passing by the psychiatric hospital.

— Handsome, got a cigarette?

I flinched; the young girl's voice seemed to come from nowhere — there was no one nearby.

— I'm here, in the window.

Through the bushes, in the barred window opening, I saw a semi-naked woman sitting with disheveled hair. Through the gooseberry leaves, it was not very clear what kind of woman she was, and simply as a smoker, I decided to give her a cigarette, nothing more.

I already had a sad experience of communicating with a mentally ill neighbor who periodically appeared in the house for a few days when she had an improvement. Back then I was a kid of six or seven and remembered well how she spat or doused people with water. She was completely toothless and gray-haired, though she wasn't even forty.

Approaching closer and handing her a cigarette, I froze in amazement. The woman sitting on the windowsill in the barred window seemed to be about 18—20 years old. And if what adorned her head — resembling almost felt of an indeterminate color — and the quite distinct bruises on her half-naked, unkempt body corresponded to the institution this young woman was in, her face, though it bore the seal of deep depression, was simply of unearthly beauty. I had never seen such a beautiful face before or since, although I had never been deprived of female attention.

Enchanted by her beauty, I simply couldn't walk away. How could such a beauty end up in a psych ward, and how could she be in such a derelict state? Didn't she have a family, relatives, or friends? Could her wardmates really not help her?

— Thank you. What's your name?

— Roma.

— And I am Nino.

A thin, elderly woman appeared in the window, but unlike Nino, she was neatly dressed, with dark hair carefully combed back. Her gaze was cold and even somewhat searchingly sharp for an insane person.

— Roma, give some cigarettes to my neighbor, otherwise she won't let us talk, she'll call the sadist orderlies.

I took out a pack and handed it to the «thorn» in the chocolate-colored corduroy robe who had appeared in the window. Something resembling a smile appeared on the woman's face, and the sharpness vanished from her gaze.

— Well, do you like the girl? Everyone here likes her, but she's just very stubborn, the little fool. She doesn't wash and doesn't screw, so the local thugs beat her. Just look at her breasts and her butt. Everyone tries to break her in — she's damn good — but she keeps kicking like a stubborn filly. Good thing I'm on guard; they're afraid to rape her.

— Get out, you bitch. You got your cigarettes, so leave.

— Now, why «bitch» right away? I'll shout right now, and the admirer of your pretty face will be kicked out, and you'll be injected with a dose for violating the routine — you'll be spinning like a top.

— Don't, Zhenya, he's just a regular passerby and he gave you cigarettes.

— That's it, got scared! Well, go on, youngsters, flirt while I'm in a good mood.

Nino was smearing tears across her face. I stood there, so stunned that I couldn't utter a word. To me, everything I had seen and heard was some kind of monstrous dream, something beyond our Soviet reality, some kind of unreality. It wouldn't fit in my head how it could be that good people leave this world early, while this «corduroy» dandelion, the embodiment of evil, lives on.

Nino, leaning towards the windowsill to be closer, spoke quietly, swallowing tears:

— Roma, you are the first normal person I've spoken to in many days. Go now, or I'll break into hysterics, but I beg you — come tomorrow, I'll be waiting.

— I'll come around this time. I'm doing my internship at the power plant here, so it's no trouble for me.

— You're a student?

— Yes, I study at the Polytechnic.

Nino said softly:

— I studied too, at the Academy... but that was in another life. Well, go now, but come alone tomorrow. Bring something for that old woman; she's «normal,» lives here as if looking after me, and if something goes wrong — she informs. And if possible, I'll ask for some simple cosmetics, just give them to me unnoticed, otherwise Evgenia Petrovna — that's the crone's name — will take them away.

2. Transformation

I walked home completely shaken by what I had seen. In my imagination, beauty and abnormality simply didn't align. In a person's common perception, a mentally ill individual is something humanoid, chewing grass with monotonous, frenzied gestures, bulging eyes, a toothless drooling mouth, and a gaze full of either hatred or fear. A typical visual sequence from television documentaries of German experiments on humans during World War II.

Of course, my childhood neighbor Anya didn't really fall out of that sequence either. And here — a girl beautiful to the point of stupor, and suddenly — insane. For what reason, why, who brought her to such a state, and why specifically her, someone so beautiful? Was she now to be chained to this «yellow house» for the rest of her life, and in ten years turn into a likeness of neighbor Anya — a toothless, gray-haired, mumbling old woman, neither externally nor internally corresponding to anything sane? Even though I was a happy-go-lucky guy, a womanizer and a joker, I was quite sentimental deep down. This life's injustice — the thought of Nino turning into neighbor Anya — took my breath away and made my eyes moist.

I sat on a bench at the bus stop and, watching the girls passing by, couldn't find anyone more beautiful than Nino. They were all here, on this side of life — clean, joyful, and rushing about their business. While Nino was there, on the other side. And why in such a state, neglected and abandoned? Remembering her uncombed hair and her bare, unwashed body covered in bruises, I realized that a normal woman wouldn't let herself go like that. Yet I couldn't understand — there was another woman right there with this poor girl, could she really not help her? Besides, Nino spoke quite normally; she didn't twitch, she didn't spit, and her eyes weren't like Anya's — which were wide open, even bugged out, with a completely mad, empty look that broadcasted her insanity. Nino's eyes were beautiful, large and blue; they held a kind of infinite exhaustion, perhaps. Her facial expressions and the intonations of her voice didn't match the felt-like hair on her head at all. All sorts of nonsense crept into my mind. I realized I was getting ahead of myself. The last thing I needed in this life was to get involved with a «crazy» girl, no matter how beautiful. No, I thought, men's brains clearly aren't in their heads — if a woman is beautiful on the outside, then everything about her, her soul and her thoughts, must be beautiful too. How when you distance yourself from beauty, when you stop rushing, when you start thinking logically, weighing all the pros and cons and putting everything in its place — a completely different picture emerges, and you even feel a bit ashamed of yourself.

— Oh well, it's a good thing I haven't told anyone about the «prisoner of conscience» yet, — I thought. — They'd laugh me to scorn and might tease me for a long time.

My heart felt a bit lighter:

— She's not the first nor the last mentally ill person, and fate doesn't distinguish between who is beautiful and who is ugly. And how could I believe that old fool about someone wanting to rape Nino?

I shuddered when I imagined kissing an unwashed beauty, stroking her unwashed and uncombed head.

I thought once more that if Nino weren't so beautiful, no such thoughts would even enter my head.

Now I even regretted promising Nino the mascara and cigarettes. I no longer felt like going to meet her at the madhouse. But since I had promised — I had to. And I felt sorry for her; after all, she was a sick girl, and it was a sin to deceive such people.

Having calmed down, I boarded the arriving bus. Settling comfortably in the back seat, I drifted into a daze, and thoughts of Nino left me entirely.

The next day, after my internship, I went down to the embankment. The old woman was standing by the window:

— Did you bring the cigarettes, Romeo?

I wanted to curse the old hag out, but I simply handed her a pack of BTs:

— Where is Nino?

— Nino, come here, your darling has arrived, — the old woman smirked, pulling a cigarette out of the pack.

Nino approached the window.

Everything that I had understood so clearly while putting together the logical puzzles at the bus stop — about the mentally ill woman and my own foolish position as a boy who fell for looks — vanished instantly.

Behind the bars of the window stood a matchless beauty with heavy, dark hair falling down.

Last time it had seemed to me that Nino had light blue eyes, but today I clearly saw beautiful eyes of a deep dark blue. A clean, unironed blouse was buttoned up to the top. Nino was smiling, and almost childlike dimples appeared on her cheeks.

I was stunned. This was a clear injustice; no, it was simply overkill — to be this beautiful and «abnormal.» I felt somewhat timid from the unexpectedness of it.

— Hello, Roma, it's good that you came. I was very afraid you wouldn't come, scared off by my appearance. It's strange, but I was preparing for your arrival like it was a first date, forgetting about...

Rom, how old are you?

— I'm 22, and you?

— I'm 19. You're handsome.

— And you are indecently beautiful! Why did you look like that yesterday?

— Roma, let's talk about pleasant things today. I, for instance, am happy right now, like a girl in love. Let's not talk about heavy things today! Tomorrow everything will fall into place, and perhaps I'll tell you then. But for now, let's just smoke in silence.

I remembered the mascara. Nino was delighted and immediately hid it in her sleeve.

— If they see it, they'll take it away.

We smoked, each thinking our own thoughts. I couldn't understand how it was possible that yesterday this girl was a repulsive, unwashed, abnormal woman, and today — you could take her straight to the altar. I no longer knew how to behave with Nino or what to say; my voice suddenly failed me. There was total chaos in my head! Now Nino was almost like a Count of Monte Cristo in a skirt. And to be completely honest — she turned me on.

I walked home, utterly failing to understand what was happening. And the last phrase from the old woman, who had stepped closer, kept spinning in my head and giving me no peace:

— Why couldn't you two have met six months ago? — and after a pause, she added a verse from the New Testament — «Whom I love, I chasten.»

3. The Beating

The next morning, I was on pins and needles. I was dying to share the news about Nino with one of my friends, but the realization that fellow students might line up in front of her window like the orchestra pit of a theater, trying to call the poor girl out for an encore, horrified me and kept me from such a rash step.

Today I went to Nino with a firm determination to find out what had happened to her — how she ended up in a madhouse while being of sound mind. After comparing what I had seen and heard during our two brief encounters, I no longer had any doubts about her sanity.

Everything that had transpired in the two days since I started taking the embankment road past the psychiatric hospital began to seem like an implausible dream. «Go right — you'll end up in the metro; go left — you'll find a nightmare.» What if I had gone «right» to the metro that first time? Would Nino not exist? Or would she still be unwashed and uncombed? Or was it just because I happened to pass by that Nino became normal? And in general, what was really going on with her — an illness, an accident, a crime? And what was my role in this? Why did chance bring us together? For her happiness or my misfortune? Who needed this and why? Questions, questions, questions.

It was like a Hitchcockian script playing out specifically for me — a random passerby. A highly improbable coincidence of chances, which only confirmed the lack of any pattern — it was simply astonishing. Most striking and incredible was the fact that all of this was happening to a girl of stunning beauty. If Nino were ugly, what would happen then? Two things struck me: first — the assigned cerberus in the form of the «dandelion» old woman; and second — which was beyond all reason — the girl's apparent abandonment. She hadn't flown in from Mars; where were all her relatives, loved ones, and friends? A beauty like her couldn't lack friends, and the absence of a loving man's heart seemed completely impossible given her looks. Where were they all? Is it possible that in this whole wide world, there is no one but me, a random passerby, to bring her mascara? Something was wrong!

To be honest, I didn't understand how this girl could be dangerous to others in any way. Why keep her in isolation? Why couldn't she be treated at home? And again, why was there no presence of relatives, either direct or indirect? Considering the state Nino was in when I first saw her, it was clear that none of her family had visited her in a long time. Why was she allowed to walk around the clinic in such a deplorable state? Even if it's a madhouse, there must be some order and hygiene rules! And the bruises — I wondered who left them. In the ward, besides Nino, there was only the old woman. Surely she wasn't beating the sleeping girl at night? Though they say the insane don't feel pain, people have eyes, and bruises would be discovered in the morning. A madhouse is a madhouse — only questions, not a single answer.

And then there was that instantaneous, almost magical transformation of Nino after a completely accidental, fleeting interaction — as if she saw not me, Roma, but at the very least, Jesus Christ himself descended before her.

When I approached the window, I expected another surprise. Nino was sitting on the windowsill just like the first time, but she had a black eye and a swollen nose. She looked horrific. I felt a sharp sting somewhere in my chest — probably where people's souls are located. The old woman was not at the window.

— Nino, what happened to you?

— I tripped on the stairs.

After all my reflections, this was hard to believe.

— Nino, I can't wrap my head around this situation. I really want to help you, but I'm lost in this horror! Tell me, what's going on? I understand you're not in a sanatorium, but this isn't a concentration camp either! Tell me how to contact your relatives — you must have some! If I have to, I'll go to

them. Maybe there's something I can do myself? I can see you're not sick — or at least not so sick that you should be kept here. Why won't your parents take you home, at least for the weekend?

— I have no one!

— What do you mean «no one»? You must have some relatives!

Nino remained silent. Her eyes filled with tears, and her face contorted in a grimace of pain.

— I beg you, don't. It hurts so much, it's unbearable.

— Sorry, I didn't think.

I handed her a piece of paper.

— Here is my phone number. Call if you need anything. Maybe you want me to come with my mother or grandmother? We'll say we are distant relatives. You'll come over for the weekend, take a bath, eat normally, and sleep on starched sheets.

Nino looked right through me with a dull, empty gaze.

— I'm tired, and my nose hurts. I want to lie down.

— The nose is nothing, it'll heal by the wedding... Don't mind me, I blurted out something stupid again.

— I'm tired of you. Go away!

It was hurtful. I was there for her with all my soul, and she was driving me away like a nuisance.

The old woman approached:

— Roma, go home. She needs to rest. In fact, you shouldn't come here anymore; it's bad for everyone, especially for Nino. If you come again, I'll tell the doctor you're peeping.

While I was talking to the old woman, Nino turned away and went deep into the ward. She didn't reappear. I spoke with the old woman but couldn't find out anything. Feeling undeservedly offended, I left.

I went to a cafe, ate, cooled down from the resentment, and realized that Nino, like any girl, simply didn't want me to see her with a black eye and a broken nose. Silly girl — I didn't even care about the nose, such a trifle! Apparently, I shouldn't have mentioned the wedding... I was being stupid! I should go back and distract her — read some poetry, maybe?

I returned and quietly called Nino. No one came to the window. I called several times, with the same result. I grabbed the bars and pulled myself up. Just as I was about to look into the window, a powerful blow to the ear knocked me to the ground. Two thugs were standing nearby.

— What are you peeping at? Jerking off to this beauty?

— No, — I muttered, — just like that, by chance.

— Oh, waiting for a tram here in the bushes?

The second blow hit my solar plexus. I lost consciousness. One of the men picked me up, and when I came to, the second one punched me in the nose; blood started flowing.

— If I see you here again, — the one who hit me said, — I'll kill you and throw you in the Kura as fish food.

Taking out a handkerchief, I pressed it to my nose.

— Get the hell out of here.

Crossing the road, I leaned against the embankment parapet and tilted my head back, trying to stop the bleeding. Моя shirt was splattered with blood; my ear was ringing. I was furious. To think that old hag actually complained about me peeping! And I, like a fool, had to hang onto the window bars. Of course, they beat me like a voyeur.

I gnashed my teeth from anger and resentment. If you left, stay away — why did you go back? I got what I deserved. Shamed and beaten, I decided I would never visit this «crazy» girl again. Let her be treated! I treated her like a human being, and she shamed and humiliated me like this.

4. Major Archvadze, Year '37

As Roman walked away — bloodied, beaten, shamed, and embittered — he could not see Evgenia Petrovna standing at the window. Roman was right about who had called the guards, and he cursed the woman with every fiber of his being. He couldn't have imagined that his harmless «tête-à-tête» with Nino by the madhouse would end in such a beating. Man — the pinnacle of evolution — is powerless before elementary malice!

Evgenia Petrovna saw Roman being beaten; she felt sorry for the boy, who had quite accidentally stumbled into something he could never have anticipated. However, she was glad he was caught while pulling himself up on the bars, rather than during a conversation with Nino.

— Better to be beaten than killed; better to look like a voyeur than a corpse! — she thought as Roman vanished from sight. Glancing over her shoulder at Nino, she discreetly made the sign of the cross over the void outside the window.

— Zhenechka Petrovna, report to the admissions department immediately! — a young nurse shouted, cracking open the door to the staff room.

— An officer was brought in — crashed on a motorcycle. His wife is dead, and I don't think he's a survivor either.

Zhenya, the head nurse of the surgical department, was experienced and efficient, knowing and capable of more than some doctors. She was somewhat withdrawn and unsmiling outside of work, but with patients, she was transformed — which was why they loved her. At work, she was highly valued; she was always «at hand,» as she even lived in a wing of the hospital. So today, on her day off, she would have to admit the incoming patient and, if surgery was required, assist with it.

Zhenya looked in the mirror hanging by the exit, tucked her hair under her cap, adjusted her robe, and went to examine the officer brought in after the crash.

In 1921, when units of the 11th Red Army entered Tbilisi, nothing foreshadowed a drama in the family of the well-known and respected photographer Pyotr Margelov. But as they say, man proposes and God disposes; no one is immune to chance. If someone accidentally wins a large sum in a regular lottery, someone else in the celestial roulette either wins death or loses their life.

One of the tipsy commissars — in a greasy leather jacket smelling of nomadic life, sweat, tobacco, and even blood — stepped into «Margelov's Photography» to have his picture taken. He took a liking to a pretty blonde — the wife of the photographer, Pyotr Margelov. Warmed by wine, the commissar began to harass her filthily, waving the Mauser he had taken out for the «seriousness» of the photograph. When the husband made a remark, the commissar, without blinking an eye, put the Mauser to use and shot the girl's parents before the eyes of their 11-year-old daughter, calling them «undefeated bourgeois.»

On that day, for Zhenya — who became an orphan in an instant — her happy childhood ended. She was taken in by a maternal relative who worked at the hospital. Since then, Zhenya lived with her at the hospital and helped care for the sick; when the relative died, Zhenya essentially replaced her at work.

A large man lay on the gurney; the blue patches on his collar bore two bars. It was difficult to determine the major's features, as his face was a solid bloody mess. A high forehead, wide cheekbones, and a head of black curly hair with receding temples revealed a stubborn character. Bloody lips whispered almost inaudibly:

— Mary... what about Mary? Where is she?

Zhenya took the documents from the pocket of his tunic.

— Meliton Georgievich Archvadze, born 1903, Major, pilot, multiple injuries due to an accident, — she dictated to the nurse filling out the patient's chart.

A buckled map case lay on the gurney. Zhenya opened it, as she was required to list the documents inside and hand them over for safekeeping. In the first compartment lay a map of Georgia, but what she saw in the second compartment made her shudder and look around to see if anyone was watching. In the map case lay a letter with a large inscription at the top: «Strictly Confidential. To Comrade Stalin Personally.» Zhenya knew what an appeal to Stalin, bypassing the higher commanders, could mean for the major. She realized that if someone reported the letter — and such «well-wishers» existed in the hospital — it would be better for the major not to recover. The hospital was often visited by NKVD men who took even sick officers away; they almost never returned to finish their treatment.

Zhenya discreetly tucked the envelope under her blouse.

The operation lasted more than four hours, and the surgeon, a Military Doctor 1st Rank, performed a miracle, bringing Major Meliton Archvadze back from the brink. Now, whether he lived or not depended solely on his body and how the Lord looked upon him.

For two days, Archvadze was neither alive nor dead. Bandaged all over, Meliton did not regain consciousness.

It was 1937, and the appearance of NKVD officers boded no good. Of course, there were plenty of «enemies of the people» of all stripes, and they had to be uprooted with all revolutionary ruthlessness, as their enemy subversive activities hindered the building of a beautiful and bright future under the leadership of Comrade Stalin — dear to the heart of every Soviet person and painfully loved by all. But it seemed to Zhenya that far too many of these enemies were found among friends, acquaintances, and even colleagues she had known since childhood. Of course, Zhenya did not doubt the correctness of Comrade Stalin's policies or the need to fight enemies, but she did not approve of the local underlings who performed their duties far too zealously, mowing people down like grass with a scythe.

At the end of the second day, two NKVD officers came to the hospital.

The military men spoke in the head doctor's office and also with Zhenya, asking her if all the major's belongings were on the table before her and if there had been anything else. Zhenya's heart sank. This man had lost his wife; a little daughter remained, whom Zhenya had seen when the child came with her grandmother. This major couldn't be an enemy! Could it be that this little girl, just like her, would have to remain an orphan? It couldn't be; it wasn't fair! Zhenya was glad no one had seen the letter to Stalin, which she had hidden in the boiler room. Looking at the major's personal belongings on the table — a watch, documents, a belt, the open map case — and seeing that the map was missing, she stated:

— There seemed to be some kind of map in the case.

— Thank you, we have seized it.

— Well, everything else seems to be in its place.

The officers decided to speak with the major. Despite the department doctor's warning that the major had not regained consciousness for two days, the NKVD officers entered the ward anyway.

5. An Unexpected Encounter

Arriving home with a swollen nose, I went straight to my room. I was grateful to my family for not coming in to soothe me with soul-searching questions. About twenty minutes later, my grandmother quietly entered with a bowl of some herbal infusion; patting my hair, she began to treat me in silence. The next morning was Saturday. My nose had almost returned to normal, and the pain was bearable. My mood, however, was nonexistent — total apathy and prostration. I spent almost the entire day lounging on the sofa, reading Asimov and blankly watching the «News from the Fields» program on TV.

The anger had passed, leaving behind a foul sense of being spat upon. Seeing my condition, my family was sure I had gotten into a fight with someone, possibly over a girl. Youth will be youth — the main thing was that I was alive; everything else could be fixed!

On Sunday, after that shameful Friday and the medically melancholic Saturday, I felt like clearing my head. I went down to the yard and played a round of preference with the guys. When it started to drizzle, we decided to hit the bathhouse around the corner. To steam ourselves, grab some beers, and then crash the girls' dormitory at the Institute of Physical Education — it was a routine affair. The dorm was nearby, and we were regulars there. At first, there were clashes with the guys from the same dorm, but they were few and we were locals, so things were settled quickly and problems disappeared. When we showed up with booze, they happily joined in with the girls to keep us company.

Having finished with the bathhouse, the «ersh» (beer with vodka), and the «do you respect me?» type of talk, I walked through the fresh air. Feeling my soul, which after several drinks had settled somewhere in the region of my bladder, relieved of high pressure, my legs instinctively headed toward the coveted dormitory.

The well-built, flexible, uninhibited girl-athletes knew their business well. Sex-sprints, swims, and races were not only their favorite activities but also completely ordinary. They cut loose godlessly; the sex was often collective, abundant, and sophisticated. The absence of lofty feelings was more than compensated for by acrobatics and muscular skill.

From frequent and persistent training, the girls' sexual form was almost always at its peak. So this time, too, I made it home from the free «sports brothel» by morning — exhausted, spent, but satisfied.

Having slept until noon, I headed to my internship, where there was no need to rush. The Olympic motto reigned there — «The main thing is not the equipment, but the attendance» — and the daily billiard battles exerted their own pull. Mind you, the billiards were peculiar; instead of standard balls, we used slightly smaller steel balls from turbine bearings.

After chasing the iron balls around with my classmates and gossiping about the previous night's collective acrobatic bolero with the athletes in vivid detail, my energy ran out by three o'clock, and we began to disperse. I felt no urge to go to the embankment; I'd had my fill of psychiatry.

Walking out of the power plant gates and chatting with my classmates, I stuck with the group, taking the usual road toward the metro. Passing the hospital fence and turning the corner, I unexpectedly saw the «old hag» — Evgenia Petrovna. In civilian clothes, I didn't recognize her immediately. My ear began to ache instantly; instinctively looking around to see if the psychiatric inquisition was nearby, I walked past, pretending I hadn't noticed or recognized her. I had no desire to tempt fate again; who knew where and what might happen because of this madam, or what kind of adventures I might find on my, shall we say, long-suffering head.

— Roma, wait.

I stopped reluctantly. When she approached, I asked:

— Isn't the artwork on my face enough for you?

— Forgive me, but that was the only good thing I could do for you that day.

— And maybe, for total happiness, you should have drowned me in the river too?

— Don't be cynical. I'm very distressed myself that it turned out this way. Although, no — I'm very glad it turned out exactly like this. People are already interested in you, and the version that you are a common «peeping Tom» is the best one possible. I tried to call you yesterday evening, but you weren't there. I didn't want to meet you at the power plant exit in plain view of the hospital checkpoint. I thought you'd hardly go by the embankment today and decided to catch you here. God willing, it will pass over.

— And where did you get my phone number?

— I'll explain later. Follow me.

After some hesitation, I followed her. We walked for about ten minutes toward the «Apollo» cinema, where Evgenia Petrovna dove into an «Italian courtyard.» Looking around, I followed her.

The Tbilisi Italian courtyards, with their pre-revolutionary buildings, are a world unto themselves. A world of national color and multi-lingual noise.

In the mornings, they are swept by loud Kurdish yard-cleaners; the sonorous calls of visiting milk-sellers ring out, along with the voices of neighbors leaning out of windows in their morning robes — blessing the local men with white breasts nearly spilling out from under their armpits — as they ask the sellers about the dairy assortment. The hubbub of a gang of children headed to school. And the «plate» loudspeaker blaring from a pole.

Well, in the evening, in this same Italian courtyard, different intonations are heard. At the eternally running tap, a few women, constantly washing or rinsing something, discuss with the same temperament everything from the color of a child's morning diarrhea to the size of a son-in-law's genitals. At the communal courtyard table, the quiet male feast is replaced by the monotonous rolling of dice in backgammon or the usual clatter of dominoes in a game of «Goat.» And if any part of this chorus suddenly goes missing, it means something has happened to someone, and the whole yard rushes to help.

But during the day — all Italian courtyards are nearly deserted, as some are at work and others at the market or the shops. It was at such a time that I dove after Petrovna into her Italian courtyard.

We climbed a spiral, rust-eaten staircase that had seen many feet, and after walking along a glass-enclosed veranda, we found ourselves before a door upholstered in black imitation leather.

— This is my room, don't worry. I'm worried myself, as I don't know if I'm doing the right thing at all.

Entering the place, I could feel that no one had lived there for a long time, or almost not at all. This was evidenced not only by the absence of any scent of owners but also by the layer of dust on the furniture.

— I'm rarely here, hence the dust. Roma, let me brew some coffee first. We'll have some coffee, you'll realize there's no trickery here — and you'll calm down. I still don't know how to behave myself. I think you've already realized that I am a mentally sane woman, and I intend to talk to you about Nino. But not because I want to or you want to, but because she asked me to — and she was the one who gave me your phone number.

6. I Am Your Guardian Angel

Meliton Archvadze — wrapped in bandages like a cocoon, with IV drips in both arms — had been unconscious for two days. His lips were as white as the bandages; only his thick black eyebrows and the lashes of his closed eyes were all the gaze could rest upon.

The «osobists» had taken Zhenya along just in case of an emergency. She stood behind the NKVD officers. One was tall, older, wearing glasses; the other was short and hairy, with small, wicked eyes. Zhenya watched as the short one felt the lying major's pulse, then lifted the patient's eyelid and yanked at the hairs of his eyebrows to check the pupil's reaction.

— He's a goner, — the one who had yanked the eyebrow declared.

Then he rummaged with his hand under the pillow, lifted the blanket, and finding nothing, brushed off his palms and turned to Zhenya:

— What's your name?

— Evgenia Petrovna.

— Zhenya, then? If this enemy suddenly comes to life, let us know. And if he croaks, call anyway — we'll celebrate it together this evening.

He handed Zhenya a scrap of paper and, flashing a gold tooth, slapped her below the waist. Purely by reflex, Zhenya slapped him across the face.

— You bitch, who do you think you're raising your nasty little hand against!? I'll rot you; I'll have you crawling and licking my boots so I'll forgive and love you.

The short-statured man, with his hairy hand, gripped Zhenya's forearm like a vice and pulled her toward the exit.

— Stand down, Lieutenant! Haven't you had enough female prisoners? — the higher-ranking officer sternly rebuked the «gorilla.» — Calm down, young lady; he has a very nervous job, so he snapped.

The lieutenant turned red as a beet; a vein pulsed at his temple, his lips became thin and pale, and his eyes filled with blood. Zhenya felt terrified; it was clear that remorse was a feeling unknown to him. This animal in an officer's uniform reminded her of that commissar who, out of his own lust, had shot her parents. Zhenya's eyes filled with tears. The officers left, and Zhenya, calming herself, dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. She approached Meliton's bed, adjusted the blanket, smoothed the eyebrow where a clump had been torn out with her finger, sat on the edge of the bed, and began to feel the patient's pulse.

— Lord, what have we all done to offend you? How did my mother and father offend you, that you allowed this scoundrel in breeches and a stinking leather jacket to shoot them? Why did you allow that monster with a Mauser to shoot my parents before my eyes? I nearly lost my mind because of it — how did I offend you? How did this major and his little daughter offend you, that you deprived them of a beloved wife and mother? And now, why did you bring these people here, people who have nothing sacred in their souls, so they can deprive this major's daughter of her father as well? What kind of «enemy of the people» is he? A military pilot, a major, a handsome man — and suddenly an enemy? What nonsense!

Zhenya, immersed in these heavy life questions, sat in a daze staring at Meliton's hand, and thus did not immediately notice or realize that the patient had opened his eyes.

— Water... — Meliton whispered.

— My dear, my good man, thank God, you've come to!

Zhenya moistened the major's lips with a damp cotton ball and stroked his thick, stiff black forelock:

— Just don't lose consciousness again. I won't let anyone hurt you! If the Lord, for some reason, hasn't stood up for you, I will be your guardian angel. Yes, yes... I already knew back when they

brought you in that I had to save you, and I hid your letter! Don't die! For the sake of your beautiful daughter, you have no right to do that!

— Who are you? — Meliton's quiet voice sounded unexpectedly.

— Zhenya. I'm a nurse. You've been unconscious for two days. Try not to speak.

— How is my wife?

— Wait, I'll call the doctor now.

Zhenya rushed out of the ward, closed the door, leaned her back against it, and closed her eyes.

Zhenya had long ago given up on men; they didn't really move her. But now, even at the sound of Meliton's quiet voice, bells were ringing in her ears, her heart was beating somewhere in her throat, and her legs simply refused to obey.

— I'm very sorry about your Mary. I don't intend to replace her, but I won't let anyone hurt you!

Zhenya, trying not to betray the surge of emotion, went to report the good news to the head doctor.

7. The Denunciation

Georgy Ivanovich Merabov stood by the window, watching a worker trim the bushes in the flowerbed. He smoked and thought:

— Suppose I don't like how he trims that bush; I could erase him with a single stroke of my pen as a German spy intentionally sabotaging socialist nature. Or I could reward him — simply by not arresting him. But if my superior walks in and doesn't like how the bush is trimmed, the poor gardener will be imprisoned as a spy anyway, only they'll arrest me too, for covering up for spies. Nowadays, to avoid becoming a «spy,» one has to be a scoundrel. Though after a while, they'll still put you against the wall for being a scoundrel; scoundrels aren't needed long-term, they can't be trusted.

Georgy stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the windowsill.

— So, think: what to do with this gardener? A problem!

The colonel walked over to the T-shaped table where he held meetings and glanced at his working side of the desk. On the green baize, to the right, stood a small bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky, next to two telephone sets. Symmetrically, on the left, stood a black desk lamp, and in the center sat a writing set with a heavy paperweight. Near the table stood a large safe topped with a large bust of Lenin, and on the wall behind him hung a portrait of Stalin himself.

Merabov sat heavily in his chair. Before him lay a red folder. After drumming his knuckles on the table for a few moments, he opened the folder and read the report inside for the third time. May 10, 1937 To: Head of the Tbilisi Department of the GPU-NKVD Colonel G.I. Merabov From: Investigator Lieutenant V.G. Glonti

REPORT

I hereby report that due to low professionalism, or perhaps for other reasons, the truck driver failed to fully complete his assignment. In the accident involving Major M. Archvadze's motorcycle, only the wife died — Mary Archvadze, agent codenamed «Sova» [Owl].

During a visit to the surviving major at the hospital, it became clear that he had been in a coma for two days. The doctors' prognosis is 50/50.

The letter to I.V. Stalin, which the agent had reported, was not found at the crash site, nor in the map case, nor in the pockets; nor was it found during the examination of Mary Archvadze at the morgue.

I interviewed the nurse who inventoried the belongings found with Major Archvadze. She claimed to have seen nothing other than what was recorded. This nurse immediately seemed more than suspicious to me.

When I entered Archvadze's ward with Major N.V. Khutsiev, the major, for some reason, brought along this suspicious nurse, E.P. Margelova, because of whom I was unable to strangle the comatose Archvadze.

I gave Margelova a phone number and asked her to call when this bastard Archvadze comes to his senses; she refused and struck me across the face, thereby demonstrating her hostility toward socialism and personally toward Comrade Stalin.

I intended to bring her in for interrogation, but Major N.V. Khutsiev rudely cut me off and began to calm the enemy Margelova.

I request your permission to personally interrogate both of them, as there is a clear indication of collusion on their part, and possibly a counter-revolutionary conspiracy.

(Signature)

The colonel sat perfectly still for some time, but his working jaw muscles and the pencil snapped in his hands betrayed his internal tension. Georgy Ivanovich understood perfectly well that if he gave the green light to this letter, he would be signing his own death warrant — because Nugzar Khutsiev was his cousin, a fact this degenerate Glonti, fortunately, did not know. What a bastard, what criminal scum... look where he's digging! I'll show this hairy gibbon! An underdeveloped butcher, a pervert! Well, you're a dead man now!

What a life — everyone digging a pit for their neighbor. Like hungry rats trying to devour one another.

Georgy picked up the receiver and dialed a number:

— Nugzar Varlamovich, what's the situation with Archvadze? Drop by, we need to discuss it. Only don't bark «Yes, Comrade Colonel» into the phone if Glonti is nearby.

— Yes, Comrade Colonel! Glonti is with the female prisoners.

— I'm waiting.

Major Khutsiev took the top folder from a neat stack on the edge of his desk — labeled in large letters «Case of M.G. Archvadze» — and left the office.

To avoid tempting fate, the brothers stepped out onto the balcony:

— Read this, — the colonel handed the report to his brother. — Good thing this filth doesn't know you're my brother, or he would have written straight to the top. Then he'd definitely beat a confession out of us that we're planning to kill Lavrentiy Beria!

— What do you suggest?

— What do you think? — the colonel smirked. — Not going down to the basement, that's for sure! Tell me, Nugzar, what happened at the hospital? Who is this Margelova?

— Just a medic, nothing special. But the lieutenant started grabbing her by the backside, so she slapped him.

— And what about the pilot?

— Still in a coma.

— And the letter?

— Georgy, who actually saw that letter besides «Sova»? Maybe she was just informing on her husband? We can't ask her now!

— Fine. If God grants it — let him recover. We'll think about it then.

The brothers whispered a bit longer and, apparently having reached an agreement, struck a deal with a handshake!

8. For Stalin

At 6 o'clock in the evening, the phone rang in the investigation department:

— Lieutenant Glonti listening!

— Yes, Comrade Colonel.

— Yes, Major Khutsiev is present. I'll pass it on! Yes, report at 21:00.

The lieutenant hung up the receiver.

— Looks like Ivanych has gone soft in the head — calling us at nine in the evening to report on the Archvadze case.

— Maybe I should go home and you go alone? What is there to report? He's just lying there unconscious. By the way, Vakhtang, did you call the hospital today? Maybe the pilot has already flown off to the other world?

The major dialed the hospital's number:

— Good day, Major Khutsiev calling. Who is on the line? Hello. What can you tell me regarding Archvadze's condition? I see. That's good. I'll call again tomorrow.

— What, did he wake up?

— No, still in a coma. I said «good» because maybe he'll just kick the bucket that way.

— Tomorrow I'm going to the hospital myself. I really want to invite this Zhenechka for a «chat.» It'll be very good for her. I love talking to such pretty little things! They reveal such fantasies and show such zeal in love — especially once I pick up the pliers!

Vakhtang let out a horse-like bray of laughter, groping his genitals. — Let Zhenechka please me while her teeth and nails are still in order.

— Listen, Lieutenant, don't you have enough wives of the enemies of the people? How many do you have down there?

— Bah, no matter how many! They aren't women anymore — they're meat, crazed meat ready for anything. I'm bored with them. I want someone new. And then I'll rip out her claws one by one — they become more passionate then. I don't understand why you refuse to join in. Maybe you can't get it up? Major, are you an impotent?

Khutsiev's eyes flashed, but he restrained himself.

— Why are you flashing your eyes at me? Any of us could end up down there. When you find yourself downstairs facing me — then you can flash them. Just kidding... though tomorrow it might be the other way around and I'll be there. One thing comforts me — you won't rape me. But if it's me — well, I'll get some practice in. Just hypothetically speaking, Major.

And again, Vakhtang brayed like a horse.

Lieutenant Glonti, of course, suspected why the Chief was calling him together with Khutsiev. The letter had worked! Vakhtang was already relishing how he would break this intellectual's knuckles — those damn «protectors!» That medical whore would long regret that slap, and the major would regret he was ever born when his balls were crushed in the doorframe!

The lieutenant took a brush from his nightstand and began to polish his boots, long and tediously.

Major Khutsiev also knew why the lieutenant was in such an aggressively sexual mood. He realized with horror that if Merabov hadn't been his cousin, then he, the pilot who had regained consciousness, and Evgenia Petrovna, who had foolishly hidden the letter to Stalin — would all have been ground into dust.

But today he held two aces in his hand. So let the lieutenant bluster, polish his boots, and imagine himself in the senior investigator's seat.

At the appointed time, the officers were in the Chief's office.

— Good evening, officers. This morning I received a report stating that Major Khutsiev is connected to Major Archvadze, and nurse Margelova is their courier.

— That's a lie, Comrade Colonel! — the major jumped up.

— Sit down! Lieutenant, take the major's service weapon.

Vakhtang Glonti lunged at Khutsiev and, deftly twisting the arm of the almost unresisting major, pulled the TT pistol from his holster.

— I didn't believe the report, and knowing that you and the lieutenant are friends, I went to the hospital myself with my driver. Margelova confessed, and she is currently in the basement, waiting for you, Lieutenant.

The colonel pressed a call button. Two men entered.

— Take him away, — he commanded, indicating with his gaze the major who had gone limp in his chair.

When the prisoner was led out, the colonel approached the lieutenant. He went to the safe, opened the door, and took out two beautiful gilded goblets — evidently expropriated from some bourgeois in the past. One had a red stem, the other a blue one. He placed them on top of the safe and poured cognac.

The colonel handed Glonti the gilded goblet with the blue stem.

— Congratulations! Let's drink to your next rank, Comrade Senior Lieutenant!

— For Stalin!

Glonti downed the goblet.

— Thank you for the timely signal!

— I serve the working people!

— Stand down!

— My mistake, Comrade Colonel. I serve the Soviet Union.

— No matter. You'll get used to it. You aren't the only one who slips up out of habit. The main thing is to be a loyal son of your people, to scent the enemy from a distance, and to uproot this filth without the slightest mercy.

— I've always hated this intellectual scum! If you wish, Comrade Colonel, you can be the first to interrogate that hospital nurse. You'll enjoy it. She's young and fair. And afterward, I'll have some fun with both of them at once.

The colonel handed Glonti a sheet of paper.

— Write a «telega» [denunciation] against the major. Everything you know about this book-loving bastard. I've long suspected his lack of zeal in exposing enemies of the people. Write it, and in a week or two, you'll have his major's position. Write in detail — I have to send this note to the top, so facts and more facts.

Glonti huffed over the paper for about ten minutes when he suddenly grabbed his throat and began to wheeze. He didn't wheeze for long; then he went limp and collapsed onto the table.

The colonel pressed the call button. Khutsiev and the same two Red Army soldiers entered.

— Nugzar, you know what to do with him. The lieutenant overdid it — seems he hasn't had a drink in a long time!

— My, Georgy Ivanovich, you're quite the «Stanislavski.» What a performance!

— At least he died happy, unlike those he tortured. I've always loved the theater, and the «Stanislavski system» — is a very useful system in our line of work!

9. Secret Agent

The coffee brewed in the cezve emitted a pleasant aroma; it clearly helped reduce nervousness and distrust, creating an atmosphere for communication. Or perhaps, as it seems now, it was thanks to Evgenia Petrovna's skill in manipulating her interlocutor.

— Roma, I will speak with you frankly, as far as possible. Try not to ask unnecessary, much less stupid questions. I will tell you what I can. I won't switch to «thou,» as we will talk today and then, I hope, never see each other again.

— And how I hope never to see you again! What possessed me to walk along the embankment that day!

— Yes, I suspect supernatural forces were involved, — Evgenia Petrovna smiled stiffly. — You know, even yesterday, the probability of us sitting here talking and sipping coffee was about the same as a meteorite flying through that window right now... and yet, here you are.

— You talk to me almost like an initiate, someone close to God. To what do I owe such attention — is it really just my broken nose?

— For boys like you, I am both an initiate and one close to the «Gods,» but that belongs to the realm of conscience and life philosophy. Today is not about me, however. Let's have you listen to me and try to understand: the main thing in the life of a commoner is the ability to adapt, to mimic, if the goal is to settle in well. I have lived in this world and realized that for the people, «Gods» only change externally and hierarchically, while for the «Gods,» the people are always a gray mass — the material from which their well-being and greatness are molded.

It's only at your age that young people are guided by the laws of gravity and relativity. It's at your age that people believe all roads are open to them, that life is just beginning and one must live it so as not to be «excruciatingly painful»... it's only at your young age it seems that if you only want it enough, everything you desire will be yours and there will be no consequences! No, my dear Roma, it's not like that. Not all roads lead to Rome, and even fewer to the temple. Only businessmen make deals with partners to earn big money; ordinary people earn big money, usually, by making deals with their conscience. It's only at your tender age that maximalism prevails over realism; only at your rosy-cheeked age that «a decent person» and «a decent swine» are not synonyms. It's only you, lovers of fine food and sweet sleep, who believe that the presumption of innocence is a mandatory attribute of justice, and that confession is not the «Queen of Evidence»!

Believe me, Roma, what I'm saying isn't just words. This is what broke the fates and lives of more than one generation. I've been through it, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Today the situation isn't what it was during the Cult of Personality, before and after the war. If today you just got a broken nose and a clip on the ear, in those times, they would have driven nails under your fingertips. You would have confessed to being a member of an underground Trotskyist organization, and while you were being sent to the other world, someone would have received a regular promotion, bought his son a bicycle, and ordered a beautiful ring for his beloved wife made from your gold crown. To all the neighbors, that someone would be the kindest man who wouldn't hurt a fly, and his wife would often be upset that he had such a «nervous and high-pressure job,» because his nose would frequently bleed and stain his clothes or linens.

Why am I telling you all this? Because back then, everyone lived in a constant state of fear. In those times, to become an «enemy of the people» and subject your family to inhuman trials — at best — a random glance at a neighbor or a coworker was enough. And for them, in turn, it was enough to imagine that your glance was unkind, or that your apartment was a bit too spacious. Then, the one who imagined it would strive to be the first with a denunciation: that you are enemy filth, meeting with German enemies of the people on even days, American hirelings on odd days, and on weekends, at home with your wife and children, whispering the articles of Trotsky and Rykov.

I myself passed through the millstones of that human soul-crusher. I often had to make a choice. Truth and falsehood back then were completely abstract concepts. The truth was whatever gave the required result, and that result was achieved through medieval methods — minus the bonfires, perhaps. What I am today is not a conscious choice, but rather the opposite — an absence of any choice.

Let's finish with the philosophy of mass terror, Roma. I didn't bring you here for that. Let's move on to Nino.

Evgenia Petrovna opened the sideboard, took out a bottle of cognac and two shot glasses, and placed them on the table.

— Will you?

— No, thank you.

— Well, I will.

Evgenia poured a shot and slowly drank it.

— Almost a year ago, Nino met a handsome young man — let's call him Dato — who was born with a halo, as his parents were from the caste of «untouchables.» Nino, on the other hand, had only divine beauty and a mother who worked in a library. In short — no rank, no lineage. And while Nino's beauty meant something to the young man, it meant nothing to his parents without the «halo.»

After some time, Dato introduced the girl he liked to his parents. That was the moment all the misfortunes of the poor girl began. — Evgenia Petrovna lit a cigarette; I lit one too.

— Evgenia Petrovna, you're telling this like you're reading a police report, except for the bit about the halo.

— Habit. You didn't think I worked as a nanny in the psychiatric hospital, did you?

— I figured as much.

— You haven't figured out anything. No one becomes a «seksoy» [secret informant] of their own free will. Some do it to save themselves, some to save someone else. But it doesn't matter to anyone, because once you take one step, you take a second, then a third, and then those steps turn into sins. At first, you do something «for the greater good,» then a small — oh, such a small, almost unnoticeable — meanness, justifying it by saying you have no choice, and if you don't do it, someone else will, and those you love might suffer. Note: you never tell yourself that you will suffer; it's easier to justify when you're warding off trouble from loved ones. Then you begin, timidly at first, and then with pride, to believe that the Motherland needs all this. Time passes, and you start to despise those you betray. You no longer deceive yourself, fully understanding that you serve the devil for a fat scrap — or some just for a bone. But unfortunately, there is no way back. There is no such thing as a «small meanness.» Meanness either is, or it isn't, and you have to live with it. But sometimes, if the soul hasn't completely turned into self-justification, if an angel like Nino suddenly crosses your path, you start to think: here is the chance to put something on the other side of the scale — the side of good.

I still couldn't understand where this woman was heading, or why she suddenly needed to catch me at the power plant exit, drag me to her home, and pour her soul out.

— Evgenia Petrovna, I'm sitting here and I just can't get it: why are you baring your soul to me? Maybe you're planning to recruit me? By telling the institute that I peep at the mentally ill? Is this your special tag-team: Nino asks a passerby for a cigarette, then you spend a day in conversation finding out if the client is worthy of the title «Assistant to the Motherland» or not? If so, you call in the bone-breakers, they punch the poor guy in the face, and then you complete your dark deed — lure the beaten man home and tell the police, his workplace, or the dean's office that he tried to rape you?

— You are either innocence itself, or a bigger scoundrel than I am! I've already told you: you should thank your stars that you hung on the window bars and got hit in the nose like a filthy voyeur, rather than ending up, at best, in one of the wards of the madhouse — or at worst, at the bottom of the Kura.

I felt somewhat uneasy. I was too far removed from the problems of true psychiatry, let alone «forced psychiatry.» This, in fact, reeked of «patriotic psychiatry!» It was some kind of schizophrenia; I felt my hair stand on end, and a chill ran through me. In general, I'm not from the breed of partisans, and I felt quite sick. Apparently, my facial expression fully reflected the horror and hopelessness of falling into the millstones of the punitive security structures, as Evgenia reacted instantly:

— Don't be afraid. If you were in danger right now, I would never have met with you. It would most likely be either too late or useless. So, Roma, I shall continue. The family problems of the «grounded» and the «celestials» differ greatly. While the former marry mostly those who are prettier, have an apartment, or match their temperament, the latter marry mostly those who have a stronger «back» or a larger fortune. In short, a marriage among the celestials is more like a successful capital investment. Often, early betrothals are practiced, to «stake a claim» on the marriage. Of course, the betrothal is known mostly only within the circle of the initiates.

Well then, David Lezhava had been betrothed for several years to Lali Khutsishvili, a girl from a family of «celestials,» which imposed certain obligations on the families. While Dato's mother could still tolerate her son sleeping with someone other than his future wife, the bride's family was categorically against David meeting a «nobody.»

Since Merab Lezhava was the city's chief of police and Irakli Khutsishvili held a position in the republic's KGB apparatus, the «aura» of the bride's family was significantly larger. It was clear that Nino had to vanish from the son-in-law's horizon. The stupidest thing on David's part was to show Nino off and brag about her everywhere, but Nino was so beautiful and kind that Dato's entire circle adored her. If not for that ill-fated betrothal, they would probably have been one of the most beautiful and happy couples.

The Khutsishvili family and the bride herself became her first enemies.

For some time, Irakli tried to persuade Dato to leave Nino and stop appearing with her in public, since he was already betrothed to his daughter Lali. But David did not react to this. After yet another fruitless conversation with David, Irakli Nugzarovich decided to act.

The next morning, Khutsishvili asked his secretary to call in Lieutenant Zakharchenko.

10. Recruitment

A week later, Meliton Archvadze was relieved of many of his bandages and began to walk. During that week, Zhenya had literally breathed life into him. She hardly ever left the pilot's side; she was filled with a new, unfamiliar feeling. Everyone around her had somehow become «good,» she worked with a smile, and she herself radiated joy and happiness. In the department, they noticed her inspiration and self-sacrifice in caring for the nearly dead major and barely burdened her with other work. Only the pilot — sullen, overgrown with stubble — noticed none of this. He remained constantly withdrawn, tormented by the fact that he hadn't been able to prevent the accident and that his Mary had died instead of him.

Major Khutsiev visited the patient several times. He was extremely polite, drew up the accident report, and questioned Archvadze about the vehicle that had hit his motorcycle — whether he remembered the plate number or anything distinctive, as the driver had fled the scene and a search was underway.

After offering his condolences to Meliton regarding his wife's death, he informed Zhenya that his assistant, Lieutenant Glonti, to the grief of all who knew him, had heroically perished in a shootout with enemies.

Meliton's daughter, four-year-old Dali, was brought in several times. A plump little girl with a huge blue bow and eyes of the same color, she charmed Zhenya with her spontaneity. She read poems and hopped on one leg in time with them. It felt as though her presence alone filled the entire ward; she managed to smile at everyone and chirped incessantly like a sparrow. But sometimes she would suddenly stop, press herself against her father's hand, and ask when Mama would arrive. Her grandmother — Meliton's mother-in-law, Margo Pertaya — was someone Zhenya did not like. A thin Megrelian woman with a hooked nose and thin, almost colorless lips, she barely spoke to her son-in-law. When she caught Zhenya's eye, Zhenya felt a very unpleasant, almost revolting sensation — as if she were being stripped and appraised like goods at a market.

Once, Zhenya accidentally overheard their conversation:

— It's that letter of yours that's to blame.

— What letter?

— You know perfectly well. Mary told me everything. She saw it all — that's why you killed her.

— You've clearly eaten too much ghomi, woman!

— I hate you. They'll shoot you as an enemy anyway, because Mary reported everything about you to the right place. I'll be happy. And forget your daughter — she will never be an Archvadze; she will be a Pertaya, mark my words! And if you don't happen to die, find a place to live at the airfield; you spent all your time there anyway, and Mary was a widow with a living husband!

After that, neither the mother-in-law nor the daughter appeared at the hospital again. Zhenya's heart bled when she saw how much Meliton suffered and how he withdrew further and further into himself.

Nugzar Khutsiev paced his office, reading the head doctor's note about E.P. Margelova. He understood that Zhenya was exactly the person he needed, and it would be simply foolish not to seize the moment to do a «good deed» with profit for himself. Since Lieutenant Glonti had died of heart failure after overindulging in alcohol, only he and Colonel Merabov knew about the letter to Stalin written by Archvadze. The death of yet another «Turkish spy» — of whom the basement was full — would bring no medals or ranks, only another sin on the soul. However, since the head doctor had reported Zhenya's feelings for Meliton, a perfect game could be played to everyone's satisfaction with minimal losses.

The major called on the internal line:

— Comrade Colonel, may I come in? I have a rather good idea.

From the colonel's office, Major Khutsiev called the hospital and asked for Margelova:

— Evgenia Petrovna, I don't want to send you a summons; our establishment is not the kind that inspires pleasant thoughts. Therefore, perhaps I'll drop by myself at six this evening. We'll sit on a bench in the hospital grounds and talk about life. Does that work?

Zhenya's legs gave way; she felt a chill somewhere deep in her stomach.

— Very well, — she answered quietly and hung up.

During the time since Zhenya had hidden the letter in the boiler room, she had gone to drink tea several times with old Samvel — the stoker she had known since she first arrived at the hospital. She had moved the letter several times, and finally, she had burned it, throwing it into the furnace without ever opening it.

In the evening, when Zhenya stepped outside at six, Major Khutsiev was already sitting on a bench under a spreading maple tree. Zhenya was extremely nervous, as if sensing something terrible. She froze at the exit; her legs refused to move, but she pulled herself together — nothing here depended on her.

— Good evening.

The major stood up and gallantly kissed her hand. They sat on the bench; Zhenya twisted a fallen maple leaf by its stem. A heavy silence ensued. A slight tremor ran through her; she was terrified. She had long been used to living alone and relying on no one. Perhaps her character — somewhat unsociable and harsh — had developed because she hadn't had the chance not just to cry on someone's shoulder, but simply to lean on someone, to feel a sense of belonging, friendly closeness, or a shared worldview, let alone the feeling of being needed. Since childhood, since the moment she lost her parents, Zhenya had completely forgotten the feeling of love for another; she lived, as it were, with the flow, from day to day. She lived without sentimentality, without feminine melancholy, without men or love for them.

And now, it seemed fate had taken pity on her; her heart had thawed, and she had attached herself with all her soul to this pilot who had nearly perished. Zhenya had forgotten when she last cried, yet now she sobbed into her pillow almost every night from happiness — and she didn't even particularly need his feelings in return. She understood that love had come to her, that for a week now Meliton had become the meaning of her life, her joy, and her hope. And now she was deathly afraid that because of this major, everything might sink into oblivion, evaporate like morning mist, or even drown in blood. She understood well that the «osobist» had clearly not come to sit with her in the fresh air; he was clearly carrying something ominous — such was his job.

— Evgenia Petrovna, I think it's clear I didn't come here to pay you compliments, though you deserve them. I am not Lieutenant Glonti, and laying hands on people is not my style — though I am by no means an angel. I must say that you, my dear, are very, very lucky that it was I who crossed your path, and not the lieutenant. I will be frank with you and hope not only for your understanding but for your sober judgment. I want to say again that you will have the opportunity to choose — but it will be a choice between something bad and something horrific. Others don't even have that.

— What, do you want me to become your mistress? You'd better shoot me!

— No, don't worry, you don't interest me in that way, — the major smiled. — Relax and listen carefully to what I have to say. I won't demand an answer from you immediately; think about it today, and I'll come for the answer tomorrow.

The major lit a cigarette and continued:

— Evgenia Petrovna, everything I tell you here must, of course, remain between us. Otherwise, you might put me at risk, and I would be forced — forgive the professional slang — to liquidate you. I hope you understand?

Zhenya began to guess what this was about — the letter, of course — and she feared she had done something irreparable by throwing it into the furnace.

— I'll start by saying that Meliton Archvadze's life is in your hands. I know for a fact of the existence of the letter you know of, written by the major, from his wife's denunciation. I hope you've destroyed the letter? I offer you a deal: I will trade the denunciation — and consequently, the pilot's life — for your agreement to occasionally cooperate with us, proving your love and loyalty to the Motherland and personally to Comrade Stalin. That is, you will become a «secret employee» — say, at your place of work — and we'll see from there. You won't have to spy on Meliton, — the major smiled.

— You understand, dear Evgenia, that if you refuse, Meliton Archvadze will be arrested. The letter will be considered lost in the accident. You, most likely, will not suffer. Ho the denunciation stating that the major was preparing a conspiracy against the Leader will cost him his life.

11. Friends in the Security Forces

Two bosom friends, Merab Lezhava and Irakli Khutsiev, finished school to the roar of victory salutes honoring the defeat of the fascists. There was no question of where to study or what to become; Irakli's father, laying the foundations of a «labor dynasty» of osobists, arranged for his son and his friend to enter School No. 305, which trained military counterintelligence officers — later to become the KGB Higher School. Irakli enrolled there under the surname Khutsishvili.

When the friends graduated from the military counterintelligence school, Major General Khutsiev assigned them to his own MGB apparatus.

Following the kaleidoscopic post-war transformations of the security structures, the friends eventually found themselves in different departments — Merab in the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] and Irakli in the KGB. Their male friendship, forged on the school bench, not only endured but evolved into a friendship between their families.

Merab had a son, David, and Irakli had a daughter, Lali. The friends even went on vacations together. Given that their departmental apartment buildings were not only in the city's elite district but right next to each other, the children not only played in the same yard but went to the same school — in fact, the same class, though Lali was nearly a year younger. David immediately showed everyone in class that anyone looking sideways at Lali would have to deal with him; thus, they were nicknamed «the bride and groom.» The fathers laughed at the moniker, but once, while sitting over drinks for Lali's fifteenth birthday, they jokingly decided to betroth them, as the children themselves were drawn to one another. They laughed and laughed, but when the wives joined the conversation, the talk shifted quietly into a practical plane.

— And why not? — declared Venera, David's mother. — The children get along perfectly, and we won't just help them get settled, we'll multiply our savings. Otherwise, the money could easily go to some street girl or be drunk away by some slick womanizer.

Valentina, Lali's mother, supported her friend, and in that tight parental circle, they decided to betroth the children by exchanging rings on David's sixteenth birthday. No sooner said than done — the betrothal took place in a very narrow circle, and the rings bore embossed inscriptions: «Dato» and «Lali»!

Waiting for Zakharchenko, who was his right hand for executing all sorts of «dirty little deeds,» the colonel pondered how to steer David away from Nino. He was quite determined; he would not allow some slut clutching onto David to ruin his daughter's future. Of course, he understood David perfectly; if his own Valentina didn't bow her head in time, her horns would scrape the chandelier. But no one knew about her horns, and those who did — didn't talk. But this milksop flaunts this girl everywhere; he's still young, still foolish. And Merab does nothing, as if he's taking revenge for his Venera — though how could he know? He and Venera had only met at the safe-house villa maybe five times, and even that was meaningless. She couldn't compare to Valka; she was just «available,» so he serviced her while Merab was in the hospital with an ulcer. And Evgenia made sure he didn't recover ahead of schedule. Margelova — an excellent operative, the «Golden Fund» of the NKVD, inherited from his father. There is no such thing as an ex-informant. Irakli used her rarely; she worked selectively — «for the family,» so to speak — but he paid her generously, just as his father had.

The colonel pulled up the data on Nino Vladimirovna Meskhi:

Student at the Academy of Arts. Mother — a Megrelian, Dali Melitonovna Pertaya, a librarian from Zugdidi. Father — Vladimir Meskhi, a university student, died on March 10, 1956, during the unrest regarding Stalin's cult of personality.

They live together in the Sololaki district, in a pre-revolutionary building on the fourth floor.

Oh, how often we, living side-by-side with someone our whole lives, think we know everything about them.

Knowing Evgenia Petrovna Margelova since birth, there was much he did not know about her. He didn't know that his father, Nugzar Khutsiev, had never officially registered Margelova as an NKVD employee. When he was dying of stomach cancer in the hospital, he had handed Evgenia Petrovna her personal file with the original entry stating that E.P. Margelova was the operative «Sirotk» [Orphan] and was at the disposal of Major N.V. Khutsiev.

To Irakli, Evgenia Petrovna was something akin to a living family heirloom — a living, unquestioning creature belonging to a family without rank or lineage, seemingly without past or future, existing only to carry out small, delicate, or even dirty errands inherited from his father. Therefore, Margelova's past held no significance for him, a KGB colonel; for the state, she had long been a nobody — a person with a passport, but without a past.

And knowing nothing of Margelova's past, he set in motion the mechanism that would lead many to a tragic end. Reading the data on Nino, the colonel, thinking of his daughter, mused:

— Oh, these portionless girls! Well, it's understandable — who wouldn't want a wealthy, handsome young man as a husband or son-in-law? No matter, we'll put everything in its place! Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's!

— Comrade Colonel, Lieutenant Zakharchenko is here, — a female voice came through the intercom.

— Send him in.

— Lieutenant Zakharchenko reporting!

— Come in, have a seat. Semyon, here's the situation — how to explain it precisely?

The colonel pulled a cigarette from a pack of Marlboros and began searching his pockets for matches. Semyon flicked a lighter:

— Zippo, Comrade Colonel, I have a Zippo!

Zakharchenko twirled the lighter — featuring an engraving of a blue-eyed tiger — which he had confiscated a month ago from some «dissident scum» and bragged about to anyone who would listen.

— Lieutenant, in short, there is this girl, quite pretty. You need to «have some fun» with her and, of course, arrange an unforgettable sexual photoshoot of the process. Outwardly, it should look as if a maniac did it — you know, tear the clothes, throw the underwear in the hallway, I shouldn't have to teach you — but without blood or beatings. Yes, her mother will be home too. You'll need to put them both under with chloroform. Take two more men from the squad. Here is the address, photos of the girl, and the apartment key.

The colonel handed Zakharchenko an envelope. Semyon opened it; inside were a photograph, a key, and a sheet with the address and the layout of the apartment where Nino lived. Semyon stared at the girl's photo for a few minutes, then at the floor plan. Then he put the plan and photo back in the envelope, took the key, and placed it in his inner jacket pocket, laying the envelope back on the table before the colonel.

— Crystal! What a girl — Brigitte Bardot, — Semyon whistled. — It's always like this: someone else gets to ride the beauty while I click the camera — it's not fair. The mother isn't bad either; maybe give her some pleasure too?

— Semyon, this isn't your first assignment. Remember: no blood, no violence. Put them under, sleep with her, film it. The photos must be as juicy as possible. As for the mother — do as you like; your brutes would rape a crocodile if given the chance. I repeat: no hitting and certainly no killing — you'll answer with your head! Tomorrow morning, negatives and the key on my desk. Dismissed.

The colonel pressed the call button.

— Some tea with lemon, Sonyechka, some tea.

The colonel rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

— Good girl, my daughter — she handled the key perfectly. Now David's little bird is finished! I want to see his face when his buddies get their hands on photos of Nino's bedroom scenes.

12. A Sleepless Night

Zhenya did not sleep the entire night. It had been a long time since she had felt such turmoil, such all-encompassing loneliness. She was suspended somewhere between spiritual prostration and total despair. Her small body — which had not yet known a man's touch, yet had burned with passion for so many nights now — shook with indignation and rage.

They had offered to make her an informant, a spy, a watcher. And if Meliton's life had not been placed on the other side of the scale, she would have certainly delivered a stinging slap for such insolence! But Meliton changed everything. Meliton — with whom she had long shared her loneliness in her dreams, in that bed where she made him surrender to her beauty, her grace, her lace lingerie, her beautiful body and fiery temperament — changed everything! Now, without a second thought, she would agree to sell her soul to the devil. Meliton's life was not merely the life of a patient in her ward, but something far greater. Perhaps Zhenya would have given even more than what they were pushing her toward, if only she could become desired by him.

Yet, somewhere deep inside, a duality tormented her regarding this deal with her conscience and the price of meanness. Zhenya wondered: can meanness ever be justified? Are there gradations to betrayal? Where is that boundary, that Rubicon, after which conscience loses its meaning and meanness successfully dons any noble justification — from patriotism and heroism to poetic lyrics about the «impossibility of acting otherwise, because...»? And who is supposed to shift those boundaries back and forth along the scale of conscience?

Looking at the icons in the corner of her bedroom, Zhenya searched for some solid ground, some justification. She appealed to God, realizing that at this very moment, she was her own God.

— For me, — Zhenya thought — Meliton's life can outweigh almost anything. But for someone else, Meliton is a nobody, and everything that is vital and essential to me right now isn't worth a broken kopek to another.

She realized she was on the verge of losing her mind, but the thoughts wouldn't let her go. If, after her report, someone is sentenced to five years instead of ten, does that make her meanness smaller? And if they are shot, is it greater? But the report would be exactly the same! Everything was so complex and relative, and often completely independent of the desire or will of the one writing. If she didn't write it — someone else would. No one would even notice if her life vanished; and they certainly wouldn't appreciate her sacrifice. Evil is multifaceted only to those watching from the sidelines. When you are at a logging camp or in a labor-camp brothel, a term of five or ten years is practically the same, since two years in those conditions is effectively a death sentence.

Zhenya suffered not only from having to make a choice where no alternative existed. She was also tormented by the fact that Meliton had no inkling of how much she loved him. He was grieving for a wife who had betrayed him — a woman with whom he should have died in that accident because of her stupidity, her folly, her jealousy, or her infidelity. Zhenya didn't even want to know why that woman had betrayed her husband, forgetting that the millstones grind down both enemies and those who expose them with equal success. But was she destined for the same fate? Zhenya felt a wave of nausea. She wanted to hide behind the back of the man she had unwittingly saved from torture and death by hiding that letter to «Comrade Stalin.» Was this all the hand of God? Was God saving him for her? Zhenya crossed herself. Outside the window, the sky began to lighten.

Walking down the hospital corridor, Zhenya was already a different person. Today she knew exactly what she would say to the major and how. Her sleepless night had defined much in her life — her new life, in which she could no longer wait for things to happen on their own.

It was still early and the corridor was empty. At the desk, the nurse on duty sat with her head buried in a book illuminated by a desk lamp; she was either reading or sleeping.

Zhenya approached the door, adjusted her hair, checked if the buttons on her robe were fastened, and resolutely opened the door. Meliton was asleep. Evgenia latched the door behind her and approached the bed.

The major's haggard face, overgrown with stubble, betrayed his spiritual pain and his lack of desire to live. The fact that he had caused the accident, and that he had survived while Mary had not, lay upon him as a guilt that completely stripped him of life's motivation. The final blow had been dealt by his mother-in-law, who had demonstratively refused to bring his daughter.

— Enough, my dear, enough. Life hasn't stopped! Your Mary received what she had prepared for you. You haven't lost your daughter — that depends on you. But as for the fact that you have been incredibly lucky — you will hear that from me today!

Zhenya walked to the window. She gathered her thoughts, adjusted the curtain, and mechanically ran her finger along the windowsill, trying to calm the heart leaping out of her chest.

— How hard it is to tell a person you love them, that you need them, need them constantly — even when they lower their trousers for an injection automatically, as if for a doctor, flashing a bare backside, and you prick that backside as if it were already something of your own, something dear. My God, I already know him better than many wives know their husbands. — Zhenya smiled at her thoughts. — I understand when women cheat, looking for something «more.» Here, it's a different case. It's likely I'm the one who will have a hard time.

Zhenya felt herself blushing. She glanced briefly at the peacefully sleeping Meliton and, as she always did when nervous, mechanically checked if all the buttons on her robe were fastened.

— Well, there's nothing to choose from, and it's too late anyway.

Meliton stirred.

13. The Confession

Zhenya sat on the edge of the bed:

— Good morning, Comrade Major!

— Good morning, Zhenechka. Why so early? Even the birds aren't singing yet.

Meliton sat up in bed, scratching a beard that had grown well beyond mere stubble.

— Major, I need to talk to you. This is a very serious conversation. Promise me that, if possible, you won't interrupt me, all right?

— Is this about me shaving? I've already told you — it's not just that I don't want to shave; I don't want to live. If that's what this is about, don't waste your time. Besides, I don't have a razor. Open the window a crack, please; I'm going to smoke. — Meliton pulled out a pack of Belomorkanal left for him the day before yesterday by Major Khutsiev. — A thoughtful officer; he even left matches. I wonder if they found that car that hit us?

Meliton tapped the cardboard tube of the cigarette against the box and struck a match. For the first time since the accident, he took a long drag of the «Uritsky» tobacco. His head swam, and he broke into a cough.

— Imagine that, — he choked through the smoke. — It feels as if I've never smoked in my life!

Zhenya opened the small window pane, took a saucer from the nightstand, and handed it to him as an ashtray. She sat back down at the foot of his bed:

— Are you ready to listen to me?

— I'm listening, Zhenechka. It's simply impossible to say no to someone as lovely as you.

Zhenya smiled:

— Well now, the Belomor has worked on you like a good narcotic! You've started to notice that besides your wife, there are other women — even pretty ones.

— Don't touch Mary. — The pilot's eyes turned sharply toward Zhenya, flashing with anger. — You didn't know her. It hasn't even been a week since she was buried. Aren't you ashamed? And what right do you have anyway? Who are you? Leave! You may be pretty, but you are cold and tactless. I know you aren't married; you clearly have no idea what love is, what one will do for its sake, or what agony a person suffers when they lose their beloved — especially through their own fault. Leave, I don't want to see you! And why are you always hovering around me anyway? Aren't there other nurses?

Zhenya stood up abruptly and headed for the door, but before reaching it, she turned back:

— No. Now you will have to listen to me! Smoke your cigarette and try not to twitch. If you need to, hold onto the bedframe, but don't overdo it — don't break the bed.

The major, not expecting such spirit from the nurse, stared at her in surprise.

— When they brought you in after the accident, you were unconscious in the admissions ward. I was the one who received you. I noticed a letter in your map case and, after reading the addressee, I managed to hide it in my blouse without being seen. That same day, comrades from the NKVD arrived and were searching desperately for that letter. They summoned me, demanding to know if I had seen anything that wasn't listed in the inventory of the major's personal belongings.

— Are you insane? I have no idea what letter you're talking about! Maybe you overheard the conversation with my mother-in-law about Mary's letter?

— Major, don't play the lamb with me. I'm talking about the letter that was marked: «Strictly Secret. To Comrade Stalin Personally.»

A heavy silence fell. Meliton slumped against the pillow, pale, his eyes half-closed. Then he sat up again, took a deep drag, and asked without opening his eyes:

— Where is the letter? Did you read it?

— No, I didn't read it. And when I realized exactly what the «osobists» were looking for, I burned it. While you were still unconscious, two officers came by specifically to find out from you where that letter was — they were checking to see if you were faking.

Then, one of those «osobists» supposedly «perished,» and that gave you a chance to stay out of the basement of the Special Department. You see, your wife, Mary, was an informant for the man who died. It was she who wrote the denunciation about the letter. The accident was arranged for you, though they made a mistake — they thought you would be alone, but you were with your wife. And she was the one who died, not you. But the biggest mistake involved the letter: they knew about it from the denunciation, but they didn't know the contents, so they searched for it with particular care.

Meliton was paler now than when he had been unconscious. The cigarette trembled in his fingers. A single tear rolled down his right cheek and vanished into his stubble.

— Her mother hinted to me that she had reported the letter. I didn't believe it; I thought she was just being spiteful. Now, much looks different. This... I still need to digest this. To re-evaluate. It's too low, too base!

Zhenya fell silent.

She would say nothing of her conversation with Khutsiev — not now, not ever. The main thing was that Meliton would live. As for what came next — let God decide.

The major looked at Zhenya:

— Zhenechka, forgive me... I'm a fool for offending you. I knew nothing about Mary. And I loved that woman! Why did she want me dead so badly? For what, or for whom? — Meliton fell silent, took a deep drag, and began to blow smoke rings. — But what made you risk your life like that?

Zhenya flushed red and, quite unexpectedly even to herself, blurted out:

— I love you!

14. Violation

In the evening, returning from the Academy of Arts, Nino saw David's white Volga parked near the house. It was only when she almost reached for the door handle that she realized it wasn't David's car. Men were sitting inside. A wave of heat washed over Nino from the surprise; she hurried past and almost ran into the entrance.

— The little bird has flown into the cage, — Zakharchenko said, taking a drag of his cigarette.
— Well, did everyone see the girl?

— We saw her, — a voice grumbled from the back seat. — She's choice.

— That's the one. Her and her mother are the ones we'll be «breaking in,» but I'm warning you now: no blood, no beatings, and certainly no killing. If anything goes wrong — I'll kill you with my own hands!

— Come on, what are we, some kind of murderers? Well, it happens sometimes, but not to girls as beautiful as that. They should be loved, not killed. By the way, is a double-rape allowed?

— It is.

— Then consider yourself lucky, Semyon. I'll rape her twice — the second time for you, while you're clicking away with the camera. — Gela let out a braying laugh from the back.

— At ease! One on watch, two resting. We go up at four, when everything in the house has quieted down.

Semyon quietly switched on the «Mayak» radio station.

Around four o'clock, Semyon and his subordinates — in gloves, masks, and sneakers — stood at the door of the apartment where Nino Meskhi lived with her mother, Dali Pertaya. In Semyon's hand was the key to Nino's apartment.

At her father's request, Lali had made the impression for the key. She was a good student and, under her father's guidance, had quickly mastered the process of making a mold from a key. She didn't know what her father wanted the key for, and she didn't want to know; but she knew for certain that this key would help drive Nino away from David. Finally — she would be able to remove this proud girl who was trespassing on what belonged only to her. David was hers; he was betrothed to her and would be her husband, and no Nino or any other girl would stand in her way.

Lali had been able to put the plan with the key into action a week prior, when she and Nino were at a cafe with a group. The girls had stepped out to the restroom as usual. Lali used that moment to take an impression of Nino's house key.

Now, as Colonel Khutsishvili's men used the key made from that mold to open the apartment door, they had no inkling that they were opening Pandora's box — that the wake of this atrocity would touch many fates, directly or indirectly affecting almost every character in this story. And if no good deed goes unpunished, then certainly no evil deed does either.

Semyon inserted the key into the lock, hesitated for a moment as if considering whether to open it or not. The door opened easily, almost silently. Despite being in the apartment for the first time, the intruders oriented themselves perfectly; thanks to the plan, they knew the layout of this section of the ancient building. Semyon had prepared the operation meticulously; there could be no slip-ups — the boss wouldn't forgive it. At his own home, the group had rehearsed the entire process several times, from entering the building to leaving it, trying to foresee every detail. It's the small details that usually get you caught.

Once inside the apartment, they acted almost on autopilot.

Approaching the bedroom door, Zakharchenko illuminated the way with his Zippo featuring the tiger engraving. Gela opened a jar of chloroform and soaked two handkerchiefs. The men moved quickly into the bedroom. Moonlight streamed through the uncurtained window, so the room was not dark. Two beautiful women, looking much alike in the moonlight, slept on the double bed. The young

one lay on the left, the mother on the right by the window. The men pressed the handkerchiefs firmly against the faces of both sleepers. After a minute, Nino went limp and stopped resisting, though her eyes seemed to react. The mother, however, began to resist actively after a minute or two, even starting to scream. One of the attackers struck her in the chin; her head jerked, and the woman went quiet. Her handkerchief was soaked with a fresh dose of chloroform.

Semyon readied the camera hanging around his neck. He drew the curtain and switched on the light. He was used to executing assignments precisely, missing nothing.

While Semyon prepared, Gela and Koba managed to undress and, demonstratively for the camera — it was clear this wasn't their first time — tore the chemise and underwear off Nino. They raped the girl professionally; the positions were the most lewd, the collective staged sex sophisticated.

The scenes of «hot sex» with Nino, played out for the camera, lasted ten to fifteen minutes. Semyon worked professionally, shooting from the necessary angles, repeating shots to ensure maximum pornography. Nino's face, her body, and the genitals of Gela and Koba were always in the frame, but their bodies — and especially their faces — were not. Raping the mother was not part of the «program,» but after finishing the shoot, Semyon let his assistants play with Nino while he, deciding the mother was also a fine option, proceeded to rape her brutally, without even undressing. To prevent the women from waking prematurely, they soaked the handkerchiefs with chloroform from the jar several times. The women did not move.

After dressing and checking that no evidence remained on the bed or floor, they took the chloroform and handkerchiefs, switched off the light, opened the window, and left — tossing the torn remnants of Nino's underwear in the hallway. They simply pulled the front door shut without locking it, just in case help was needed, as killing the women was not part of the task.

Waking from the anesthesia, Nino did not immediately understand what had happened. She felt nauseous; everything ached — her head, her body. Not understanding the situation, Nino didn't even notice at first that she was completely naked. In the morning light, she saw her mother lying motionless, uncovered by the blanket, her nightgown torn. Only then did Nino realize what had occurred. Coming to her senses and sensing disaster, Nino began to shake her mother, trying to wake her. Her mother would not wake, and Nino realized that something irreparable had happened. She began to scream and call for help, instinctively covering her nakedness with her hands.

Frightened neighbors — a mother and daughter — ran in at the sound of the screams. The house was filled with the characteristic smell of chloroform. The neighbor, not understanding what had happened, tried to ask Nino, but the girl was in a state of shock, repeating that they had been raped, that her mother wouldn't wake up, and that they had to call Dato. The neighbor threw a blanket over Nino and, realizing a tragedy had occurred, began to sob aloud as she picked up the telephone.

15. The Evidence

An unexpected early call was not a rarity in the Lezhava household; therefore, no one but Merab reacted to it. He was often called from work even at night — a high police rank and position carried such obligations. But now, as the colonel realized, the call was not from work; a woman was calling, weeping and asking for David.

— Calm down, madam. I am David's father. You can tell me everything; it would even be for the best, as I am a police colonel.

On the other end of the line, the woman began to sob aloud. Between sobs, gasping for air and wiping her nose, she managed to convey that Nino and her mother had been attacked during the night. Nino was alive, but Dali Melitonovna, it seemed, had been killed.

Merab woke David and, as quickly as he could, explained that Nino and her mother were in some kind of trouble and they needed to leave immediately. While David was dressing, Merab called an ambulance to Nino's address and summoned the city's duty investigator.

Twenty minutes later, the father and son were at Nino's home. The smell of chloroform was pungent. The duty officer was already in the apartment and saluted; Merab shook his hand and gave a nod, signaling that he could begin the inspection.

The ambulance doctors were already tending to Nino. They had administered some tranquilizers, and she lay on a stretcher, wrapped in a blanket.

The doctor explained the situation to the colonel: there had been a rape, and the mother had been struck during the assault, as evidenced by a bruise on her chin. The doctor put it bluntly:

— The woman was beaten during the rape. Perhaps a blow to the temple, or perhaps she was smothered with the cloth — the autopsy will show. It's impossible to say for certain right now.

Like ghosts in white nightgowns, the neighbors — mother and daughter — paced through the house.

The ambulance took Dato and Nino to the hospital. After questioning the neighbors, who had heard and seen nothing, Merab thanked them for their help and dismissed them.

Left alone, the policemen put on gloves and began to examine the scene. The investigator's open kit lay on the table. After finishing the necessary photoshoot of the crime scene, the officer began searching for traces of the perpetrators.

The investigator brushed every possible surface with his kit, but found no fingerprints other than a couple of small female prints. Checking for traces on the bedframe, the officer muttered:

— Strange. No signs of forced entry, no signs of robbery, no fingerprints. Strange. If the rapist was alone, why on earth would he crawl into the trap of the building's upper floors? They usually rape in parks or, at most, in courtyards, so they have a chance to flee if needed. If he killed the mother, why leave the daughter alive? Besides, we haven't heard of a serial rapist in the city for a long time. And if there was more than one, it's likely some youngsters — but where did they get such professionalism? Not a single lead. And this scattered underwear — that's not accidental.

Packing up his Pinkerton-style tools, the investigator mused:

— Comrade Colonel, it seems to me this isn't a serial maniac. It's too risky; the apartment isn't on the ground floor, you can't escape through a window. No, they were too cautious for that, and such types usually rape random women, not beauties like this. For them, it's not love; it's pathology. The theory about thieves who played around with the women as a side note is out — nothing was stolen, and there wasn't much to steal anyway. Thieves today don't «clean out» an apartment without a tip-off, and they usually do it when the owners are away. Another nuance, Comrade Colonel — the chloroform. I think we should look for neighboring medical students. Youthful passion, perhaps a drunken spree, or revenge for a rejected proposal of eternal love. I think we need to dig there. A pity;

I understand these are your acquaintances? Well, I'll be off. I'll call the medics to take the mother to the morgue for an exam — maybe some leads will turn up.

— Thank you, Major. I'll lock up here, leave the keys with the neighbor, and head to the hospital.

Merab walked through the room, mechanically casting the piercing gaze of an old pro into what seemed like nowhere. But it only seemed that way; the colonel's eyes and thoughts were working in parallel. His thoughts were running in a completely different direction than the investigator's. While the major was thinking about who could have done it, the colonel was thinking about who benefited.

Merab dismissed the neighborhood medical boys immediately; the locals knew well that Nino was David's girl, and they knew even better who David's father was. Merab was already beginning to suspect Irakli; it all looked too much like a «demonstrative rape» in the style of his «office.» Everything meticulously prepared, no traces, no motive for the uninitiated — but why rape and kill the mother? What if it really was transient thieves? No, they aren't idiots! Aren't there enough prostitutes? They know if they get caught, they'll never wash it off! They would have at least stolen the earrings from her ears. And what if it was a maniac? No, that's highly improbable. Where did the keys come from? The door seems intact. And if the women opened it for him, it's even more unlikely he'd rape them both at once without tying at least one of them up.

Before leaving, Merab entered the bedroom once more. Dali's face was covered with a towel, while the unfortunate woman's body remained exposed. Merab covered it with a blanket, and suddenly something slid from the blanket onto the floor. Merab leaned over and picked up the object.

— And here we go, — he rasped, grinding his teeth.

In his hand was a lighter — the pride and joy of his father-in-law's guard, Semyon Zakharchenko.

16. A Deal with Conscience

The colonel made one more round of the apartment, using his gloved hands to wipe down every possible surface — door handles, the telephone, just in case — checking to see if the night guests had dropped anything else. Finding nothing more, he recalled a remark Irakli Khutsishvili had once let slip in conversation: that his people, supposedly, left no traces.

— Only lighters, — David's father smirked to himself, and carefully pulling the Zippo from his pocket, he winked at the blue-eyed tiger. — This needs some serious thought.

Sitting down at the massive, handcrafted oak dining table, Merab placed the lighter into a cellophane bag and tucked it into his inner pocket.

Drumming his fingers on the table and looking at the portrait hanging on the wall — Nino's grandfather in flight uniform with a young daughter in his arms — Merab's mind worked like a computer, calculating options. He was trying to orient himself on how to proceed, since no one else knew what he now knew, and he simply had to take advantage of this without making a mistake.

Of course, he liked Nino, and he couldn't wish for a better wife for his son. He wouldn't have minded making a move on Dali himself, for that matter — here he adjusted his equipment inside his trousers, glanced at the bedroom door, and crossed himself.

— May she rest in peace, — he thought. Well, he hadn't made his move in time, and she had been a fine-looking woman. Ah well, a pity. But the option of Nino as David's wife would mean the end of his own career and a completely clouded future for his son. Irakli would stop at nothing to prevent disgrace to himself or his daughter Lali; he had proven that today. The risk wasn't worth the reward. He could, if he wished, shift the blame and expose Irakli as the organizer — which he was — but in that case, his own police head would likely roll, and not figuratively, but quite literally. No, accusing the «in-law» was out of the question, but shaking all the kompromat out of this Zippo-toting dandy was definitely worth it. Put the confession in the safe and «roll the man in concrete.» Or perhaps a car off a cliff «in the line of duty» and a funeral with honors for everyone to see? Ah, how things can turn — nobody knows; it pays to have insurance! Dato's fiancée isn't bad either; there had never been problems on that front until Nino appeared. So, they'll settle in; he'll live like a king, and something might even trickle down to me. One way or another, the people are wise: «Better to be born lucky than beautiful.» Well, everything seemed clear, except for Nino. I don't understand — why did Zakharchenko kill the mother but leave the daughter alive? If both were dead, there would be no problems. Now something has to be done with Nino. If I sent her to a political brothel, Dato wouldn't understand — the problem would remain. It's too late to liquidate her now. Merab walked to the phone and dialed the duty investigator, then, after a thought, called Irakli:

— Good morning. I think the news will distress you: last night, unknown persons — likely one or two maniacs — broke into Nino Meskhi's apartment, raped her, and killed her mother.

— Killed the mother? How?

— Most likely a chloroform overdose, or perhaps a blow to the temple; the autopsy will show.

— Idiots!

— Excuse me?

— I said «monsters.» You must catch this maniac. How could anyone do such a thing to these sweet, harmless women?

— I can imagine how upset Lali will be; she and Nino were friends, after all.

— If you need help, call anytime. This maniac must be caught. I suspect some kind of schizophrenic medic.

— Oh yes, a medical student who leaves no traces.

— None at all? No fingerprints, no dropped documents, no handkerchief or anything?

— No, unfortunately, nothing. No open passport on the table, no cigarettes, no Zippo lighter — everything is clean.

— A pity, a great pity there's nothing. You're saying there isn't even a lighter with a tiger?

— Not a thing!

— Look, come by this evening. We'll sit over some cognac and talk about life. By the way, a good position is opening up in Czechoslovakia; I'm thinking of sending Dato — after the wedding, of course.

— I'll certainly come. We have much to discuss.

— Well then, Merab, keep me posted. I'll send my «eagles» over; maybe help with the organization, the medical forensics? Dato is likely with Nino? Poor girl. These monsters must be destroyed. Why kill the mother while playing around with the girl? Those are different motives for a crime, different articles of the code. It's untidy.

— I agree with you. You're a smart man, Irakli, and you understand how things are. For now, I'll be dealing with the unwanted problems concerning Nino. I think Dato should stay with her for now, but where to place her next... we should discuss that tonight. Perhaps a madhouse, under «Sirotki's» wing?

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