

The Third Candidate

Serge
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NOSTALGIA

To Mr Z from X.

Your proposed job would be to dispose of the man in the photograph you received, no later than 19.00 on August 5th. From August 4th to August 5th your target will be staying on the Brijuni Island in Croatia, at the Neptune Hotel. We are ready to accept your expert advice on successfully fulfilling the job. A sum of 125 000 euros is already transferred to your account in Cyprus. According to the terms of the contract the second half of the payment will be transferred after the deed is done. Our friends recommended you so strongly that we do not doubt your success. The map of the island and the description of the locality are attached. Awaiting your reply in no later than twenty four hours.

I scratched the back of my head, which was almost flat — there, at least, I had no curls; nature's little joke on me, — and looked

at the calendar page. It was July 15th, high summer. I picked my rather widely spaced teeth with a toothpick, and finished a glass of juice.

It's really nice to hear such things about yourself. You can say that in the last ten years of work, I have acquired a fame of some kind amongst certain circles. Already I was picking and choosing job offers, and people have to wait for a year for an appointment with me. No, I'm not that picky; I just limit myself to two or three jobs in a year. The rest of my time is taken up with a fine and most peaceful profession. I go to work every day and enjoy respect among my colleagues whose opinion I value very much. At thirty I am not yet married — it's a pity, but my dear departed father taught me that before marriage you need to set up a little nest egg, and that's what I'm going to do. I am creative and inventive at both my jobs, I do not spend too much money, I do not have close friends. My birthday celebration is usually quite a modest affair, an evening in a small restaurant with my colleagues from work, but I could never deny myself the pleasure of live music. Usually I invite two virtuoso musicians to the party, a violinist and a guitar player. There

are only two little weaknesses I have, cats and girls, and no bad habits. I have been able to speak several European languages since I was a child; this is a kind of a legacy from my dear departed mother. Oh, and I forgot to add that I have a decent singing voice, a tenor, and I am fond of Slavic songs.

I dug into the dry reference materials. This is what I learned looking at the map: there are fourteen islands in the Brijuni archipelago; the total length of the coastline is 43 kilometers. The coast is stony and notoriously twisty, and dozens of secret coves serve as a splendid haven for small boats during storms. During the Second World War the archipelago was a base for Italian and German submarine attacks on enemy convoys. The map was quite detailed, showing all the houses, paths, the ruins of the Emperor Vespasian's palace, ancient stone quarries, several hotel buildings, a golf links and a well with clear water.

I looked at the photo of my target again, enlarging it on the screen of my computer: naturally, I switched to modern communications technologies in my contacts with clients about five years ago.

The target's intelligent and tired eyes looked at me attentively from under half-closed lids. Short bristling grey hair, deep nasal furrows, a toothbrush moustache. A face which certainly radiated power. This was unmistakably a person capable of leading thousands of followers and accomplishing a lot.

I read the info on the target and whistled: height 190 cm, weight 110 kg, used to be a pro boxer, 75 years old.

An hour of searching online, and I knew the name, position and financial status of my target and even guessed a motive for the hit. My target, the head of a big steel corporation, ran for the office of president of the association of leaders of this industry. On August 5th this association would meet in the Neptune Hotel. I got all this information from an economics news site after recognizing my target on a photograph. Someone really, really did not want Mr Golovsky – that was my target's name – to get to that meeting. To know everything there was to know about your target wasn't mere curiosity; when you know a person's position in society, it gives you a basic idea of his or her security level.

I wanted to start planning the operation, but at this moment my beloved cat jumped on my shoulder and started purring, inviting me for a walk. I decided to grant its wish. We walked slowly. It was a quiet evening in the park, but my thoughts were already on Br-junI as I prepared an answer for my client.

To Mr X from Z.

To provide my cover please prepare a female partner with field work experience. You will need to rent a room in her name at the Neptune Hotel from August 3rd to August 5th on the same floor as the target. I will also need a lightweight MK3-9 air rifle, an underwater swimmer's kit and a mining rescue kit, a Toledo ceramic gun and a crossbow. It would also be desirable to have a more detailed daily schedule for the target. Hide the kits in the left shaft of the stone quarry; deliver the entrance door key through the partner. I will inform you later about the time and the place of my meeting with her.

I returned to the thoughts that gave me a pleasant tingle of satisfied vanity. A high-paying job, and a dangerous one. I could imagine the strength of that security service. Of course I am not naïve enough not to be thinking about escape routes, at least two of

them, and about the fact that my “friends” would probably want to dispose of me, saving a tidy sum of money in the process.

On August 4th, a white three-deck yacht worth fifty millions dropped an anchor at the Pheasant Cove of the Brijuni Island. A well-trained crew was finishing the preparations for the launch of the admiral’s barge. This was Mr Golovsky’s private yacht. In the captain’s cabin, a tall grey-haired man said, almost smiling, keeping his eyes glued to the binoculars: ‘Difficult to believe, Mr Hugh, but I haven’t been in this cove for more than fifty years.’ The speaker kept looking closely at the coastline.

‘How do you find it now, Mr Golovsky?’ his companion, dressed in a captain’s impeccably white uniform, enquired respectfully.

‘It’s still wonderful. Here, see that hotel with a red-shingled roof? It was my father who built it. I’ve spent the happiest days of my life on this island. What a crowd gathered here then! Here my father made friends with Thomas Mann. They were both inveterate hunters, both fond of drinking and of wise-cracking. There were always merry gather-

ings at the cottage Thomas Mann rented. He lived as a bachelor, which suited everybody; no one paid much attention to his preference for boys. Here he wrote his most famous novella, *Death in Venice*, and read chapters from it in the evening. Of course, I know all this from my father’s stories, I wasn’t even born then. I still feel amazement and terror when reading his psychological dramas, they are splendid.

‘Have you memorized all your father’s stories?’

‘Of course I did, and with all the details, too. I still keep his book with the writer’s inscription.’

‘How old were you then?’ the captain asked.

‘I first went shooting pheasants in his company when I was ten. And the fishing here also was wonderful!’

However, Mr Golovsky’s story was interrupted. There was a knock at the door, and then a stony-faced man with icy opaque eyes slid into the captain’s cabin. This was Harry Burton, recently an FBI agent, who now headed Mr Golovsky’s personal security team.

Burton wasn’t much liked by his patron’s other employees. He was haughty, crazy

about sport, kept giving people unwanted advice and never invited anyone for a drink. Also, he was as obstinate as a mule. And now he'd be certain to blurt out something outrageous, Mr Hugh thought.

'Mr Golovsky, the planning for your security was completely overthrown. The yacht arrived 24 hours earlier than it was planned. My people had no time for a full clean-up, the island's coastline was not checked.' Burton sounded professionally offended. 'What are you paying me for?'

'Please, Mr Burton, do not worry. I know what I'm paying people for, and I have no complaints about your work. It just so happened that my granddaughter wanted very much to see the island.' Mr Golovsky spoke the last sentence in a slightly apologetic tone. 'Here, have some whisky.'

'Thanks, but I only drink soda and juice.'

'Sorry, I completely forgot. Mr Hugh, please send for a glass of juice for Mr Burton.' Now the patron's voice had a clear mocking tone. 'And please instruct your people to have a couple of electric cars ready. I'd like a ride along the coastline first. Maybe towards Vespasian's villa, before settling into our hotel rooms. And tomorrow we will definitely

visit Thomas Mann's house. Nostalgia, you know ... Isn't it a familiar feeling, Mr Burton?' The question was full of heavy irony.

That showed this wannabe James Bond who's the boss, Mr Hugh thought a bit malevolently.

'What will your orders be regarding supper, Mr Golovsky?' Mr Burton asked coldly without answering the question.

'I'd like to enjoy the view of the cove. Let the table to be set on the veranda.'

'Very well, Mr Golovsky. May I leave?'

'Yes, Mr Burton, but please keep your people from being too noticeable. It always spoils the view. We are at a Croatian national park, not in Chicago.'

The idea of coming here earlier than planned belonged to Mr Golovsky's granddaughter, a Harvard graduate and a promising young lawyer. As Mr Hugh said about her, this young lady walked through life with her claws out, and she was quite able to outdo her grandfather. She was the only heir of the Golovsky family fortune and possessed an impeccable upbringing, a quick mind and was bursting with energy. Her parents were killed in a car crash many years ago, when she was about five.

The door of the cabin opened again; this time it seemed like a fresh wind swept inside. Katya burst into the room, her smile radiant, her eyes burning. She was holding a pair of mother-of-pearl binoculars.

‘Grandfather, how could you keep such an island secret from me!’ the young woman exclaimed. ‘It’s absolutely beautiful. You have ten minutes to change your clothes.’

‘See, my dear, this enchanted island sort of floated out of my childhood memories. I didn’t doubt you’d love it, and I can well understand your impatience. Will you come with us, Mr Hugh?’

‘I’d like to, but I need to stay aboard. There’s a storm warning out; there will be a storm at night.’

The e-mail message was late in coming to my address and also rather short: “He is ahead of his schedule”. At this moment I also kept staring through my binoculars, watching my target. In this business, detail is everything. For example, the ship had already anchored here almost 24 hours ahead of its schedule, so there were probably many more surprises waiting for me. However, as soon as the yacht owner’s barge started gliding

over the amethyst waters of the cove, I got the next message which made me more optimistic: «The target and his security will visit the Vespasian villa, supper is to be served on the veranda at 21.00. Golf after breakfast, then a visit to Thomas Mann’s cottage, dinner at 17.00 ». Timely information: evidently the mole was someone from the inner circle. I was watching the target from inside the terrace so that the security snooping nearby wouldn’t notice my little haven. My partner was nearby, doing countersurveillance and looking faintly bored.

I had several plans worked out for this hit. The clients weren’t giving me any trouble; they fulfilled all my requests. There was just one thing that they overdid: my partner’s breasts were a bit too full. This piquant detail was a pleasant distraction for me. Of course we were staying in one room – the cover story required it. You know, living together brings people closer. She behaved impeccably, was good at her role and complied silently with all my requests, so, to my shame, I lost my control somewhat.

The elderly gentleman surprised me with his trim figure and haughty manner. His pure white suit looked particularly bright

against the azure sky background. What a wonderful target. Implementing the first plan, I asked my partner to order an electric car for a short trip.

Everything was ready for the first meeting, but we were very pushed for time. I settled under the canopy of intertwined branches of young oaks, on the upper terrace of the Emperor's summer palace, and looked around. Terraces with half-ruined columns, steps and pools descended to the narrow bay which separated my hideaway from the opposite shore where the target would appear any minute now. I had already adjusted my shot, targeting the unpaved road between the lower terrace of the palace and the place where the target's car had to arrive; about fifty meters, ideal for a pneumatic rifle. My partner was waiting for me at the helm of a speed boat on the beach of the nearby cove. Even supposing the bodyguards would notice the direction of the shot, they wouldn't be able to cross the rocky creek valley, and I would have time to reach the boat. I brought the car almost to the top of the other side of the hill, and there it stood, safely hidden by the shadows of the oak's spreading branches.

As I supposed, the first electric car appearing on the open road was full of bodyguards. They stopped near the beginning of the path leading to the top of the hill from which I was watching them and started inspecting the place. The second car would appear any minute now. I glued my eyes to the scope sight and – dear gods! – what do you think I saw? A huge lady's hat blocked my view of the target's head and body. Of course, a woman was driving, or a girl, as I managed to notice a bit later. She braked and then speeded up and turned the light car here and there like a hare running from an unlucky hunter. What a fidget, I thought; had nobody taught her to behave? Then, of course, it could have been all temper. Finally the electric car stopped, but instead of moving towards me the girl dragged the old man to view the emperor's bath under the spreading pines, and the shadow swallowed them. In the next hour the restless pair climbed over all the pools, wells and baths, but kept avoiding my gun sights. And then the cars disappeared. Their route had been changed. **Well! I can also be full of surprises.** I wasn't too worried, since I had time and more plans in store. I signaled my partner to stand down and started on the next plan.

It was a quiet evening. The Creator seemed to fall deep into thought, pouring molasses all over this place. Somewhere far away over the Istra Peninsula lightning flashed from time to time, but the sound of thunder didn't reach the island. The small group of holiday makers settled on a low platform on the first-floor terrace of the hotel. At the edge of the patio there were several tables under umbrellas for those who wanted to enjoy the freshness of the sea breeze and look at the fish playing in the water. Floor vases with oleanders in bloom stood between the tables.

The supper table for Mr Golovsky and his granddaughter was set on the huge balcony of their luxury suite.

'It's just awful here, grandfather. I can't see the sea, and I want to breathe in its freshness,' Katya exclaimed.

'But Katya, we are already at the table so it's hardly possible to change it,' Mr Golovsky said with a hint of reproach.

'Come on, grandfather, it would be so lovely to sit at the table near the water. Look, that boy is feeding breadcrumbs to the fish; I want to do it too. Please, please do something,' Katya pleaded. 'I never asked you for anything in my whole life, but I think I will

die right here and now if we don't go there.'

'Look, Katya, the tables near the water are all occupied, and Mr Burton certainly wouldn't approve,' Mr Golovsky tried to persuade his granddaughter.

'Please, grandfather!'

'All right, all right,' the old man finally surrendered. 'Mr Burton, please order a table to be set near the water'.

All at once Mr Burton appeared before their table.

'Mr Golovsky, this is not the best idea...'

And then he saw his boss's face and realized it was useless. In fifteen minutes grandfather and granddaughter were sitting at a table which the hotel management set near the water for such a rare and respected guest.

My partner and I were close by, at a nearby table. I still can remember their talk in all the detail. Mr Golovsky was impressive. He had the manners of a grand socialite on holiday, and his story about a water spring which served as a place for secret meetings moved me to tears. However, the wind from the sea interrupted our idyll. The storm was approaching, and the first raindrops already tapped on the umbrella. The waiters ran

about, rolling down flapping tablecloths, and Mr Golovsky and his granddaughter, shadowed by his security team, quickly disappeared in the hall.

What a night it was! Lightning split the sky. The waves merged with low-flying clouds. The rain was streaming down in torrents. It was 4am— an ideal time and the right conditions for my plan. Like a cat, I was making my way over the wide beam of the balcony of my target's granddaughter's room. I had just several meters left to go when there was a crash of thunder and a flash of lightning, as I thought at first, a ghost with upraised arms. Hugging tightly cool column, I felt the remains of my hair stood on end. The ghost was coming at me, mumbling something and flashing its eyes. I am not superstitious, but right at that moment I remembered all the saints I knew. The ghost stopped near the rails and the next flash of lightning allowed me to see it in detail; it was Mr Golovsky's granddaughter. Clothed only in a streaming bedsheet, she was reciting poems ecstatically. How lovely she was at that moment! I hunkered down, afraid to give myself away. Regretfully, the girl knew an awful lot of poetry. She kept reciting it for

more than an hour, but then, tired from all the emotions and quite satisfied, she went back inside.

My muscles were stiff from cold wind and rain, and I had to go back to my room. After a hot shower I climbed into bed and asked my partner to give me a massage.

In the morning, after a light breakfast, we went out for an ambush on the golf links. This was an ideal place for a hit. Mr Golovsky couldn't miss that hole. He had no other way to go. I lay waiting in the ambush for several hours but my partner never gave me a signal. Then I heard the familiar voices of Mr Golovsky and his granddaughter behind my back. Breaking all the rules of the game, surrounded by bodyguards, they moved cheerfully in the wrong direction. Suddenly they stopped the game and went to the other side of the links to look at the troop of half-wild deer which unexpectedly appeared there.

For the first time my heart trembled with apprehension. Of course, I would have a chance with Thomas Mann's house, but that was only a faint hope. There was no logic in the target's behavior. Failsafe plans were not working. And I knew perfectly well whose fault it was. The meeting which was the rea-

son for Mr Golovsky's visit was to start in a couple of hours. My instincts were correct: the target decided to visit Thomas Mann's house after the meeting of the heads of corporations.

The dinner ended. Katya kissed her grandfather and ran off for a bicycle ride, and he smoked a cigar, looking around. Apparently Mr Golovsky had ten or fifteen minutes left. Suddenly he noticed a boy feeding the fish. The water teemed with them, it looked fascinating. The curly-headed boy was dressed in a sailor suit and a sailor hat; he reminded Mr Golovsky of those happy days, now long past, when he himself had fed the fish on the beach. Something moved the old man to stand near the teenager and look at the pulsation of the huge silvery tangle of flexible bodies moving through jets of water and rays of sun and stealing breadcrumbs from each other.

The boy looked at Mr Golovsky and seemed to guess his unspoken wish, offering him another bun. The old man gave him a friendly nod, took the bun, broke it in half and wanted to throw one of the halves to the fish, but suddenly he felt a prick to his palm. He clutched at his heart, his legs

buckled under him and he fell into the water. His bodyguards jumped after him at once. They dragged his body out of water, but Mr Golovsky showed no sign of life. As the doctors said later, his heart just suddenly stopped.

In the resulting turmoil nobody paid us any attention. I picked up the broken bun. In the evening a boat very romantically called The Pearl brought us back to the mainland together with the other passengers.

After getting back home first thing I did was take a walk with my cat; then I made a brief visit to my workplace. I took the key to my dressing room from the watchman on duty, walked along the corridor to the arena and took a full breath. The circus has a special smell. Nostalgia, you know — an indescribable feeling, perhaps a memory of the past. In the dressing room I looked at myself in the mirror. At thirty I am still able to wear a child's clothes. I hung my new acquisition — a sailor suit — into the wardrobe and looked closely at the new poster. It showed me full length, in a dramatic plunge, and below my picture bright letters proclaimed: Lilliput, The Most Intrepid Trapeze Artist In The World.

In the evening I got an email message saying: «Thanks for your work, the money was transferred into your account. We'd like to offer you another job on the same conditions». I opened the picture, and the smiling face of Mr Golovsky's granddaughter looked at me from the screen. For some reason I suddenly remembered the stormy night at the island and this girl wrapped in a bedsheet and reading poetry. I refused, saying that I was busy, and hadn't even stopped to think about possible ramifications.

THE THIRD CANDIDATE

There are happy municipalities in some dormitory suburbs where the councilmen have no gains to split between themselves except social problems. So they just carve up the budget quietly and try not to get into quarrels. At times perhaps they get some pay-off from construction orders, tiny amounts, nothing to write home about, but at least there's no reason for a headache. They just sit tight until next election and give no one any trouble. Then again, imagine that between the borders of your municipality deep lakes full of spring water stand in solemn languor. Their hilly shores are covered by pine forests holding up the blue of the skies. In the shade of these forests blackberry bushes cover on

mossy slopes along the tingling brooks. The mushrooms are so abundant that you get too tired to pick them. Here and there you can see flocks of ducks whizzing overhead, and some woodpecker can be heard clearly from far away.

Yes, my friends, the land in such places is worth a lot. Even in the early throes of our chaotic democracy a hundred square meters of such a land was worth three or four thousand bucks, and today it'd be at least fifteen or twenty thousand. Now imagine that you are the head of such a municipality, that you are directly involved in carving up such a sweet morsel, and, especially towards the end of your term, there are many people eager to oust you from your cushy place. Of course you wouldn't voluntarily give up what you consider as yours.

It was nearly lunchtime when the door of my office as the director of North Falcons Security opened and Pasha Gruzd, a friend of my youthful days, breezed into the room. Tall, broad-shouldered and still slim, his eyes sparkling, Pasha greeted me with a hug me and asked me for a dinner. We hadn't seen each other for ages. Once a fearless and a bit reckless lieutenant leading

a special forces recon unit, Pasha retired as a colonel at forty, graduated from the academy of public administration and for the last six years worked in the water management administration. I knew that as an official Pasha's time was worth a lot and he wouldn't have come just for the sake of visiting an old friend. However, before getting to business we still recalled a couple of episodes from our stormy youth: Kandahar, other hot spots. Three hundred grams of vodka and some snacks disappeared almost instantly. Then I realized that if I ordered a couple of beers now, we'd probably forget all about the reason for Pasha's visit.

"Are you here on business?" I asked, trying to be tactful.

He snorted and gave me a flyer, saying "Here, read it".

The generic-looking flyer had a photo of Pavel Gruzd in dress uniform with all his medals on, smiling brightly. A shiny slogan below the photograph proclaimed "For safety and prosperity of Svetlogorsky municipality". I needed no more explanations: Pasha clearly decided to fight for the position of the head of municipality. The registration of candidates for the election was already going full speed.

“Don’t be stupid. To win there you need a lot of money and support from regional administration,” I said knowingly.

“I have a serious sponsor, and the vice governor promised me his support, though I won’t give you any names. But advice is not what I need from you. I have no head organizer for the election campaign, and you are the person I want to see in this position. You won’t hurt for money: three thousand a month, five after we win the election, and you’ll be my right hand in distributing the land lots. I’ll make you filthy rich. Come on, say yes. And don’t tell me you have no experience: I just need a trusted man on that position”.

I tried to reason with him. “Pasha, this is the Fatman’s job, and he’s holding on to it; it won’t be easy to take it away from him. You know better than me about his connections”.

“Have you gone timid, Sokolov? This leech needs to be ousted. He has the whole region under his thumb”, Pasha said robustly. “And it’s too late for me to turn back; the money’s already in my account”.

We had another drink of vodka, then a couple of beers, our conversation flowing freely and sweetly. That night I returned

home at dawn. Such things happen, but not too often.

I declined the offer to take part in the election campaign. There is a time in life where money is still important, but not important enough to get into a rat race. Pasha was not offended; he had no time for it. The campaign was going full speed. One week before the election it was clear that according to the ratings Pasha left his main opponent far behind. The other two well-known and worthy adversaries for reasons unknown to me withdrew their candidatures. I was helping, but only a little: the intelligence database of our team worked for the victory of my old comrade. Otherwise I watched the tumultuous campaigning from the sidelines. A lot of dirt kept being flung on Pasha’s reputation: I was most of all amused by a flyer from his opponent stating that Pasha’s a polygamist and that orphanages all over Russia are full of his children. The flyer also had a photo of Gruzd with four wives, all of different national origins, judging by their faces.

Two days before the election, in the evening, my cordless phone rang. The voice I heard sounded very far away, as if calling from the cold depths of space.

“Karp Nikolayevich, Pasha was killed in front of me half an hour ago. Please come”.

That was Zoya, Pavel Gruzd’s young wife. I sat down at the edge of a chair and suddenly remembered my friend’s eyes shining with joy. He only ever had one wife, I thought, his beloved Zoya with whom he spent the last ten years, and two sweet children, a boy and a girl. And now they were left alone.

Pasha got the funeral he deserved: his former and current colleagues all came to speak about him. All of them were full of sadness and regret, because the man they buried was a worthy citizen of Russia, a really great guy and a true and loyal friend. And it was there that I realized that Pasha’s death became a personal affront for me.

The Fatman felt victorious: he organized a concert for disabled children and gave them presents, opened a computer class, demonstrated his care for the veterans by doling out five hundred rubles to each of them (and three thousands to each of his supporters in the municipal council). Everyone felt drunk with success. And this was far from the end of the festivities: the victors’ wild private party at a remote country house, with the leaders of the region as guests, went on for several days.

I also wasted no time; in this short period my people managed to find out what had happened in the last two weeks. Here’s what I learned.

A week before the election, about nine in the evening, there was a phone call to the apartment of one of the candidates, a well-known businessman of about forty. His wife took the call. A cold, emotionless gravelly voice, addressing her with familiarity, explained very clearly what would happen to their lovely daughter if her husband did not withdraw from the elections. Next morning the candidate, looking pale after an all-night discussion with his wife, notified the election committee about his withdrawal.

The other candidate was tougher. He had recently returned from abroad where he’d been for the last ten years, developing his business ventures. His wife and child lived somewhere at the South of France and he had money and plans for turning the region into a world level tourist resort. He got used to the Western way of doing things and had only a hazy understanding of the situation in Russia. But somebody sent him a reminder of our reality: his beloved expensive car got burned in broad daylight, in view of a lot of

people. The candidate had not waited for the second call: next day he flew back to France, abandoning his unfinished campaign and his campaign workers — who still had not been paid — to the mercy of fate. He did not even bother to take his name off the list of candidates.

The third candidate was Pavel Gruzd, who went ahead full speed, brushing off threatening phone calls and an attempt of arson in his apartment. He had a lot of support and was by nature fearless and sure of himself. I reminded him of several murders of candidates during the previous elections in Svetlogorsky municipality, but Pasha just shook his head. "I'll throttle any killer with my bare hands," he said with a smile, "you know what I can do", and declined all the proposed measures for additional security measures.

My late friend's wife described the murder. Sadly, Pasha missed the first strike of his attacker's bat and crumpled down unconscious. The attackers wore masks; two of them held wildly struggling Zoya, and the other three, wielding baseball bats, turned Pasha's head into a bloody mess. On that day the Gruzds were returning from the re-

gional prosecutor's office where, on my advice, Pasha left a detailed statement. It was a concise document summarizing numerous breaches of election law by Zahar Efimovich Klykov, otherwise known as the Fatman. For example, it listed the occasions when his representatives gave money to the voters and the instances of blackmail of those who actively supported Gruzd. This information would bring any court to find Klykov guilty and to withdraw his candidature from the elections.

The attack followed less than an hour after Pavel Gruzd's talk with the regional prosecutor. His statement went no further 'for the reason of death of its author'. You know how they say: no man — no problem. At least I knew now who informed the man who ordered the murder about Pavel Gruzd's visit to the prosecutor's office and about the contents of his statement.

Finally I discovered all the characters of that sad story. The biggest trouble I had was with determining the actual perpetrator. It turned out that this was Klykov's chief of security, an old jailbird known as Vint. The dead man's wife recognized him by a noticeable tattoo on his wrist, a cat playing with a snake.

And finally, in the end of the work day, filled with information about the murder of the candidate, I sat in front of the wide desk of the head of the city's department of internal affairs. Like Pasha, Fyodor Strazhin was a very old friend and colleague. "Well, what do you have?" he asked in his low basso voice, a frown on his face.

"Let's have a drink in Pasha's memory, Fedya".

"That'd be good," Strazhin said more softly and warmly, "only I don't keep vodka in my workplace".

In a moment the contents of my briefcase moved to the side table — a liter bottle of Absolut vodka, some bread, sausages, a jar of sprats, a jar of cucumber. Strazhin drank, then took a bite of food and went on:

"I know you brought me something besides vodka".

Without any further comment I gave him the thin file containing the information I had. Before getting absorbed in my materials, Strazhin nodded at the bottle: "Come on, pour, it'd get easier with a drink".

After a few minutes he paused in his reading and told me: "You say it's facts and I say it's all your theories. This needs more

work. I already have among my cases an unsolved murder during the previous election campaign with the Fatman as suspect. You need not convince me of anything. I know better than you who ordered Pasha's murder; he was my friend as well as yours. I have a bit of an idea about what to do with this, but I'll need your help. Remember that the Fatman's untouchable. We'll need ironclad evidence to get him: withdrawing a deputy's mandate is quite a complicated procedure.

We finished off the vodka, and I came home early enough. A month passed.

Then one morning I saw a splash headline in the news section of the regional paper: "The head of Svetlogorsky region is accused of killing his deputy and selling drugs". I eagerly scanned an interview which the paper's special correspondent had with the chief of the city homicide department.

Colonel Strazhin dryly informed the community that "a police operational unit, acting in hot pursuit, apprehended the head of the Svetlogorsky municipality who was charged with murder of his deputy Soskin. The instrument of the crime, a Makarov gun with a silencer, and half a kilo of heroin were found

in the suspect's private car. Police suspects that the reason for murder was infighting among criminals. A preliminary check established that Soskin had three criminal convictions and had dealings with drug dealers. Until the end of the inquest Klykov will be kept in custody in the detention facility. This is a special measure chosen by the chief prosecutor of the city".

Six more months passed, and then a call woke me up early in the morning and I heard Strazhin's familiar voice: "I have two pieces of news. One of them is good".

"Come on," I said.

"The Fatman died tonight in the detention facility. A stroke. Only a week before the court date, poor sod".

"What's the good one, then?"

"The election date for the Svetlogorsky municipality was announced today, and you are taking me out for dinner".

"Okay", I said.

Late in the evening, smoothing out the vodka with the beer, Strazhin thundered:

"You know, Karp, why don't you run in that election yourself? It's a cushy job, and we'll be supporting you".

I refused, thinking all the while that a mu-

nicipal counselor had to have qualities which I most certainly lacked.

The department's patrol car carried me softly towards my beloved Petrogradsky district, but my thoughts were still there, still in the Svetlogorsky municipality.

Every Friday the Fatman and Vint met up in a fairly well-known local restaurant to discuss their shady business. That evening Vint had been running to the loo every ten or fifteen minutes because of his upset stomach. The waiter, my informer, knowing his habits well, kept offering him mineral water with a bit of laxative in it. So, the next time when Vint settled down comfortably in the loo, I opened the door of his cabin and stopped him with three shots to the head. In a few minutes the gun with the silencer and a package of heroin were laying quietly in the Fatman's car trunk. One of my hobbies is impersonation; so I managed to leave the restaurant unnoticed and any occasional observer would not have recognized me.

Then I called the duty officer in the department of the internal affairs. An operations unit from homicide took mere minutes to come to the crime scene.

You might tell me I was acting against the law: perhaps, but justice was what I was after, and also, this was personal.

I recalled a funny story I wanted to tell and smiled, distracting myself from the sad memories.

GOLDEN RULE

You know, it's never much fun to lose a customer, even if his contract only brings you a hundred bucks in a month, and it it's five thousands, there's definitely a reason for sad thoughts. You start remembering that good old rule about the customer always being right, and you start pondering on the mistakes which led this. And so here I was, driving towards my office, and in my slim briefcase I had a letter of cancellation from the Northern Crown Bank, addressed to the North Falcons Security company. My company – and not a big one, not by any means.

In just twenty four hours the bank replaced its whole management and security team. And they had their reasons, too – the bank just had one million dollars stolen from them. You've probably thought of robbers attacking, masks, shotguns and shooting. No, dear readers, the money arrived where

it should've, but on its way it turned into a hefty wad of paper; I think you all know the kind of substitution I mean. The teller, an experienced bank employee, had a bit of a shock when she opened the first package and saw what happened to the money. Her hands shaking, she called the head of the bank's security service. After which the bank quickly turned into a sinking ship. That was real world, after all — in a fairytale one, of course, we'd still be getting our pay.

Now, let me add some details. Northern Crown is a branch of a fairly big and well-known Moscow bank. For them Saint Petersburg was a transit point for endless cash flow directed to the faraway offshore areas.

There was an inquiry. A criminal case was opened. Nobody wanted publicity: money lost was bad enough, but the image of the bank could also suffer because of this, and its founders were people well-known in Russia. The first person to be arrested was the cash transit courier who transported the cash box.

The main suspicions fell on the deputy chief manager of the branch, a young and talkative man of about thirty, and, of course, on our security company. That cut me to the

quick. In ten years of working in this field no one could reproach us for breaking professional ethics, not to speak of breaking the law. Our company's reputation had been flawless. So, I decided to investigate this case on my own.

I met with Boris Kunizin, now ex-deputy chief manager, in a small café. From the very beginning we talked like people who trusted one another. We had coffee, and Kunizin told me his story. He believed that the only place where they could've substituted the money was the Moscow bank, since the cash box was sealed, the sheaves of bills were still in bank wrappings, and it was impossible to substitute the box in transit, since the courier was accompanied by guards. He said he told all that to the investigator, and the next night he got a phone call from an unknown person warning him about the problems he'd have if he kept talking so much.

With a shade of fear in his lively brown eyes my companion finished softly, "I'm almost sure we fell foul of the Moscow money-laundering mafia. What do I do, Karp Nikolayevich?"

"Well, it would be helpful to get a recording of the blackmailer's voice".

Kunizin took another puff of his cigarette and gave me a tape, adding a bit complacently:

“I’ve a phone with an answering machine and a recording system. Here’s a souvenir for you, for the analysis. Of course I gave a copy to the investigator. But I suspect people from Moscow have it all cornered. I think it’s just the first step.”

“You are an observant man: call me if you will notice something strange going on”.

Our parting was warm enough. Somehow I had liked this lively, nimble and unaffected man who reminded me of a drop of mercury. You know, some people just have that gift of a happy nature. Kunizin was one of those, eminently likable with his helpfulness and his guileless smile.

Back in my office I flipped through his personnel file again. Boris Romanovich Kunizin, thirty three years old, single, a degree in economics, captain of the army reserve, spent six years on governmental service in a technical department providing security for chief executives of the state. Registered in the region, in a small village where several years ago he had bought a land plot with an old house and soon built a cottage and a bathhouse.

The next photo showed a young man with soft, almost boyish features. Like a young Alain Delon, I thought absently. The life story of Leonid Yurievich Kolesnikov, the bank’s former cash courier, was rather short: dance school, army service, special courses, work in the bank, single, no criminal convictions. Nothing special, just a young man from an educated family of engineers. Right now Kolesnikov, considered to be the main suspect in the case, was held under arrest in the detention center.

I called one of my most experienced employees, brought him up to speed and gave him all the necessary instructions. For a few days the flow of current business distracted me from that case, and then Kunizin called, giving me a lot of new food for thought. His voice trembling, he said that ten minutes ago someone blew up his expensive car — it was a miracle that he was alive, — and this night someone had set his cottage on fire.

Someone clearly did not want Kunizin in court, saying what he knew about violations in the bank security system. This was something I wouldn’t mind knowing myself, but Kunizin called me first, asking to meet me soon.

It turned out that, knowing the ways of the detention center where Kolesnikov was held, Boris Kunizin came to ask me for one thing only: to provide safety for his former employee, that is, to get the young man out of the way of being raped by his cellmates. Touched by his sensitivity, for a small payment I provided some support for the accused through people I knew in the management of the detention center. The chief of operations of this god-forgotten center hadn't even asked for that much money, since he also needed a new informer. So, the inquiry about the lost million went on, and life around moved to its own beat, a stream with its own rules that we didn't invent, with its own heroes and villains, where the laws existed only in name.

At our next meeting Kunizin just handed me an envelope and asked for his charge to be moved to a special cell for recovering patients.

I asked how much money the envelope held, and he said, "Ten". I shook my head and flatly told him that life on a resort as compared to Siberia cost five more. Kunizin brought me the required cash, no arguments. The conditions in the detention center were

typical: eight square meters held eleven or twelve persons under investigation, that is, two or three citizens of Russia to one bed. In a week the former cash courier was moved to a cell of the same size which held only three more similarly lucky prisoners, and with improved diet, too.

After a year of fruitless search the inquiry finally hit a dead end. Kolesnikov was found not guilty for reasons of absence of elements of crime and set free in the courtroom. The investigator did not manage to prove the Moscow connection. The case was shelved.

Another year passed. Once again I looked at the route of the cash courier, recovered by a meticulous employee of mine, and while I thought about what I knew, my imagination took me by that route from the doors of the Moscow bank to the secure ramp of the airplane. The reel of events started to unfold in my mind, but then my train of thought was interrupted by a phone call. This was expected. The caller was my employee from abroad, sent to work on the case of the stolen million.

Packing did not take long; and in twenty four hours, dressed in a summer suit and a light hat, I was walking along a street with

easy steps of a man who had no problems. A piece of paper with the address I needed lay folded in my trouser pocket, and in my hand I held a thin file.

I was in a small resort town on Canary Islands, approaching a fashionable club opened just a week ago. I knew only one Spanish phrase, "Buenos Dias", but that was enough; I didn't plan to communicate in Diego Garcia's native language.

After the overwhelming heat outside it was nice to feel the sharp freshness of pine scent and to sprawl in a low leather armchair. I ordered a cold drink and looked around. The owner of this club clearly wanted to pay a tribute to Polycletus from Argos: the wall niches held wonderful renderings of naked sportsmen of the past and present. The walls were decorated by pictures of slim youths who entertained each other by playing reed pipes. The semi-darkness and red reflections in the mirrors gave finishing tones to the whole ambience. This was a gay club; that, however, did not embarrass me, since I already knew where my inquiry would lead me.

A few minutes after I gave my card to a young man eyeing me suggestively, the

club's owner came out to see me. This was Boris Kunizin, and he hurried towards me as if I were his long lost brother. We hugged each other warmly, he got a bit tearful, and then, of course, he asked me about the bank robbery case. I nodded at the thin file I held and offered to tell him the news in his office. Knowing my penchant for strong liquor, he offered me a drink. I accepted it, as well as a cigar, and after a good sip of whiskey and a puff of the expensive cigar, I said:

"You know, Boris, my story is meant for both you and your friend, so why don't you let him listen?"

"Who do you mean, Karp Nikolayevich?"

"I mean your dear friend Leonid Kolesnikov. Don't keep him in suspense, let him come in."

I noticed a fleeting look of surprise on Kunizin's face, but he managed to get a hold of himself and said quite calmly:

"You are right, it wouldn't do to leave him waiting. Come here, Lenya."

The drapes on the wall opened and Kolesnikov appeared, looking as slim as before. He greeted me and settled quietly in the nearby armchair.

“And now, Karp Nikolayevich, we’d really like to hear something we haven’t heard before.”

The irony in his voice was quite clear. I took out my file and began my story.

“You exchanged the box in the air, using the fact that the cash courier is left alone on the plane. Our employee found a woman who recognized you, Boris, and she even remembered that you were transporting two boxes. Of course you used a counterfeit passport. We found the owner of the stolen passport. This, of course, is the main piece of evidence. Here, look.” I handed him a copy of the page in question. “The photo is certainly inserted flawlessly; you used all the best technologies. You have my admiration.”

Boris took the offered page carefully and started to study it.

“But this is just the beginning. As you remember, the defense team’s main argument at the trial was the untouched seal. The prosecution couldn’t prove it was counterfeit, but we managed it. Our employee found among the ruins of the bathhouse – not the cottage as you have told me – a staple gun for fixing security seals. It was disguised as a nutcracker. Look at this.” I handed him the

next page, adding: “That’d be ten years, but since your actions can be qualified as gang offence, they might get you fifteen years and more.” After a small pause I went on: “You managed to draw a red herring across the path of the inquiry, giving us the information about the explosion, fire and phone call. We found that the car blown up was not the new car as you claimed, but an ancient model five. Here’s the result of the examination, though we mostly ordered it for the sake of completeness, to see the picture in its whole. And then you neatly sold the car and the cottage. I wouldn’t really want to disturb your idyllic life and your successful business on this lovely island full of proud Spaniards and famous Russians, so do think it through.”

“We did think it through already,” Boris answered immediately. “Karp Nikolayevich, we respect your experience and you are really a man of your word. I remember what you did for my friend and of course I think you should be paid for your efforts. How much do you require?”

“A third part,” I said as quickly as he did. “Don’t get me wrong – see, I also have a partner.”

Boris as a senior partner only nodded in agreement. Before leaving I put a hundred-dollar-bill on the table and said easily:

"Here's a souvenir for you, one bill from that million you managed to get from the Stepan Razin factory. Good work." And added after a pause: "Of course, for someone from Moscow one million bucks is no kind of money, but my colleague and I have long planned to build a couple of summer houses on the shore of the Gulf of Finland. Just imagine, having a shashlyk and beer on Saturday with a quiet company of old army comrades. Oh well, sorry, I've been chatting too much. Tomorrow at noon at the bank office. We'll have the evidence with us."

My partner Semyon Zhmakin and I spent the quiet evening on a long walk. We were almost at the waterfront, and there was a breeze which freshened the air, but even though it was already autumn, the weather was still hot and we were thirsty. I was telling Semyon all about my talk with our opponent. As we walked, we kept encountering small restaurants where steamed taps for draught beer peeked out appealingly from behind the bars and dishes with sea-

food could be glimpsed in the last rays of sunset. Somehow our talk died down. Finally Semyon couldn't stand in any more and almost groaned:

"Let's go have a pint of beer, chief! I think the deal is as good as completed, and my throat is parched."

"Let's," I said complacently, fully sharing Semyon's opinion.

After swallowing the second pint in one gulp we looked around. It was getting darker. The proud Spaniards were not in any hurry to serve two Russians who were feeling good, but not good enough to not notice this slight. They had two almost millionaires sitting there, and these damn waiters were paying no attention.

"Three hundred grams of tequila, Pedro," I said, for some reason in Russian.

"Five hundred," Zhmakin thundered. "Sacramento, dammit, and some crabs."

His voice cut through delicate Spanish souls and clearly left a deep impression: in a moment we had people bustling all around us.

"You know, chief, my soul aches so much — let's have a drink for Russia!" Semyon said feelingly.

"For Russia!" I echoed, hugging Semyon.

Our souls were singing, and our feelings were all over the place. You can probably imagine how fast time flies when you are in such a state. And we had a reason for celebrating, too, having managed such an affair. About three in the morning in another small restaurant, when we ordered more drinks, I checked my wallet: we had about two hundred and fifty dollars left – that went for the two of us, naturally. Semyon noticed what I was doing and paused, giving me a questioning look.

"It's okay," I said to calm down my partner. "We'll manage until the morning, and at noon we'll fill our pockets with a part of Spain's gold reserve, so don't hold back."

Semyon did not need much persuading.

The last thing I remembered from that night was Semyon slipping crumpled bills into the strippers' panties. At seven in the morning we fell asleep in our hotel room.

Around noon, after taking a shower and changing my shirt, I examined myself before a mirror and asked: "Where's the attaché case?"

That case held the evidence gathered after two years of efforts. Semyon handed me the case reverently. I opened the cover. The case was empty.

"It can't be!" was the only thing I managed to say.

The attaché case had been standing at my feet all this night. It was clear that someone had replaced it, so cleverly that neither I nor Semyon had noticed anything.

"Neat work," my partner muttered.

In fifteen minutes I was sitting in a cool bank hall, holding an attaché case on my lap. It was made from natural leather, and that was the only thing distinguishing it from the lost one. My opponent sat in front of me, holding an identical case.

Kunizin opened the case with a click and said: "Here's the sum we agreed on, come and look."

I couldn't avoid looking at tightly packed wads of bills; they made me sigh.

"Show me the evidence, Karp Nikolayevich," Kunizin said coldly.

"It disappeared. Last evening it was here, though," I said, trying to keep the remains of my dignity intact.

"Of course I believe you, Karp Nikolayevich, but imagine that tomorrow someone else will offer that evidence to us. What are we to do then, buy it out again?"

I nodded. He was right.

"Don't be too upset, Karp Nikolayevich. You have a bit of a money problem, don't you?" Kunizin inquired, sounding quite sincere.

I nodded again.

"Our company will pay for your tickets back and for all your efforts we'll also give you a small bonus." And then Kunizin handed me an envelope, adding, "It should not feel insulting; there's three thousands here."

"It won't," I said.

Now I know why I always liked this guy, I thought.

In half an hour, on the terrace of a small restaurant I summed up the operation. Semyon sat quietly, drinking his beer in big gulps.

"Remember the golden rule, Semyon: no drink until a case is closed".

"Come on, boss, we do have the case closed!"

"Now we do," I said gravely, myself surprised by the steel in my voice.

"Three hundred grams of tequila, comrade!" Semyon proclaimed loudly.

I did buy a house after all, though not on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, but in Psk-

ovsky region, in a forgotten village; I've paid thousand dollars for fifteen hundred square meters and a ramshackle little house.

VORTEX

Over the vortex
A butterfly dances,
Not knowing what lies under.

Have you heard anything about oriental poetry, the Japanese, for example? Such words as haiku and tanka were unfamiliar to me until I got in my hands a pocket notebook with a cheap worn cover. The first lines somehow disturbed me, and I kept repeating them in my mind:

Barefooted, chased the shadow,
Christmas snow crackled,
Then suddenly flew to the moon.

The handwriting was not just fine, it was flawless, like spilt beads. The writer had reasons to be proud of each letter – and the writer was, as you have guessed, a woman. I am not a sentimental person, you know, but at this moment I somehow remembered

her profile, and somewhere in the depth of my mind her voice sounded, with its unique beckoning and maddening tone. But this is, of course, in the past.

One day in spring someone knocked at the door of my office. Then Semyon Zhmakin, the leader of the quick response team, pushed in an uncomfortable sideways manner through the door opening. Semyon, a kind and open man, though with a heavy hand and the snap of a bulldog, was frowning. A good-looking woman of about fifty – of the type who likes good food, you know – was peeping out timidly from behind his back. Right now her cheeks were grey and sagging like a hamster's cheeks and her eyes were full of fear and sadness. Naturally, I recognized her: that was Anastasia Ivanovna Polyakova, financial director of a concern well-known in the city. Judging by her face, trouble came to her home again.

“Can we come in, Korney Ivanovich?” Semyon asked gravely. “It's a delicate situation which will need coordination.”

I invited my visitor in. Semyon neatly poured hot tea for everyone. Finally I broke the silence:

“Please tell me, what is it? Has everything started again?”

The woman, who seemed to wait for the smallest bit of commiseration, started to cry but then collected herself and managed to say:

"My poor daughter! She disappeared... I think it's the same bastard, her old boyfriend."

"Please tell me more," I asked.

She dried her eyes sadly, sighed and, her breath still hitching a bit, started:

"I always thought myself a happy mother; sorry if I am repeating myself. My girl finished school with a gold medal, graduated with distinction from the economics university and was accepted to a prestigious firm almost at once. She did not date, did not even kiss anyone. Of course I was strict with her, since my Lyubochka was growing up without a father. And then my girl started to disappear at night. She seemed so changed, so strained, started to be rude with me."

The woman paused, clasping her hands to her breast, as if preparing herself. Her face was all in spots.

"Some cold water, Semyon," I said quietly.

After drinking some water my visitor went on with a heavy sigh:

"She started going out with that that black villain, and he broke our sweet darling. She left her work, did not come home for weeks and when she came, she was tired and beaten. You wouldn't believe what I had to put up with: I'm not even speaking about money, though it was impossible to leave at least a tiny amount at home, but sooner or later things started to disappear. She stole all my gold jewellery, all home electronics, even plates, I'm sorry to say. I managed to drag her to the doctor, and it was awful what he said. A druggie, with hepatitis C. And when my little flower disappeared for a month, I did not even know what to think, but dear God sent you to me when kind friends gave me your name. Thanks to Semyon, he found her fast enough in some dump and beat her prettyboy boyfriend good.

Zhmakin nodded in accordance, frowning grimly and making a fist which resembled a sledgehammer. I suddenly imagined with pleasure the disheveled villain with his mug well-battered. The woman sobbed and went on:

"I was so happy! My girl got cleaned up and cured from all those nasty things, your narcologist friend helped her so much. I was sure

that Lyubochka's boyfriend, Karim or Kerim, whatever, was gone forever. I was happy for a year. We had such nice times together, went to Pavlovsk, walked on Yelagin Island. My dear girl was so quiet and silent. Mommy, mommy, she kept saying. Suddenly she started to write poems in the oriental style. To tell you the truth, I didn't understand them. Once we were walking a path around a lake. She was deep in thought, as always. Then suddenly she froze near a birch looking far ahead and whispering something. I called her, and she spoke almost as if she didn't see me:

Oh to be a cloud!
I'd flow to him at once
But the earth still holds me.

My poor darling couldn't forget him. It was as if that bastard had given her a love potion. But they say time cures everything; we started living like normal people. And then it started again. I came back from work yesterday, and the apartment was empty, they even took the kitchen furniture. I understood then that Lyubochka went off with him again. There was a note on the table.

Her hands trembling, Anastasia Ivanovna gave me a piece of paper. I ran my eyes over

the note: «Don't look for me, mom, I am past praying for. Forgive me for everything. Your Lyuba.»

"Please find Lyubochka," the unhappy mother pleaded. She left my office hunched, tired, barely able to walk — a woman exhausted by her fight for her daughter's life.

Fortunately, we still had the bastard's address. He lived somewhere in Pyatigorsk. In a week Semyon called me to say they found Lyubochka but had some problems with transporting her. I recommended drastic measures.

In a few days Semyon was back in the office, unshaven and pale, but it was clear from his face that he was pleased with the results of their trip. It wasn't difficult to find the runaway, Zhmakin said, but his group encountered a problem: the woman refused to leave with them and became hysterical. To my questioning look Semyon said:

"Sorry, we had to use nontraditional methods. We got a glass of Armenian brandy into her by force, and then another one when she came to herself on the train. When we brought her to her happy mother she was still drunk."

"What did her black boyfriend do?" I inquired casually.

Semyon answered without looking at me:

“We found him at another apartment. He jumped from the ninth floor balcony. He died at once – I think he was drugged. We had no time to explain that it was his girlfriend we needed.”

Semyon gave me the notebook Lyubochka lost.

Another half a year passed. From time to time Anastasia Ivanovna called me. She told me that Lyubochka managed to get better, though with some difficulties, and started a new life. Once my secretary brought me a short fax message. I recognized the elegant microscopic writing and impatiently read the three-line poem:

Standing on a precipice,
Got lost staring at sunset,
Waiting for dawn to come.

And, added below: “Thank you for my life. Always yours, Lyuba”.

On the same day I called Lyuba’s home number. She answered the call herself. I thanked her for the poem and offered to return her the notebook. Lyuba offered to meet on Yelagin Island. It was early spring, and the pathways we walked were wet. Lyuba read

her poems. I listened silently and attentively. For some reason she did not take back her notebook, and I kept it as a remembrance.

The summer flew fast. One morning I got a phone call. That was Anastasia Ivanovna, but I did not recognize her voice. She told me shortly that Lyubochka killed herself, jumped out of the window. Someone had called her from Pyatigorsk and told her Karim was dead.

I still go for walks on Yelagin Island, wandering alone and rereading Lyubochka’s haiku, still mysterious for me:

Leaves of papyrus,
Disturbed by the wind,
One more autumn...

SHOES

Tell me, who doesn't like to get presents? There's hardly such a person in the whole world. And when your birthday approaches and you are only forty five, when you feel at the peak of your strengths and talents and full of life, you want to celebrate this day in some special and momentous way. In the depth of your mind you are already imagining your fondest desires given to you as a present. Knowing my tastes and interests, my old comrades needed no prompting. I had such a lot of presents that day: a cutlass, two sabers, a Japanese sword, a Spanish air rifle with decent scopes, a 12th caliber Mossberg, a three-liter bottle of Scotch and other important things — especially important for a single man.

It was December the third. As you can guess, I'm a Sagittarius according to the Zodiac and a Cat according to Chinese horo-

scope — a really explosive mixture. This year it snowed very early, and it was piercing cold on my birthday. Suddenly the women from Accounting entered my office where the table was set. The eldest of them was carrying a shiny box. I opened the box, and my heart gave a lurch. Their dark brown sides shining, a pair of fur-lined English shoes lay before me. Now this, my friends, is a real present of a kind you can dream about all year. I couldn't help stroking tenderly the surface of the shoe, then dipped my hand into the overwhelming softness inside and, breathing in the smell of first-class leather, felt a pleasant lassitude. Semyon Zhmakin, my veteran deputy responsible for enforcement tasks, dashingly uncorked another bottle of champagne. Glancing at my present from the corner of my eyes, I had a drink of wine with my employees, waiting impatiently for the chance to walk on the crisp snow in my new shoes.

On such a day the doors of our security company are opened wide. All kinds of people visited my office. Several municipal councilmen, businessmen, a well-known singer, several poets, the director of children's theatre. At the key moment of our celebration a

group of women from the fashion magazine located at the same floor as our company entered the room like a merry and shining drop of mercury. They brought additional energy and enthusiasm to the company of men, mostly former officers, which gathered at the table. It was noisy and no one paid much attention to the leftovers of snacks. Everyone wanted to drink and talk, practicing their wit for the sake of the ladies. One of the female guests, probably wanting to show off her figure, climbed to her chair and then jumped lightly onto the table. However her elegant foot stumbled into a plate of salad and she lost her balance. The lady squealed and fell down; fortunately, she was caught by the strong arms of my quick-reacting deputy. Once in Zhmakin's arms, she pressed into him, trembling, and hadn't left his lap till the end of the evening.

After midnight we were joined by a tipsy band of colleagues from a similar company headed by a former special forces leader Korney Chernyaev. Korney Ivanovich solemnly handed me a trophy TT he got somewhere among battles at North Caucasus and said with a charming smile: "Here, Karp, let your arm be steady when you finish off the coun-

terrevolutionaries!" The special forces officers brought a special flair to the atmosphere of the celebration, and we decided to go eat shashlyk and drink home-made Caucasian wine in the nearby restaurant. The remains of our company, the sturdiest ones, went towards this goal on several cars. Of course I went in my old shoes. Come on, it wouldn't have been logical to put new winter shoes on just for that. To be truthful I must admit that we were in a state where we noticed no obstacles before us. Together with the restaurant singers we sang military songs, especially those about special forces and about the sea. You know, "In the night on a quiet pier", or "The floodlight slowly searches the hilltop" or "His darling will never know the way this chekist died". Zhmakin led everyone in a lezginka dance. For some reason he took his shirt off and started waving it like a cavalryman waving the colors of his regiment; then he decided to freshen up by diving into a small pool in the middle of which, his wings spread, a marble mountain eagle sat on a pedestal and looked severely at our silliness with his glassy eyes. Some other guests followed Semyon's example. All in all, we had a lot of fun.

It took a couple of days for me to realize that my shiny new winter shoes weren't there. I checked every nook and cranny in the office, but all was in vain: my cherished present disappeared. In a corner behind the door, however, I found somebody's well-worn pair of shoes. Of course I did not suspect anything criminal, though it left a gall in my mind. I reasoned that the loss was because of my own disorganized life and probably the duty officer sent the shoe box to my summerhouse together with other presents since I had no other living space. Sooner or later I would find them — they're not a needle in a haystack.

But then a container of our major customer disappeared, and for some time I forgot about my loss.

Can you imagine what a KAMaz with a forty-foot container is? To put it shortly, this monster moving with the speed of one hundred forty kilometers an hour suddenly disappeared somewhere in Pskovsky region.

Inside it were thirty thousand pairs of Chinese-produced rubber footwear worth two hundred fifty thousand US dollars. At least, that's what the accompanying documents said. Naturally, a criminal case was

initiated upon disappearance of the car and driver by one of the regional internal affairs departments.

A week went on, then another one, and the container still couldn't be found. The customer's representative, an equable and cultured man, announced, with the aim of motivating us in our search, that the company management intends to give a bonus to our team in the event of the discovery of the container; he did not name the sum, though.

The unit headed by Zhmakin traced the route of the lost KAMaz. In his next report Semyon wrote that things were not so simple with the container in transit. During the inspection of the cargo customs officials found a serious violation — the accompanying documents listed Chinese-made rubber footwear, while in reality the container carried English-made shoes and so the real price of the cargo was several times higher, going from two hundred fifty thousand to one million five hundred thousand US dollars. To put it simply, the customs officials noted the instance of smuggling goods. Of course, the truck with the container and smuggled goods were sent to an impound yard. To solve this little problem and to hush

up the blunder which happened because of the businessmen's absentmindedness, the company representative had to hand a tidy package of fifty thousand US dollars to the management of the customs.

The driver of the container truck's last registered call was when he was crossing the border of Pskovsky region. After that the driver and the cargo disappeared.

The abandoned truck was found by Zhmakin's unit on one of the parking stops of the international route. Of course the container was empty. The driver called long distance several days later, from Crimea for some reason, and said he had faxed his letter of resignation.

One more week passed; everyone grew even more nervous. We used all our connections in the lead investigative teams of the City Department of Interior Affairs. Finally Semyon called and said, trying not to show his excitement, that the cargo had been found.

The priceless footwear was kept in the warehouse where all the confiscated goods from the Northwestern Region were kept, and belonged to a reputable buyer, the Triumph company. The operatives, however,

could only verify that this was indeed the lost cargo: at the moment the goods belonged to a legitimate owner with totally clean documents.

During further peace talks between representatives from Triumph and from our customer an agreement about the price for the goods was reached: it matched their cost price of one million US dollars.

It was early March and eavesdrip has already started when the lost footwear returned to its former owner and appeared at the stores of the most famous shoe company of the world which had settled firmly on the Russian market.

The company's representative, the same modest and cultured man, came to my office to summarize the operation. First he thanked us for helping to return the lost cargo and then, as a sign of gratitude, put two shiny boxes on my table as a bonus for the work of our security company. After finishing his coffee he said he had more business to attend to and then left.

I opened the box and saw the exact double of my lost winter shoes. Unable to resist the temptation, I tried the new pair. My feet seemed to drown in softness, and the office

smelt pleasantly of leather. I hurried to call Semyon Zhmakin to give him the deserved reward.

Semyon put the shoes on and took a couple of steps.

“How are they?” I asked.

“A little tight, but it won’t do to look a gift horse into the mouth,” Semyon said with a smile and added: “I’ll soon break them in.”

We only had time for one cup of tea when Semyon had to leave urgently on business. Left alone, I decided to change my shoes: it would be rather uncomfortable to keep winter shoes on in my office. I leaned down and noticed another pair of winter shoes under the table. How mysterious, I thought. To see my find better, I took it into my hands and brought it closer to the light. Doubtlessly, it was a pair of English winter shoes exactly like the one I tried on several minutes ago, but the light allowed me to see that this one was well-worn. The fur inside was scuffed, the leather was cracked. Disgusted, I threw them into the corner. Whose shoes there were? How did they get into my office? And suddenly I knew: this was my present, which was lost last year. I didn’t even investigate, my train of thought was enough. The only

thought cheering me was that they served someone well. Leaving my office, I threw them into the rubbish bin.

That evening in the car I was wearing my new shoes. Winter shoes are not so convenient in spring, but I remembered the saying about fair heat breaking no bones. I also remembered that the spring holiday of love was coming, that my employees were expecting guests and some of them could’ve inadvertently mixed the shoes, putting someone else’s shoes on. Sure bind, sure find, I thought, remembering another saying.

LOST

You know, I never believed into stuff like magic and psychics who heal people by laying on their hands and predict future. Of course I had read some stuff, about Vanga, about the consecrated priests of the antiquity, but that was the limit of my knowledge in that sphere. And then my old friend, a teacher of astrology, called me to ask for help for a woman. Just a little bit of a girl, thin as a hungry bird, and eyes like a gazelle, but her look was strange and burning. She had a threatening visit from a local criminal outfit, and these guys asked payment for her working on their territory — she had a chiropractic practice in three little rooms and also offered acupuncture séances. We dealt with those guys fast enough — one call to their boss was enough. Our company isn't much, but it has a good reputation: people know that they'd better leave Falcons of the North

alone or it's going to cost them. Of course we didn't take any money from her, but I did take her number and, as it turned out later, I was right in doing so.

At one time our operations unit was led by a former Navy commander Semyon Zhmakin. Formerly a well-known person in Vladivostok, fleet heavy weight boxing champion and a merry fellow, he was, to put it shortly, life and soul of any party and of our company. He had a smallish apartment in Kronstadt, two children and a crazy red-headed wife who visited our office every other day. She took pleasure in having tea with somebody from the office, repeating: «You cannot be too careful». Very likely she meant her husband. Each summer this happy wife and their children left to stay with her parents in Krasnodar region.

It was a summer Monday when Semyon did not appear for work. A week passed and we still had no word from our operations team unit. My employees accused me of being cold and paying no attention to personnel: a man was lost and I was cool and calm. First searches gave us nothing. Together with the local beat officer we even opened Zhmakin's apartment, but found nothing

except for a layer of dust, an unmade bed, a mountain of dirty dishes and a battery of empty bottles. We weren't yet ready to call his family in Krasnodar region. After seven days of waiting nervously, when our lost commander had not returned, we started thinking about registering him as lost.

At that difficult moment I remembered about Hilda – that was the name of my new acquaintance. I heard from my friend the astrology teacher about her unusual abilities, even though I did not pay much attention to this information or, more precisely, had not believed it. I called her and briefly informed her about our problem. She quickly invited me to come to her office and to bring the photo of our lost 'hero'.

It was a warm evening. Hilda invited me to sit in a soft armchair. I took a drink of tea brewed from Alpine herbs and sank into sweet languor, My body seemed not to weigh anything, but my mind worked clearly. The woman pinned Zhmakin's photo to a wall in front of her and, stretching her arms on shoulder level, started doing slow passes as if she were flying. Her eyes were burning and, it seemed to me, her hair stood on its ends. Suddenly she whispered: "He's alive. On an island."

Her soulful voice gave me goosebumps all over, and even my hair started moving.

"There are seven of them," Hilda went on. "Three men and four women are sitting near a fire and drinking vodka."

I flushed angrily and said, splashing my tea in indignation: "When will he stop?"

"He'll call you Sunday at nine in the evening", Hilda said seriously.

I went home, full of conflicting emotions, but soon realized that I waited impatiently for Sunday evening. At nine there was no call. Ten long minutes later still no call. Oh right, I said to myself sarcastically, that'll teach you to believe a charlatan; it's as if she'd hypnotized me. And then my phone rang. I answered, my heart almost missing a bit, and heard Semyon's low voice, so well-known to me.

"Comrade chief, this is operations unit leader commander Zhmakin."

"Yes, comrade Zhmakin," I said, keeping my emotions in check.

"Had a bit of trouble. Went fishing with a former colleague."

"You will tell me the details tomorrow at nine in my office."

In the morning, sitting in my office, Semyon told me a terrifying story about him and a friend going fishing on the weekend on one of the islands in the gulf. Regretfully, they hadn't secured the boat well enough, and a wave swept it off. The brave warriors spent a week eating fresh fish until they were picked up by a cutter passing by.

"Thank god we had matches and salt. I can't even look at fish soup right now," Semyon said sadly, licking his dry lips. "I know you must have been worried."

Having listened to Semyon with all my attention, I added after a small pause:

"There were seven of us, three men and four women. You had a great time and drank so much vodka that you forgot to count the days."

Semyon just blinked and said:

"Guilty as charged, chief, but tell me please who was the bitch that ratted us out?"

This way Hilda became our indispensable and loyal helper in many complicated cases connected to searches for missing people.

THE DOMINO PRINCIPLE

"The last hawk of socialism", the header on the first page of the morning newspaper said. I couldn't help looking through it, and what I read there almost made me choke on my coffee. It was impossible to imagine the sudden death of the Red Mammoth, that's what I thought at once. That nickname was how people called the chief manager of one of the biggest defense industry concerns. "Artyom Ivanovich Tyazhlov fell from the balcony of his hotel room on the eleventh floor while on a business trip in Moscow. His death was instantaneous. The dead man's colleague said that Tyazhlov went to take a breath of fresh air before sleep and never came back. In all probability the tragedy happened by acci-

dent. Tyazhlov could have passed out from a sudden heart attack or vertigo.” That’s what I read in a short news item, imagining at once that still slim man with wide shoulders and high forehead. As far as I remembered, he turned fifty last year.

Fate was kind to him as a young man. Well-treated by the powers that be, at thirty two he became chief manager and a laureate of the State Prize and defended his doctoral thesis brilliantly. A really impressive career for any era.

Also, he was, as they say, a man ripe with strength, talent and physical power. For example for fun and for entertainment of his guests he could cross himself three times with a sixteen kilo weight. In his youth he was the heavy weight champion of all Leningrad in freestyle wrestling. He was probably still able to rush a bear with a fork. I snorted; I couldn’t help remembering how on one of the sports clubs he lifted a stuck cutter with a crew. He was interested in the sea, or, to be more precise, in everything connected with the sea. Due mostly to his perseverance, the concern created one of the best yacht clubs on the coast. He hadn’t smoked a cigarette in his whole life and only drank occasionally in the

company of close friends. He was dedicated to sports and had excellent health. I couldn’t help doubting the reporters’ version and remembered our last meeting which was only a link in a chain of events, expressing the domino principle very well.

The office furnishings spoke of former greatness and successes in the industry, not just these belonging to the concern headed by Tyazhlov, but the successes of the whole country. The shelves were full of cups, medals and diplomas. There was also a great big of the world with flags marking countries to which the production of the concern was once sold. The government officials called the world which the unaccommodating chief manager defended with such perseverance in the new economic conditions a shard of socialism of Tyazhlov’s red island. Today the yesterday’s government-owned factory producing classified stuff was going public, and it was such a sweet morsel for those who wanted to get hundred of hectares of land in the center of the city with empty facilities and berths in the estuary of Neva. Until recently Tyazhlov and his closest associates owned the majority stake, but it was getting more and more difficult to protect

it. Their controlling interest was melting as snow in spring before their very eyes. One after another their loyal comrades sold their shares to Northern Trust and retired. In the end Tyazhlov himself became the stumbling block for the aggressor company.

"Let's drink to our meeting, Karp Nikolayevich," Tyazhlov said with a small bitter smile. "Thank you for coming."

The hot trickle of the drink ran through my body as a wave of pleasure. A thirty-year-old Camus, as far as I could determine. The reason for my meeting Artyom Ivanovich was my friend, the head of the concern's security department lieutenant colonel of the reserve Nikolai Ivanovich Krotov, whom I met in the eighties in one of the special forces units. A friendship until someone buries us, as another friend of mine once said. However, this one wasn't a meeting I was eager to have.

Our talk was private. I tried to seem at ease but, as they say, had my ears pricked.

Looks like the chief manager is in serious trouble, I thought, if he asked for such a clandestine meeting with me even if he had such a reliable security department. What I said aloud was:

"I'm ready to listen, Artyom Ivanovich".

"Yes, yes, of course," he said, uncertainly, as I thought. "I don't even know where to start."

"Start from the most important thing."

"Okay." With these words he offered me a rectangular package with something in it. "Look closely. This was found pinned to the entrance door of my apartment a week ago."

Through the transparent package I clearly saw the dried skin of a frog, its eyes, as it seemed to me, open wide, and a big steel needle.

"What could it mean?" Tyazhlov asked, his voice trembling for some reason.

"Well, it looks like an ordinary dried moor frog."

"I was told you're the only one who can disentangle this," Tyazhlov said grimly.

"You mean it's something more?"

"I'm a dyed-in-the-wool atheist and I don't believe in magic, but please hear me out in full and with attention."

"That's what I'm here for."

Tyazhlov sighed, as if gathering himself, finished off his brandy in one gulp and started speaking:

“About a week ago I came from work late, somewhere about midnight. I noticed some rag, as I thought first, pinned to the door. It was a frog skin, though — someone had it pinned securely to the door with a big needle. I even laughed a bit, remembering the fairytale about a frog princess, but I probably shouldn’t have. Next day — maybe it was a coincidence, of course — my wife fell very ill. A couple of sleepless nights, and her face started looking grey, livid rings under her eyes showing just how ill she was. It’s my second marriage, though we aren’t legally married yet. You know how it goes, a difficult and passionate love affair late in life, the kind which brings a lot of problems. We’re expecting a baby, and my divorce is slow in coming through. The good old warhorse got really stubborn, taking the bit between her teeth. Such things happen.

Meanwhile my Nastenka was fading away before my very eyes. The doctors diagnosed her with pneumonia. All at once so many things were falling on me ... Like, say, the last offer from the Moscow team.”

“Could you be more specific here?” I asked, truly interested, realizing that the other man was finally approaching the most important part of the story.

“I had a private meeting with the representative of the Northern Trust. I got an offer to sell my shares for a tidy sum — five million US dollars, and I’d even get to stay as the chairman of the board. You know as well as I that this is such a serious deal that I’d have to be an idiot to refuse it, but I asked for a week’s time out. You know, I am so tired of all this. I’d like to feel myself rich and free, to go abroad for, say, three weeks — I don’t think I would stand it for much longer. A white yacht under sail, my wife and our baby nearby. And right now I have to go to Moscow, to force through an order from the ministry of defense, to wheedle out some loans, to raise the level of welfare programs, to strengthen the wages fund. I have three thousand workers looking at me. How can I leave all that to the mercy of fate? Right now I have things going the same way they did at the peak of socialism, with a sanatorium for veteran workers, a summer camp, we celebrate every holiday with presents and bonuses. I managed to retain the manpower. I won’t pretend that I’m a saint: the concern rents out part of its facilities, using the cash it gets to add to the salaries of certain categories of workers. I think it’s my only sin.”

Tyazhlov sighed and ended with a question. "So, what would you recommend to me?"

"The situation is not simple. I think your opponents aren't going to stop even if you refuse. I know very well the methods that team uses. They tend to barge straight ahead and to hit below the belt. The best lawyers in Moscow are working for them right now, they have unbelievable financial assets, and a lot of administrative leverage too. An intractable customer usually disappears.

"So what should I do?"

"If I were you I'd take that offer without wasting a minute, but that's my private opinion."

"I'm leaving for Moscow today, so I'll have time to think it through. Thank you for taking time to give me a sensible advice. I left the envelope with your payment with your colleague. All the best to you."

I nodded thinking that I never refused even a dollar in my life, since I always thought any work was worth payment. On my way to the door I couldn't resist asking:

"So what was the deal with the frog, Artyom Ivanovich?"

"Ah, the frog. You know, I think I started to be afraid of my own shadow. And my

wife's getting better, too. If you got interested by the frog story, though, you can take this package for analysis and call me if you find out anything. All your expenses will be paid. Good-bye for the moment."

Then, of course, I went to my old friend's office to take my payment and to inquire a bit more about Tyazhlov's life in the last several months.

It was the end of the workday. From the window of the tiny office of the head of security services we could see the silhouette of the Trinity cathedral in the evening twilight. Nikolai silently put an opened bottle of Camus of the same vintage on the table. Tyazhlov and his security chief trusted each other, and my old friend had not only the full use of his chief's bar but many other privileges.

"Let's drink to our meeting," Nikolai said.

"To our meeting, Kolya. Haven't seen you in ages, as they say."

We drank, nibbling on a piece of chocolate, and then kept silent for a while. Finally, squinting a bit, my friend said with a touch of irony:

"So how do you like all this stuff with the frog? I think our Mammoth, sorry, I mean

Artyom Ivanovich, got a bit crazy from all these problems.”

“So you heard everything?” I asked calmly.

“Of course I did! I’m not paid for nothing. What if the situation went out of control? I have all Tyazhlov’s talks recorded for psychological analysis and for reference. Who knows how it’ll go.”

“You think the Northern Trust’s offer is dangerous?” I asked.

“I think if Tyazhlov will take too long answering they will kill him. He’s too intractable.”

“Have you taken measures?”

“Of course. I strengthened the security and informed the relevant authorities, but I don’t think Artyom Ivanovich quite realizes the level of the danger. For his visit to Moscow today I’m going with him, together with his two bodyguards. So, I’m sorry but I can’t have a real drink with you. Some other time,” Nikolay said and gave me the envelope.

“Here’s your payment and expenses for your dried from. Do you seriously plan to investigate this nonsense?”

“It’s a difficult matter, Kolya. I don’t really understand it much, but I have an adviser

in these matters. I think he’ll give me a full answer. I don’t want to hold you up. Let’s finish it off to luck!”

We finished the brandy and, after I put my coat on already, I asked him casually:

“Tell me, Kolya, do you by chance have any family photos of Tyazhlov’s laying by?”

“I certainly do, if it helps you any,” Nikolai said, handing me a small album.

We shook hands firmly.

In my car I looked into the envelope and whistled in surprise. Five thousand bucks! A nice beginning.

Any bounty God sends you, I always believed, has to be worked off honestly and also shared with fellow beings, and if this bounty is especially large it’s better to give a half of it away. That’s what I was quietly thinking while browsing Tyazhlov’s family album.

Apparently his young wife had a lot of imagination. The photos had various exotic backgrounds, and only her open face and toothy smile stayed the same. Yes, this young woman really got to him. Only one photo had three people in it: Tyazhlov, his first wife — the same age as him, judging by her looks, — and a young man of about thirty, his heir.

I called my deputy and asked him to collect the data on all the people in this case as fast as possible. Once I was alone, I called my old friend Hilda, a psychic well-known in certain circles, and asked her for a meeting, which took place a couple of days later. I don't quite remember why she couldn't meet with me at once — I think she was at her new client's in the country. Oh well, who knew the events would gather the speed of an avalanche.

For several years already Hilda consulted our team in some delicate matters, searching for lost people and objects, checking the reliability of employees, informing about days unsuitable for meetings and negotiations; she could predict the future, take off a hex, or a love spell, or other, more serious things which aren't to be spoken about, or to stop a mortal illness from developing. All in all, a person indispensable in private investigation business and in life in general.

I don't know about the rest, but at least one thing Hilda did really well was brewing a wonderful tea with mountain herbs. While I breathed in the aroma and enjoyed myself leaning back in an easy chair, she studied attentively the things I brought in a slim leather briefcase.

She spread the photos on the table and spent a long time browsing them. Then studied closely the content of the package without taking it out. Finally, looking at me with the eternity's cold eyes, she spoke firmly:

"Karp Nikolayevich, you brought the smell of death with you. It's a serious contract. You said this couple is expecting a child, but I see it won't be born. And the man has a black cloud over him, too. He'll be dead in several days."

For a while I sat silently. The cup and platter in my hand were jingling and, regretfully, I had no doubts that things would happen just as Hilda said — by then I had many opportunities of testing her abilities. Finally I managed to ask:

"Can we do something? Stop the contract, for example?"

"Is it possible to stop a tsunami or a torrential flood? It's not in humans' powers," Hilda said calmly.

"So what should I do?"

"You probably ought to visit that poor woman, though you'll need all your courage. That matter's getting to a close, so hurry."

"Another question. Who ordered this?"

"I am not a police investigator. I think

you'll find him yourself. To each his job," Hilda said, her lips pressed tightly together. "Now go."

Before leaving I left an envelope with money on the table, according to my principles.

It was late in the evening, and at that moment I had neither phone nor address of Tyazhlov's young wife. To put it short, I did get the information I needed, but I lost several precious hours. Nobody picked up the apartment phone, and when I went there I got sad news: neighbor said that the emergency car took the young woman to a hospital. She went into premature labour. The clock showed midnight. I had no connection with Moscow, Nikolai Krotov's phone number was blocked.

It was only in the morning that I learned about the night incident from a newspaper article. Of course it could have been just a fateful coincidence but, regretfully, Hilda's prediction was coming true. Finishing my morning coffee, I started thinking. I had more questions than answers, so I was waiting impatiently for the results of my assistants' work.

Then, at last, I got the first information and hungrily read the memo.

According to my investigator's information, Tyazhlov's only son, who had an economics degree, lived with his mother and worked in one of the concern's subsidiary companies. Father and son's relationship was difficult, especially since Tyazhlov left his wife for a young woman. Aleksei Tyazhlov led an idle and dissipated life. He frequented popular night clubs, liked cars and at thirty already had tried a lot of things. He lived, as they say, beyond his means, and it was difficult to say where he got his money. There was a story that he got lucky at the casino, but show me a man who really won serious money at the casino and I'll bow before him. His father gave him nothing.

Tyazhlov's former wife turned out to be a model of a modern woman trying to conquer the world. Owner of several apartments legally belonging to her son, she set in them several salons of aesthetic gymnastics, a massage parlour with more intimate services, and now she was in the midst of successful litigation concerning the distribution of estate. Through her lawyer she issued a request: if Tyazhlov gave her half of the registered shares of the concern, she'd drop her case. Marina Eduardovna liked only two

things in her life: money and, a little less, her son whom she considered a simpleton. Close relations called her 'our sweet little nuclear torpedo'. The former spouses haven't met even once for the last three years.

The next information had to do with my old comrade in arms Nikolai Krotov. I looked closely at the printout of the calls from his phone, and noticed that the day before Tyazhlov's death and during that day Krotov talked on the phone a lot to the representative of the Northern Trust. I knew he was flexible enough to possibly start secret negotiations, but nobody could be sure how far could these negotiations go.

The Red Mammoth was dead, and I was free of any obligations towards him, but something pushed me to go on with this mental exercise and to find the truth. Perhaps it was my professional's pride. My experience and intuition were tearing my mind apart, screaming that something was wrong. So I went on with my investigations.

Three months went by, and things kept happening. The young Tyazhlov who inherited his father shares became the general manager of the concern. Regretfully, a

week ago he was killed in a car crash during strange circumstances.

I was driving to the address I knew well. I've got an invitation by the new chief manager whom I had known as a young lieutenant. At the same huge desk the size of a football stadium my old friend Nikolai Ivanovich Krotov was sitting, but I could see no winner's exhilaration in his face; it was too grey. After a prolonged handshake he led me to the guest room where he at once silently filled our glasses with golden thirty-year-old drink. We took a drink for our meeting. I was waiting for an offer.

"You know, Karp," Krotov said. "I have an unfilled position of the head of security. Think about it: the position's cushy enough, two thousand bucks. You'll be your own master, I won't bother you with all the problems.

"That's a flattering offer. Can I think on it?"

"Of course, but think quickly."

"Tell me please, who owns the concern now?"

"Northern Trust does, didn't you know? The young Tyazhlov sold the controlling interest to the corporation. It's a pity, the guy could live and work with our team."

"Yeah, a pity. Well, goodbye, old friend. Things to do, you know. I'll call you."

"Wait, Karp, I've one more question," Krotov said and, putting a package on the table before me, said: "Last evening I found this at my front door."

I clearly saw a dried frog and a needle in the package. I looked into the eyes of my former friend and, handing him a printout of phone call, asked:

"Can you explain exchanging phone calls with your main adversary to such an amount?"

"I had to prepare the meeting with Tyazhlov."

"I don't believe you. What did they want from you?"

"I had to persuade Tyazhlov to sell the shares to the Northern Trust corporation."

"And for this," my voice was even, "my selfless comrade asked for thirty thousand dollars and the position of the chief manager. Here's the recording of your negotiations."

I put my tape on the table and went on:

"And that's not all, Nikolai. Your people got rid of Tyazhlov by throwing him off the balcony." As I was saying this, I put the pho-

tos on the table before him. "The quality's quite good, don't you think so? My people recorded it all with special equipment. Later you did the same thing with Tyazhlov junior, and your role there was the same."

"What do you want?" Krotov asked threateningly. "Money?"

"I wanted to know the truth."

"Very stupid of you; I don't think you've got long to live. Sorry, but you just know too much, old comrade. Sorry, nothing personal. I can't mess it up, this is too serious a business for a lot of people."

"Wait a moment, Kolya. You yourself got a contract on you; I guess you really stepped onto someone's foot. As you've noticed, the death frog knocked at your door."

"Come on, this is nonsense."

"No, it's not nonsense. Remember, the same thing happened to Tyazhlov's young wife, and soon she died together with her unborn child."

"It is that serious?"

"Very much so, I think."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

"No, nothing."

"I don't believe this."

"Time will show. Farewell!"

That night Krotov died in his bed from apoplexy. I really hoped that he had no time to put a contract on me. I really wanted to learn a bit more and to find out the rest of the truth.

Hilda helped me after all, and the thorny road of professional curiosity led me to a modern cottage among the pine-covered hills at the shore of a lake.

The silent wall-eyed bodyguard led me to a darkened room and closed the door tight after me. There were lit candles on the tables. The rooms were full of leather armchairs, sofas, tapestries, bronze and porcelain things, the smell of incense hung in the air.

"Get yourself comfortable, Karp Nikolaevich," a smooth creamy voice spoke behind me. "We have a lot to talk about."

I turned and saw a woman in a floor-length dark dress with piercing brown eyes. I recognized her: it was Marina Eduardovna Tyazhlova.

"I was expecting a visit from you; I've heard a lot about you, you know. What will you be drinking, man of experience?"

"A cup of coffee," I said.

"All right, and some brandy."

I nodded. We drank in silence. Finally, it

seemed, Marina Eduardovna came to some decision, since she started speaking in a clear and resonant voice:

"You can't imagine what it means to lose a beloved husband, even though Artyom Ivanovich hadn't been living with us those last years. Thirty years together — we've met back then in the university. Of course, when this young piranha appeared close to him, I tried to intervene, but who would listen to me? Fate punished her, though. Then an irreparable thing happened. Artyom died in Moscow, clearly not by accident, and then the same happened to my son. It was all because of the shares. My silly boy, the only heir, allowed himself to be persuaded and sold his father's shares to the Northern Trust. These bandits are still transferring money for those shares. Only now I understood that money do not define everything in life.

"Who was it who talked to your son?"

"A weedy guy called Krotov, their chief of security. I think he died recently. Now their company appointed a new chief manager, they say he's also implicated in this case." For a moment her eyes lit and then the flame went out. "I know some people have been slandering me, but please don't believe

the gossip, believe the facts. I told you everything as it is."

Marina Eduardovna herself came to see me out. Passing through the terrace I noticed the aquarium. However, it had no fish in it; all the space of its bottom was occupied by the teeming greenish mass of frogs. Marina Eduardovna noticed where I was looking and said with a considerably more lively tone: "You know, I was interested in amphibians since I was a child; there's something mysterious in them."

I kept silent, unable to share my hostess's tenderness. We said our goodbyes almost like old friends. I did not choose to remind Marina Eduardovna of the death of Tyazhlov's young wife, of my former friend and of the unborn heir and the ideas I had regarding that. Frankly speaking, I did not want the frog of death come knocking at my door. Soon I learned about the untimely death of the woman from the cottage; some said she poisoned herself, others, that she was poisoned. Strange story. That evening I couldn't fall asleep for a long time, thinking about life and death and about the domino principle which closed the circle of people involved in the Tyazhlov family case.

LETTER

Late in the evening someone called my work phone. A cool and polite voice asked:

"Karp Nikolaevich?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Sorry for a late call. This is the prosecutor's office calling. Senior investigator Vasiliy Segeevich Prokhorov. Do you know a Yelena Nikolayevna Teplova?"

"Yes, I know Teplova. Did something happen to her?"

"Karp Nikolaevich, she was found at the stairs of her house with serious skull injury. You probably realize that you'll need to visit the prosecutor's office as soon as possible to give your statement."

"Of course," I managed to answer and added: "Will she survive?"

"Difficult to say. Please hurry. Her condition is quite grave."

My forehead was sticky with sweat. My

fingers suddenly clumsy, I opened the collar of my shirt and sat back. The sudden worry made it difficult to breathe. Springing to my feet, I ran to the window and opened it wide. The spring breeze messed up my hair. It brought the fresh air and the smell of lilac which was everywhere. Somewhere the lightning flashed, lighting clearly the domes of the Saint Boris and Gleb Cathedral. Infrequent raindrops fell on the windowsill. It was early June, and the clock was showing half past midnight.

That spring evening I was to meet Teplova, but she hadn't come. Who knew that a cool-headed cynic I thought myself to be could have something that made him reel and caused his heart to beat faster. Fate led me and Teplova to meet as if by chance and allowed us to talk to each other.

Besides everyday business successful companies have anniversaries which are celebrated with special scope and splendour. The Neva Coasts company celebrated its anniversary in a famous princely palace belonging to one of the uncles of the last Emperor of Russia. The company CEO himself composed the list of invitees which included high-level governmental officials, bankers, well-known

businessmen, famous actors. The event was hosted by a popular TV presenter and decorated by the presence of the theatrical stars, fashionable singer-songwriters and composers. The tables, each for about hundred and fifty people, were served by waiters from the most exquisite restaurant of the Grand Palace Hotel. These tables were heaped with food, and the choice of drinks was impressive. The celebration obviously cost a tidy sum. I was among the guests – the company CEO invited me out of gratitude for my help in a delicate situation.

The drawn-out congratulations finally came to an end, and the company owner in a tailored dinner jacket together with his charmingly smiling wife invited the guests to partake of the food 'sent by Providence' as he put it.

Well-trained waiters started hurrying round the tables, pouring drinks and serving appetizers. The clicking of the utensils, the peal of crystal ware and the hubbub of voices filled the space of the dining hall. The huge beehive of pleasure started moving.

Some spots at the tables were empty, since that day the governor of the city gave formal reception in honour of the head of a Euro-

pean state, and some of the guests by virtue of their position had to be present at the official meeting.

Watching the next show number out of the corner of my eye, I paid scrupulous attention to all the appetizers offered by the waiter, applying myself at the same time to the nice Scotch, when a sweet voice somewhere over my shoulder asked:

“Good evening, can I join you at this table?”

A slim and slight woman was standing next to me; I automatically got up and moved the empty chair next to me so that she could sit. The woman with short chestnut hair smiled briefly and said:

“Could you help me to choose? The menu here is so varied!”

Of course at this moment the waiter was not near us. I readily shared my impressions, suggesting whitefish aspic with horseradish, something from the fish plate and a glass of white wine. By the way the woman devoured the appetizers, I correctly guessed that she had had a difficult day. Of course we started talking noncommittally. When the desserts were served, I already knew she was married to a much older for-

eigner, had a grown-up daughter at a university, and for the last ten years she had her own business as a founder and owner of several law firms. The company celebrating its anniversary today was one of her clients. Not bad for a woman in her early forties, I thought, and also guessed for some reason that she doesn't consider the bonds of matrimony to be too restricting.

In the next room a chamber orchestra started playing. The company CEO's wife invited the guests to dance.

“Let's go dancing! By the way, I'm Lena.”

“I'll be glad to keep you company. I'm Karp,” I said, offering her my hand.

The large hall with its high fretted ceiling was decorated by wall-paintings and lit by a huge multilayered crystal chandelier. The windows with ornate window guards commanded a view on Moika River.

Gliding over the dance floor, I held my partner's waist, feeling her closeness and her breath. As partners we were perfect. I kept twirling Elena around until the music stopped. Then, flushed, we stood in the middle of the room, holding hands. Turning to me, she said impulsively:

"I think I haven't danced in ten years. Come, I want to show you something."

Without letting my hand go, she led me to the windows, her heels rat-tatting against the floorboards. Moving the curtain aside, Elena whispered:

"A street. A streetlamp. A drugstore." She paused, then went on: "Tell me where you served in the army."

"In Samarkand. Went to a communications training unit. Well, you know: codes, cyphers... Accelerated marches at night, AWOLs, extra duties. The stars over Samarkand are amazing, especially Venus, the morning star. It fascinated me."

"And then?"

"And then I was transferred to Semipalatinsk. It's a city on Irtysh, you know, in Eastern Kazakhstan."

"Yes, I know, I got good grades in geography. How was your service?"

I stopped to think for a while. It's not easy to tell a stranger about the most vivid days of your life. And what a life it was!

"How was my service?" I repeated her question. "Back then we had strained relations with China, and our army corps took part in endless training exercises, we all paid

a lot of attention to our physical conditioning. The war could have started at any moment. I was the secretary of the corps' Komsomol organization, we had Courage lessons for the pupils of the nearby school. A bit later I was sent to Moscow to study and for some twenty years served in the operations subdivision of the state security. That's it, my whole life story. I never married. Today I am the head of a small detective agency and consult a bit on the side.

"Let's go drink something," she said. My story seemed not to have impressed her.

The evening ended. Near the door, under the balcony at the façade of the palace I lifted a white rosebud which some guest dropped, and automatically gave it to my companion.

"Perhaps it's not very sensible for you to have lifted that rose from the ground, but then I can sate it with water at home and keep it alive for some more time. Maybe it's a symbol of that morning star of yours. Thank you for this evening."

We were standing next to the entrance to her house. She lived very close by.

"Shall we meet again?" I asked.

"I'm flying to Germany tomorrow. To see my family. I'll be back in three weeks."

"Have a good journey," I said.

We spoke our goodbyes and suddenly I remembered the lines of a Russian poem:

"Good bye, my friend, good bye!

You're in my heart, my darling..."

A month passed; to say the truth, I did, of course, remember my new acquaintance, but not too often. She was the first to remind me of our meeting by a brief phone call.

I arrived at her office on an almost new Volvo which I borrowed from my colleague for the occasion. It was Saturday in late April. She was about half an hour late, and when she slid into my car, she breathed out: "Let's get away from the city, Karp."

I had three days off and felt myself free as a bird, so I just asked: "Shall we go to the dunes?"

"With you I could go to the end of the world," Elena said jokingly.

"We'll be there in a moment."

In less than an hour I parked my car on the territory belonging to a picturesque rest home called Dunes. Passing past the golf links, we slowly walked along the empty alley of young pines. The sky was bluest of the blue, except for some clouds drifting low along the horizon. The high sun warmed the

ground, but there still was some snow slush in the depressions on the northern slopes of the hills. Brimstone butterflies fluttered over it like bright sparks, and close by on the other side the ant hill was coming alive like a small volcano. A huge wasp cleaned her feelers, sitting on the sun-warmed bark. Somewhere in the briar bushes the bullfinch whistled. After a full breath of forest air you feel really giddy; but such forest trips are, regretfully, very rare. The conveyor line of life most often works in different ways.

Once at the observation deck, we paused for a moment. The panorama of the gulf was silent smooth surface. At some places the ice split, and near the edge of the sandy shore it rose as an ice ridge. It was windy on the deck, and when I held my companion by the waist, I automatically held her close to my chest. She pressed even tighter. Looking at me with those blue eyes, she whispered:

"I've been thinking about you this whole time."

She stood on her toes, moving closer towards me. Our kiss was long.

"Let's go to the dunes," I said, almost whispering. "Here the wind is too piercing cold."

We walked along the wide sandy strip of deserted shore squeezed by ice ridges on one side and sandy hills covered by gnarly pines, birches and briar bushes on the other side. A four-sided granite pillar about three meters high rose above the shore surface, barring our way. About thirty meters behind it a stream of the Sestra river was winding by. The unknown master's hand hollowed out an equilateral cross of the ancient Slavs on one of the facets of the marker.

"What's this?" my companion asked with evident interest.

"This is a border marker set according to the Orekhovsky treaty in 1323. Here the border with Sweden passed, along the shore of the Sestra river. But this is only a part of the story. This marker is considered sacred. It gives strength and fulfils wishes of those who touch it."

Without speaking a word, Elena hugged the stone giant and whispered something.

We walked about eight hundred meters towards the foothills still on the territory of the abandoned rest home, and then we sat down on a wooden block smoothed by time. A giant gnarled pine spread its branches over us. There was no wind at all, and we

still could enjoy the view on the gulf. I took a flat half-liter flask out of my inside pocket and, handing it to Elena, said:

"Looks like you could use this."

She took a sip and nestled closer to me, like a kitten. I covered her with the flap of my coat. For the first time in twenty years I wanted to stop the time. To add to the fullness of this experience I lit a cigar. Little by little, drink by drink we finished up the contents of the flask. The good Kizlyar brandy had done its deed simply and quietly: the world around us became free of any problems. We came back late in the evening. I stopped the car near a flower stand and, offering her a rose, said: "Your rose."

Pressing the flower to her chest, she whispered: "It's difficult to believe, but I think once you told me about the star of Samarkand and about this rose. Until we meet again, beloved."

She slipped out of the car lightly and vanished after giving me a wave with her rose. I hadn't paid any attention to her words.

* * *

Vasilij Sergeevich, the investigator from the prosecutor's office, turned out to be a young man of about twenty eight years. He

looked almost perfectly fit which was only spoiled a little by the way he stooped. His manner was severe; he didn't try to establish personal contact, his questions were dry, but he got to the point, first relieving me with the information that Teplova was expected to live. I guess he felt a connection between the two of us intuitively. Lighting up another cigarette, he asked:

"Did you ever wonder, Karp Nikolaevich, how we had found you so fast?"

"I guess your operatives found my phone number, or maybe my name in Teplova's appointment book," I answered almost without thinking.

"No, Karp Nikolaevich, the operatives found a letter in the victim's handbag, a letter addressed to you and written by Teplova, though the envelope was a bit strange," the investigator said, his voice a bit warmer, and handed me the envelope, adding: "By the way, we caught the attackers while the trail was still hot. They weren't difficult to find: young men, unemployed, registered in a drug abuse clinic. They earn their living by robberies. Teplova was their twelfth victim. I can see you have nothing more to add. We'll call you if we need you. Teplova is in the first

city hospital, in their neurosurgery department. I can send a car to drive you."

"Thanks, Vasiliy Sergeevich, I have my car."

"Good luck on the road."

Passing through a corridor full of echoes, I went one flight down the stairs and stopped. My heart was beating loudly; in the dim light of the lamp I scrutinized the envelope. Such envelopes were in use before perestroika, they had cheap cancelled stamps on them. The address was written in an even almost childish hand: Semipalatinsk, military unit 594093, to Sokolov Karp Nikolaevich, from Izyumova Elena, and the return address a bit lower. In the corner of the envelope there was a rectangular Undeliverable stamp. The envelope was opened. I took out the letter written on a page from a copybook and ran my eyes over it.

Hello, Karp!

Comrade Sergeant, a few days ago you gave a talk to our class in honour of the Victory day, on the topic of "What patriotism is". You spoke so well about the heroic act of the frontier guard Sergeant Babansky who demonstrated heroism defending the Damansky island. The enemy was stopped because of such soldiers. I would really like to become that brave and

fearless but I don't know whether girls are accepted into frontier guard schools.

But you know, Karp, most of all I liked your story about the morning star over Samarkand where you served before. You gave me a rose – the first rose anyone ever gave me – and told me it's a symbol of that star. All my classmates hope for a new meeting with you, and I do, too.

*Chairman of the council of the troop
Lena Izyumova, class 6B. May 11, 1975,
Semipalatinsk.*

All this struck my mind like a lightning. I reread the letter from that schoolgirl several times more. Of course I remembered the blue-eyed girl with a red Young Pioneer scarf, clearly a leader of her school. It was so long ago! So, then, Elena Teplova was that same girl... Unbelievable! I felt pretty much dazed by the way life sometimes turns.

I could barely wait for the morning to get into Lena's hospital ward, barging through all the obstacles. In my hand there was a white rose.

Each morning she found a fresh bouquet of white roses near her bed and smiled softly to herself. Finally her husband, a business-

man well known in Germany, took Elena to Dresden. I knew her health got better.

Two years passed. Once the company's employee on duty brought a registered letter to my name to my office where I spent the night at times – I had no apartment of my own.

"Hello, Karp!" I read, and my heart died for a second.

"I am writing to you from the island of Capri. I bought a small villa here, and I'll be waiting for you at any time. I am free, my husband died.

I am waiting for your answer. Chairman of the council of the troop, always your Lena."

Leaning back in my chair, I lit the remains of my cigar and started thinking. I felt like I had a cobweb in my throat after yesterday's drink with friends.

"Why not to go to Lena?" I thought at once. "I can borrow some money for the trip. I can stay several weeks with her – I probably won't be able to stand it any longer, I am too used to a bachelor's life."

That was what I did. Since then each early spring I fly to Capri to spend several weeks with Lena. Usually we take a lot of walks. It's the loveliest time, when all the island is in

bloom. At times we furrow coastal waters on a double-deck motor yacht. At the request of my friend I almost stopped to drink strong beverages and I smoke only one cigar a day. Each morning I give her white roses.

Coming back home, I always impatiently wait for her letters. Lena never came to Saint Petersburg again, saying that her doctors did not recommend changing climate any more. Last year for my anniversary she sent me a double-deck yacht. I don't yet know what to do with it. Probably I'll use it for fishing with friends, without any stupid excesses.

DEBT

Aleksandr Pluyev had been my classmate and even shared a desk with me. Ours was a very good school in Smolninsky district — I think it's a gymnasium now. He was a real genius. His successes at math and physics academic competitions made us proud for him. Unlike Aleksandr, I had neglected the hard sciences to the point of failing in lots of subjects and was waiting, terrified, for the inevitable end. The school year was drawing to a close, and my intuition was telling me that I had virtually no chance of getting my school certificate. Meanwhile the competitions I was participating in went on. For all my modesty I cannot avoid mentioning that in my tenth grade I already was on the city's junior modern pentathlon team and was especially good at shooting the Margolin gun.

Finally things came to a head. I was told that I would not be allowed to take exams,

since I had a failing grade in math. After the end of the class our more active classmates headed by Aleksandr Pluyev surrounded our math teacher and made her let me retake the last test. Of course it was nice to know that my friends supported me, but I realized it was hopeless and tried to avoid the perspective of retaking the test.

“Don’t be a spoilsport,” Pluyev said. “I’ll pull you through. I’ll just have to manage to get your version of the test questions. Mademoiselle Froux will cover for us.”

Everything happened just as our genius had predicted: I got four out of five for my test, was allowed to take the exams, and soon the headmaster handed me the school certificate.

During the graduation party, near the entrance to the school hall I hugged Sashka and his trusty girlfriend Mademoiselle Froux and said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I swear I’ll pay you up in full. I just don’t know when.”

“Don’t sweat it, buddy. Just let us shoot the Margolin a bit, and that’ll be all.”

All three of us spent that crazy white night, full of the smell of lilac, wandering till morning. We couldn’t suppose that in twen-

ty five years fate would bring us together again.

Aleksandr Eduardovich Pluyev graduated with distinction from the faculty of economics of Leningrad State University, passed his Ph.D. defense splendidly and for a while taught at the university. During perestroika he joined the group of progressive economists who worked at creating the Rost program for the young democratic government of Russia. He had been noticed and appreciated for his remarkable mind and organizing skills. At thirty he headed the Finances and Economics Committee of the Government of Saint Petersburg and then he was promoted to the position of the head of the Real Estate Department.

Pluyev wanted that position with all his soul. His candidature was supported by an old friend with whom they chased girls together when they were both active in kom-somol. Today he was one of the top officials, practically on the president’s advisor level, and responsible for many decisions on personnel. Aleksandr clearly realized what a nice piece of cake he had at his disposal.

Like a slice of blood sausage larded with bits and pieces, the city was full of indus-

trial facilities that were only just holding on. Some of them were situated in the center of the city and therefore especially valuable. That was what the criminal groups mostly fought about. Not, of course, with the goal of developing national industry. Most often they were turned into office buildings. Collecting the rent from their tenants under the table, the new owners evaded paying the taxes using the most primitive scheme.

Aleksandr Pluyev sold cheaply what did not belong to him. And the more he had, the more he wanted: he forgot the ancient saying that our fate depends on our mores. He thought it possible to eat three breakfasts, four dinners and ten suppers. He became a small but voracious piranha. Usually he took money through an intermediary, but sometimes, when the scheme involved really substantial sums and delicate details, accepted the envelope himself. He had to send half the profit to his friend in Moscow, but even there he cheated, hiding substantial sums from his companion. Having accepted an official position as his fief and enjoying an incredible support from the Center he felt he could do no wrong and was allowed anything he wanted. He started violating his obligations

to people who gave him money, protracting the process of organizing a tender, and at times even sold the promised facility to another company which offered a bigger profit. People eager to earn fabulous money in shortest possible time queued for a meeting with him. But not everybody in that queue was going to let Aleksandr Pluyev treat them in that way.

Mr Kolmarov, one of the leaders of the city's underworld, had, of course, never queued for anything and never ran around hat in hand: he had enough people to send on such errands. He bought several facilities from Pluyev for a song, but then the next one turned out to be troublesome: he paid the required sum and there was no following actions from Pluyev. There was a tactful enough reminder of the debt, but Pluyev waved it off. First, he was certain of his cover — which, naturally, was provided by officers from a well-known law enforcement agency, and second, there was nothing to return — he had already spent the money. At that time Aleksandr was already aping the lifestyle of Russia's young millionnaires. They had their favourite spots, for example in Monte Carlo — they could fly there to-

gether for a few days to test the fate. Usually such crazy little adventures required a lot of cash. Of course Aleksandr knew he had to return the money, and he would've returned it, covering the 350,000 thousand, not such a great lot of money, with the next deal, but he got too stingy.

He started to avoid the meetings with the representatives of the criminal community. Kolmarov himself was killed about that time. For a while the criminals had no time for Pluyev, and he thought naively that his debt was forgotten. He was wrong: his customers on the shady side liked money as much as he did.

And then he got a call, a reminder from Smerdin, the successor of Kolmarov, one of the leaders of the underworld. The amount of debt has doubled. Aleksandr's mind was in a tumult, but he still hoped to get out of it. He still hadn't fully realized that there was a shadow over him, a specific contract to punish an official who got out of control, and to do it publicly.

It was in that difficult mental state that Pluyev found me. We agreed to meet on the next day. He knew I worked in special ops for a quarter of a century which brought

me the rank of lieutenant colonel and some unique experiences, and that today I headed a small but respected security company. He was eager to get some advice.

That morning was particularly calm. I waited for my school friend on the corner of Pushkinskaya street and Nevsky prospect, nibbling on an ice cream. The street ran into Nevsky without crossing it. I enjoyed the warmth of sun, looking around lazily. My ability for total recall helped me to notice the surrounding objects without any effort, and my brain rapidly analyzed them. For example, a spectacular blonde was walking back and forth nervously on the other corner of the street, biting her lip: evidently a date was not about to happen. A man of about thirty, dark umbrella in his hand, looked with great attention at the shop window with women's underwear. Seems like nothing in particular, doesn't it? What if a guy got interested in women's underwear? But I instantly realized that the man used the glass of the shop window as a mirror for surveying the street behind his back, and then, that he had a walkie-talkie: there was a barely noticeable mike in the shell of his ear. Then his partner should be somewhere nearby. Oh, there he is. A bit further in the street,

near the newspaper stand, a man was studying the morning papers with all his attention. Well, well, I thought, who were they shadowing? Sashka, perhaps? It was seven minutes to ten when, not taking my eyes off the outdoor surveillance, I noticed a black Mercedes slowly moving towards them. The man near the newspaper stand suddenly slipped into a car standing next to the kerb, as if following someone's order. The other one opened his umbrella and lifted it over his head, then lowered it down sharply. The Mercedes got so close that I clearly saw the smiling face of Pluyev who was saying something, leaning towards the driver. The car slowed down. Another car, the one which the stranger from the newspaper stand had just entered, followed suit, almost touching its bumper. Now wait! This was the beginning of an operation. These were signals for the sniper who sat in a cover, probably in the attic of the house across the opening of Pushkinskaya street. Almost without thinking I ran towards the car, gesturing for the driver to drive away fast. But the driver, killed by the sniper's shot, fell face down onto the steering wheel and never saw my warning. The car struck the kerb. I threw myself into the driver's seat, pushing the driver's

body out into the road. The sniper's bullets clattered on the car roof. Making a steep turn, I shot out into the oncoming lane of Nevsky prospect, and in ten minutes I was on the Fontanka embankment. Aleksandr Pluyev was hiding between the seats without showing any signs of life.

"Come on, Sashok, I know guys like you are not so easy to destruct."

Aleksandr's white face appeared from behind the back of the driver's seat and he said, his lips barely moving:

"You keep joking when I almost got killed. Poor Evgeniy Nikolaevich."

"You know, my friends, snipers don't really go shooting people just for kicks. Now tell me what happened and whom you suspect. Maybe I'll give you free advice."

I could hear Pluyev sighing heavily; then he said helplessly: "I took money, not that much, but I haven't fulfilled my obligations in processing the facility. Now the sum of my debt doubled."

"Who gave you the money?" I asked, throwing a look into the rear view mirror.

"That kind Samaritan was Mr Kolmarov, you've probably heard about him. They say that recently someone tried to poison him,

and several days ago I had a call from his people. I told them to go to hell. That's all."

The car sped up past Mikhailovsky castle and, after crossing the bridge, went by Lit-eyny prospect towards the Big House, stopping on Zakharievskaya street, opposite the huge building built in early 1930s according to the special design of the OGPU.

"Sashok, you're in deep shit. The people who put a contract on you did not even need that money. They needed your dead body. They wanted to show everyone who's the boss in this city."

"Please, Karp, don't leave me alone. I have three small children, the youngest is eight months old, and a wife I love very much. You should remember her, it's Mademoiselle Froux. You need money, perhaps?"

"I have enough money, Aleksandr. As a friend you merit a free advice: here, see that door? That's the reception office of the Federal Security Service and your only chance to stay alive. Go and tell them everything."

"I'm so very afraid, Karp, I think I feel sick."

"Me too, but say nothing about me. It was you who drove out from under the fire. That's all. Now go."

"Shall we meet again?" Aleksandr asked with evident hope.

"I don't know. Don't look for me. I'll find you myself."

"Thank you, Karp. You saved my life."

"Words pay no debts, Sasha. Good bye!"

We paused for a bit near the car perforated by bullets. I nodded to Pluyev encouragingly. In response he gave me a sluggish wave and, barely managing to move his feet, went towards the Big House. Before leaving I checked out the shot holes. What splendid work! I imagined the situation from the sniper's position. The plan was rather basic: the driver would be the first victim. That would make Plyuev's car brake. The cover car would block it from behind and then they would shoot the main target.

"Looks like I stopped some team of professionals from a nice dinner with vodka," I thought, walking in a faster step towards the subway station. My romantic evening, though, wouldn't be disturbed, so I made a call to an old friend of mine.

Within a week someone shot Sasha Pluyev. Judging by their style, it was the same team of specialists. Regretfully, even going to the Big House did not save my school friend.

Too much time was lost. Perhaps this way my old friend paid his dues; who knows?

Aleksandr Pluyev was buried on one of the most prestigious cemeteries of Saint Petersburg. In mere moments his grave was covered by a mountain of live flowers. And the press started the story about a fighter for democracy and the new flourishing Russia who was killed by ruthless criminals while working for people's happiness. "If everyone did their duty like this, our life would have been different," a guest from Moscow, a member of the government of Russia said in his speech at the funeral. I approached Mademoiselle Froux who was sadly standing there and pushed my business card into her sleeve, rightfully suspecting that she might soon need my help.

“GOLDEN POINTES”

Strange as it sounds, it was a criminal case with serious aftereffects that allowed me to get closer to the great art of ballet. Please don't consider me a total ignoramus. Of course I've heard of the talent foundry on Architect Rossi Street and could even name two or three names from the history of the world ballet, like Anna Pavlova, or Matilda Kshesinskaya who, I think, used to be the mistress of the last emperor. Among those still living I respect Maya Plisetskaya a lot, may she stay in good health for years to come.

Once on the ballerina's very important anniversary during the reception by chance I've met her husband, a noble and open-hearted

man. We started talking and, working quietly on some excellent vodka, became such good friends that it was difficult to part us. A timely look from the queen of ballet cooled our ardor. This was the whole of my experience in dealing with those involved with the magic of dance.

I knew nothing about the life of the young stars of Russian ballet, except for many stories about the well-known Xenia Tzarskoselskaya. At that eventful time of her life she lived in a splendid apartment in Moscow and was in litigation with the management of the Bolshoi theater because of her dismissal from the troupe which she considered unlawful.

Anyway, from time to time Xenia came to Saint Petersburg to distract herself from the bustling Moscow and to finish the interior decoration of her recently bought apartment in the center of the northern capital, on a square with the most exquisite architecture. It's difficult to say how much had this new apartment cost, but people said it was by an order more expensive. Of course it wasn't Xenia's ballet tours that paid for her apartments. She had a friend, a patron and an admirer at once.

This guardian angel did everything to let his dove's talent grow safely under his wing. Speaking about him you could've quoted Alla Pugacheva's famous song, since he did send a million of red roses to the scenes of various theatres where his beloved floated — more and more heavily with each day, as malicious tongues were saying. The people of Saint Petersburg remember quite well the huge billboard with the green-eyed beauty in Carmen's costume. And oh, what solo recitals were organized in her honor in the best known and most splendid concert halls of the city! The fans still get dizzy remembering the multitude of concert numbers.

Regretfully, as it often happens, the dancer's love for her patron went away. There's nothing permanent under the sun. Who was the guilty party? Difficult to say. Perhaps it's the case of Carmen leaving her Jose.

The ballerina's feelings ended, and that ended her patron's payments for the princess's current expenses. Lawsuits started appearing. The lawsuit of a company which worked on the interior decorations of her new apartment in Saint Petersburg was especially unpleasant: the court kept awarding the payment of the costs of the repairs now

to the complainant and then to the defendant. The case seemed clear, but Xenia, looking at the judge naively, kept explaining that it wasn't her who ordered the job, and that this suit had better be directed to her former boyfriend in Moscow. It was true that none of the documents related to the job had the ballerina's signature. In the end the court decided to seal the apartment.

She had to get back to work. However, the ballerina's first tour abroad ended badly; she was detained by the border guards together with the court marshal, and her passport was taken away. That was just one of the problems. Next week the city prosecutor's office opened a criminal case against Xenia Tzarskoselskaya based on the burning of the complainant's car. Seems a complete and utter madness, but the paper, my friends, doesn't blush. Some handy witnesses were found who had seen Xenia in the company of people who allegedly burned the expensive car of the building company director. They hadn't just burned it; the witnesses considered it a kind of revenge from Xenia because of the lawsuit brought against her by the builder.

That day I came to my work office late enough. Browsing the morning papers, I no-

ticed an article intriguingly titled "Golden pointes". That made me to start reading, since the author offhandedly discussed the life of the daughter of my friend Aleksandr Tzarskoselsky.

"One look of her enticingly trustful and childishly naïve green eyes was enough to fascinate you and to drive you crazy," the author wrote and then went on with a newspaperman's typical presumptuousness: "The art director of the Bolshoi theater, though, had a bit different impression from working with the Saint Petersburg star, which, perhaps, was because of her character or because of her demands for all the leading roles in the repertoire of the theater". After that the author of the article listed everything that happened to Xenia recently.

"This is all nonsense, but someone's trying to make trouble for the ballerina," I thought, throwing the tabloid aside; however, just at that instance someone opened the door without knocking and I saw the unusually worried face of my old friend Aleksandr Tzarskoselsky, father of the heroine of my story. I have to say that in certain circles the ballet star's father was no less well known than his famous daugh-

ter. Take, for example, that case when some people extorting a big enough sum which they claimed Aleksandr gambled away or borrowed under false pretences managed to enter his apartment and even tried to use weapons. It was, of course, their great mistake. The bullet sent by the bandit's unsteady hand did wound the owner of the apartment; it also angered his pet, a Caucasian Mountain Dog which seriously bit one of them and smothered another one. And that was that.

"Karp, old buddy," he said shortly, nodding at the newspaper. "You've read that already, haven't you?"

I nodded, pushing the newspaper away, as if renouncing everything written there and, with noble anger and a tone of an offended admirer in my voice, exclaimed:

"I could kill these hacks for getting so out of hand... Give me the address of the man who wrote this. I'm serious: give me his address. I'm sending a duty car with my men there.

My hand moved towards the phone.

"Please don't get too worked up, Karp. Please stay within the limits of the law. A dead body would really be too much for us

right now," Aleksandr said nervously, hurrying around the table with a glass of water.

"I don't need water," I exclaimed, getting angrier. "I'll throttle him with my bare hands!"

"Do they know they dare to attack the pride of Russia!" echoed the concerned father, slightly worried by my vigor.

"No, Sasha, let's put it plainly, pride of the world!" I exclaimed, banging my fist on the table.

"You know, I happen to have a bottle of whiskey with me."

"And you kept quiet about that! Get it out, or God knows what I'll do next!.."

In ten minutes, getting a bit calmer after another stiff drink, we started to talk business.

"Where did they register the statement?" I asked in a steely voice. "We have to stop this outrage."

"In our district prosecutor's office, where we live."

"Well, thank god I'm friendly with the prosecutor of your district. Let's drink our dear Xenia's health." We took another drink, and I went on: "Promise me to give her Uncle

Karp's warmest regards and to tell her how we drank her health."

"I promise," Sasha said with difficulty, beset by emotions, and hugged me with tears in his eyes.

We drank all the whiskey with a bite of some chocolate I found in my desk drawer. Then, looking assertively into my friend's eyes, I said:

"By the way, the prosecutor is an admirer of ballet and of your daughter. So we'll need a couple of tickets to the first performance of Giselle."

The prosecutor turned out to be a real admirer of ballet and was well qualified for this position. With his interest in the case and according to the law the case of arson of the building company director's car was closed and the ballerina once again had access to her apartment.

At the first performance of Giselle I was sitting in the director's loge right behind the prosecutor's refined wife who smelled of French perfume and enjoying every move of my protégé. It was, I think, the third visit to ballet in my whole life. I will never forget the moment when Giselle, lost to her torturous emotions, tore at her necklace so that its

thread broke and the pearls scattered over the scene in a fantastical dance around her perfect legs.

Time passed. Each time I'm brought an envelope with a ticket, I know that my loyal friend, the most exquisite ballerina of the Russian ballet, is back in the northern capital. I made up for lost time by reading a book about ballet, so now I know what *fouette* and *grand battement* mean. Her photos are all over the place again, so I guess Xenia found a new friend, patron and admirer, and my heart is full of pride for my part in helping the success of a remarkable dancer of our times. You know, people say that the talent grows if surrounded by love, safety and comfort.

Praise to the man who supported the Russian ballet in the face of one young ballerina, providing her with decent conditions for living and creating art. I hope this surprises no one, since we all remember traditions started by Russian businessmen — patrons of art and producers of the beginnings of the last century. The memory of one of them still lives in the Petrogradsky district as the mansion of the ballerina Kshesinskaya.

CHANCE

You know, my friends, everyone should go to Slovenia for a week, to take a dip in the thermal springs. You shouldn't wait until your radiculitis plays up or your knee starts aching. In such places, outside of the noise of the big cities, the whole atmosphere does wonders for your unstrung nerves. The air is full of unique aromas, the evening twilight and the morning sun rays both strike your imagination, and you are eager to share at least some of your impressions with someone of equal spirit.

But I could find no one like this, and trust me, I've tried. Over the pool where I took my daily bath I only ever heard the German speech. As you well understand, with all my respect to the German nation, all the German I know is stuff like "Hands up" and "Hitler kaput" which is clearly not enough for communication. I was looking

for a Russian soul, that is, someone from Russia.

And then, as people say, speak of the devil and he will appear. I saw right before me a sweaty face and two shining eyes. Without knowing why, I asked: "Are you from Russia?"

"From Moscow."

"Finally I found you."

"Was it so bad?"

"I swear I had no one to talk to. What do you do after supper, by the way?"

"Nothing."

"How about taking a walk together?"

"Why not," the stranger answered as if continuing some internal dialogue of hers and then, with a small nod, went on: "I'll listen."

The dusk at the end of August enveloped us, inadvertently pushing us to talk freely. The town where the rest house was situated looked more like an overgrown park with narrow streets flashing with the lights of small restaurants. It was a warm evening, so we chose an open café, its terrace overgrown with ivy and climbing rose, and ordered coffee. The bell sounded over the town hall, and its sonorous ring spread over the town,

reminding us of the evanescence of human life.

"Do you visit Europe often?" the stranger asked.

She looked about forty, a striking chestnut-haired woman with emerald eyes who held herself simply, without an ounce of coquetry. I knew at once that she was a free woman.

"Almost never. You know, if I have a free week or two, I usually prefer to spend them in Crimea."

"Oh, Crimea!" There was such a lot of true emotion in her voice. "I am Crimean, you know."

"Coctebel, Voloshin, Ayvazovsky, Kuindzhi, the carnelian cove," I said, copying her tone.

"Ay-Petri, Sudak, old-growth forests, Bakhchisarai," the stranger answered rapidly.

"Sevastopol, the stronghold of the Russian Navy," I added.

"I was born in Sevastopol. That's where I spent my childhood and got married at eighteen, to an officer, of course."

"And I fell in love there. For the first and only time in my life."

"That's so romantic – please tell me more!"

"My uncle, a Navy captain, was posted to Sevastopol back then, and invited me to come for summer holidays. I couldn't come for all the summer – I was in the junior pentathlon team and had to train a lot, but after the competition in August I left Leningrad for a fortnight to go to the seashore. It was my childhood dream. My cousin and I spent the whole days on the shore. You know: sea, rocks, burning hot pebbles on the beach and blinding sun. The relatives let us do what we wanted. The place we loved best was Black Rocks. That was where I met that girl, green-eyed and darkly tanned. She was about two years younger than me, so bold and given to laughter. We swam, played cards, raided gardens and vegetable patches almost innocently. In the evenings I walked her home, to the door of the red-roofed single-storey house where she lived with her parents. Their yard was full of apricot, cherry and mulberry trees. The limestone fence had a lot of cracks in it; there was an arbor joining it, made from poles tightly interwoven with vine. There, in that overgrown corner of the garden, with the cicadas singing around us,

we kissed each other for the first time. You remember, of course, the particular charm of the summer night."

The woman nodded slightly, not taking her rapier glance away from me. Looking into her unfathomable eyes, I went on:

"The aroma of the butterfly orchid gets you drunk, and the huge stars beckon with its eternal mystery. The day before I had to leave we decided to climb the sheerest cliff and to dive off it. Leaning a bit to the side, the fifteen-meter lump of rock hanged grimly over the smooth amethyst-like surface of the sea. Even the hearts of the most reckless young daredevils clenched when they looked down from the rock ledge into the depth of the sea. The ledge was narrow, the sharp edges of the stones hurt the divers' bare legs and pushed them to take that difficult step. And for those who got up there was no choice whether to dive or not: no one could've climbed down that cliff. I stood holding her hands, seeing how wildly the small blue vein under the skin of her neck was pulsing. She pressed close to me with all her body and whispered, "I can't jump. Do you hear me? I can't, I'm too afraid!" It was a desperate situation. Without think-

ing any more, I hugged my girlfriend tightly and with all my might pushed off the rock. I heard a cry "Mommy!" somewhere near me, and the next second we rammed into the cool water."

"Karp, you bastard, so that was you!" my listener exclaimed.

"Lyuba!" I answered, amazed. "But why a bastard!"

"You left me alone at such a moment."

"You're wrong!" I said sincerely. "After our jump I was brought to the hospital with the diagnosis of brain concussion and the fracture of both feet, and when I came to myself my uncle sent me home. I looked for you, Lyuba, and wrote to you often, but all my letters returned as undeliverable. I still kept them, though."

"Have you looked for me?" the woman asked with pain and hope in her voice. "Have you? Tell me!"

"Of course I have! I didn't know what happened to you, even whether you were alive..."

"I want to read your letters, you know? I want to read my letters now! My letters!" She repeated the last words as if they were an incantation.

"Sorry, but I don't have them with me. I keep them in my summerhouse in the country, in the desk drawer."

"I'll go there with you."

Suddenly her feverish thought seemed to stop at something. She paused and then, still looking into my eyes, asked, "Tell me, are you free?"

"I am a bachelor, yes."

"And I'm not. Not yet free, that is. My husband died half a year ago."

There was a sudden pause in our talk. To amend this awkwardness I said: "How about celebrating our meeting today?"

"Why not? Life goes on," she answered with a sad smile and stroked my hair, then my cheek. "Let's start our friendship anew."

The night was dark. The cicadas got up an unbelievable concert, as if especially for us. The star shower and the aroma of the butterfly orchid really made us feel as if we returned to the long ago halcyon days of our youth. We never went back to the rest house on that night, meeting the dawn snuggling on a bench.

Lyuba left on the next day. I sent her letters to Moscow with the first opportunity as soon as I returned to Saint Petersburg.

We came to be good friends. I often get letters from Lyuba from all over the world. She told me she became a well-known writer. Her books are published both in Russia and abroad with the circulation of thousands of copies. Some days ago I got a mail package with her new book, a collection of stories and novellas. In the top right corner of the title page there was a short sentence: "Dedicated to the friend of my youth, my first and only love." The book began with the novella called "Chance".

SOMETHING NASTY

A grim Semyon Zhmakin was sitting in my office and disdainfully drinking green tea from a tea bowl — I was understandably unable to offer him anything else during work hours. He had a sad and edifying tale to tell.

“You know, Karp Nikolaevich,” Semyon said, emphasizing his words with a dramatic gesture, “I’m going to stop doing this.”

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“I lost an old army friend because of a drink.”

We did not have any pressing cases at the moment, so I was quite ready to hear my deputy’s story — and interested in it, too. Semyon clenched his huge fist and went on:

“We’ve just had an anniversary of our

graduation. It was a good party, by the way, worthy of our battle past. We weren’t quite ready to head home after that, so people drifted off in groups to have a couple of beers somewhere. I remember ordering a table in a new restaurant near Sennaya square. There were three of us: Artyom, who just got back from Northern Caucasus where he had worked for several years managing a building company, and Georgiy, a recently retired Navy captain. That evening Artyom was the one who talked most. As he said, he earned a lot through building orders and came here for a week to close some deals. Every ten minutes he ordered some song, then he started talking to the waiters, a couple of times invited a full-breasted young woman from the table next to us to dance. Of course he made an impression: a Rolex on his hand, a golden chain thick as a finger could be seen from his dark half-opened shirt; he had a diamond ring and a bracelet too. All in all, a visiting big shot, shining with gold and diamonds as a Christmas tree. And it wasn’t too long ago that he’d been a decent captain II rank on a submarine, penniless as he was. Then, as soon as we dealt with beer and the first half a liter of vodka, my crazy wife came

to the restaurant and led me away almost voluntarily. So, we parted. By the way, we were treated as sheiks; the waiter hadn't left us for more than a moment. He poured vodka from a steamed decanter, and it flowed in a viscous trickle.

Semyon swallowed. The memory was too fresh, however sad. He paused for a moment and poured himself some more green tea.

"About one A.M., Georgiy later said, his wife called and quietly reminded him what time it was. So the guys ordered taxies and left. At five A.M. Artyom's dead body was found on the pavement at the other end of the city. All the valuables and two thousand dollars disappeared. The old sea dog got unlucky."

"What were the results of the autopsy?" I asked interestedly.

"The medical examiner's conclusion says that death came at about five A.M. from heart failure, no signs of violence detected."

"And, of course, the prosecutor's office never opened a criminal case."

"No reason to. All clear, just an accident."

"So, no reason, you say."

"That's right."

"Did you, by chance, have a headache in the morning?" I asked mildly with an experienced physician's intonations.

"Well, to be honest, I did, and also I seriously wanted a shot of vodka in the morning."

"That was quite a mix you've concocted. Have you been drinking something nasty?"

"Come on, chief," Semyon exclaimed, offended. "We were ordering the most expensive vodka."

"Price does not equal quality. It could've been counterfeit, if you don't take bad intent into account, and if you do, there might've been something added to your vodka. How did Georgiy feel?"

"He'd been hugging the washbasin till morning."

"Now that's even more interesting. Now tell me, Semyon," I said slowly, "did someone approach the dead man? Without taking the waiter into account, of course."

"Well, yeah, some curly guy joined us for five minutes. Artyom said they served together somewhere in the Northern Fleet. Looked like someone from the south."

"And he had two nieces with him, and kept sending vodka in a decanter to your

table. And later joined your table with his ladies for more than five minutes. And you kept asking them to dance. And you, Semyon, should thank your wife for dragging you out of that dive with a little scandal, and Georgiy should thank his. They did save your lives. Regretfully, there was the third playboy left, and he jumped at the bait."

"Are you a clairvoyant, chief?"

"No, I just know how the crooks are thinking and how guys like you usually party," I said with commiseration.

"But Artyom called a taxi!"

"That's an old trick of the conmen who use Mickey Finn and prostitutes as bait. I'm sure it was the waiter who called the taxi. They must've worked together. Your friend left with a woman, not alone. And in the car she noticed that the usual dose wasn't much affecting that bull of a man, and added one more. So, he had an overdose and his heart stopped. Now, why so grim? Are you feeling sorry for Artyom? I am also a bit sorry for that idiot, but now's the time to think about his underage children. I'm sure it's just the beginning of this sad story, and we have to put an end to it. You should remember the golden rule: not to drink anything that strangers offer.

It can always turn out to be something nasty, like Mickey Finn in this case. And you'll have to find this southern man, the 'navy captain'; start with the waiter. I guess the reason for all this was Artyom's business, the one that brought him so much money. The money should return to his heirs; I'm sure it won't turn out to be that simple."

Semyon just nodded; he looked as if he was sick of tea already.

A month passed safely, then another. I didn't get into the details of the inquiry much, just sometimes gave Semyon advice and did not limit my colleague's expenses for the investigation. One day he called me and said he was in a town in one of the Northern Caucasian republics. In a few days he was sitting in my office, unshaven and thinner than he used to be. There were sparks in his eyes, the look of a lucky hunter. He raised a worn sports bag over the desk and shook out sheafs of bound bank notes.

"Six million here, chief," Zhmakin breathed out.

"That's a nice catch, congratulations."

"This is for the heirs," Semyon said quietly, putting a bottle of Dagestan brandy on the desk. "Let's have a drink, chief."

It was the end of the workday. I quietly poured two glasses of the golden liquid and said:

“Welcome back to your mother country, Semyon.”

We downed our glasses.

“Now talk,” I said impatiently.

“They got the ‘chemists’ gang’, as they called themselves, with the first bait. The guys from the criminal investigation department worked splendidly and organized a real performance. I paid for food and all the investigative expenses, as you remember. The gang consisted of two prostitutes, a taxi driver and a guy with multiple previous convictions – the ‘southerner’, or ‘the navy captain’. My old comrade was the ninth for them. They used the classic scheme: the southerner joined a tipsy ‘old acquaintance’ at a restaurant table, got him to meet his ‘niece’ and then found a reason to disappear. The new girlfriend added the poison in the decanter in the last moment or offered to have one for the road in the car. The drink worked without hitch – next morning the victim had no memory of what had happened. Out of nine people five died because of overdose. I had a little talk with the ‘navy captain’ one

on one in his prison ward. He soon realized that silence would be bad for his health and told me that he was working for some young businessman who came from Northern Caucasus. The conditions for the kill were the following: the gang would take their target’s cash and valuables and bring their customer a file belonging to the dead man with his company’s articles of association.

Since I knew the company address and the dead man’s last name, I easily found his partner, a certain Vadik Sabirov. Feeling that I had not that much time, I hurried to a small district center town on Northern Caucasus. I was, of course, together with two experienced guys from criminal investigation department working on the chemists’ gang case.

Vadik Sabirov was arrested in his country house. During the confrontation he confessed that for selfish motives (the company got a line of credit for many millions) he decided to get rid of his business partner and to manage the huge sum of money single-handedly. Using a primitive scheme, he cashed all the assets on the company account. Thankfully, the lucky operatives found the whole sum in his house. The same day, after the confrontation, Sabirov tried to run and was shot by

an operative from the investigative department."

"Very well," I said when he finished this short story. "Now, Semyon, you find the dead man's family and give his children their inheritance. Take the investigative expenses and your bonus out of the sum. And never ever drink nasty stuff poured by strangers. Our world is such that you can only relax in the company of friends."

Semyon sighed contentedly.

"Most certainly, chief. Now, have I earned a day off?"

"You have."

"Let's drink to Artyom's memory, then."

And so we did.

Semyon was already leaving then I asked out of curiosity:

"Tell me, Semyon, have you entered the cash in the impoundment protocol?"

"We did," Semyon said with certainty, "the sums that were accounted for."

"And what's about those that weren't?" I inquired meticulously.

"These are right before you, chief. Except for the bonus paid to the operatives."

"Reasonable decision. If that money went into the impoundment protocol..."

But the chief never finished the sentence; the call on his cellphone made him pause, and he waved at Semyon as if telling him not to wait, since that was a long talk.

Semyon quickly gathered the money from the desk and left quietly, closing the door to his chief's office tightly.

Next day he was standing in the hallway of an efficiency apartment of a generic house on Prosveschenia avenue.

"Come in, please," said the thin girl who let Semyon in. "Mother's in the kitchen, she'll come out in a minute. Don't take your shoes off; Father said that wasn't a requirement. We always had lots of guests. Father liked to meet people a lot, that's what got him killed." The girl looked at Semyon piercingly, evaluating him. "Why do you keep standing there? Come on in."

Semyon sat in the armchair she pointed to him. His face grew pink from sudden shyness he couldn't manage to throw off.

"You are Semyon Zhmakin," the girl said positively. "That was you who put a sailor's vest on the monument to an admiral and almost wasn't allowed to graduate, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right," Semyon chuckled.

"Father used to tell us stories about what you got up to. Isn't it funny to remember all this now?"

"It is."

In the next moment Anna, Artyom's widow, entered the room with a tray in her hands. She was still slim, with a mop of wavy hair. They married in the last year of the navy school, almost before the graduation, Semyon remembered, looking intently at the face of his friend's widow. They kissed each other hello; of course, Artyom's family and his were all great friends before they got their postings, living in shared accommodation. These long gone untroubled days stayed in their memories.

"Come, Mashenka, make our guest welcome," the hostess said warmly.

"I'll make you a sandwich with caviar, okay?"

"Of course," Semyon said with a smile.

He really felt good. He knew that for the last several years Artyom lived apart from his family and tried to avoid this topic. The brandy they've drunk and the stories of the lovely past started them talking. But Anna was the first to start the topic that disturbed her.

"You know how we loved each other, Semyon," the woman said, sobbing, almost moaning.

An escaping tear ran along her cheek like a hot stream. She took out her handkerchief.

"Mother, please don't, it's bad for your heart," Masha said, worried.

"No, I want to talk about why we separated. Listen, Semyon, it touches you too. You remember how we all lived in early nineties. After leaving the Navy Artyom was jobless, I also had no job, Kirill was less than a year old. Once my husband came home and said he finally found a goldmine. He started to go to the Baltic states often, started selling nonferrous metals. He said it was a very hot topic. Now we had another life; we were well provided for, but what was the price? Artyom was absent for weeks, creating his company. He was almost always tipsy when he came home, he started to get easily irritated, rude, could raise his voice in front of the kids. Of course there were more serious problems: he got shot by bandits twice, lost his business, started all anew, earning millions again. He could go and sponsor a theatrical performance or leave with friends for Spain for a week, saying that he had to take

part in negotiations there. Finally I left him. For the children, as strange as it may sound, so they wouldn't have to see him like that. Artyom got crazy about money. For a while he kept calling, sometimes spending the weekends with the kids, but then his visits became more and more rare. He's still a hero to them, a man who can do anything. I recently heard that he got embroiled in some affair once more and went to Northern Caucasus to do business there. By the way, we never saw any money from him."

"How did you live all these years, then?" Semyon asked.

"I was bringing up children," Anna shrugged. "Got an education, going through law school by correspondence studies. Now I'm a notary public with my own small company. This year we have a big hurdle before us." Anna looked at her daughter who listened silently and eagerly to their every word. "Mashenka's entering university, but chances for a state-subsidized place are not great, so we'll have to pay for her education."

"Come on, Mother, I'll find work in some company!" the girl explained. "And I'll be studying in the evenings."

"Not that again, Masha. The evening classes aren't good enough — tell her, Semyon!"

"Your mother's right," Semyon said slowly. "Don't argue in vain; I don't think you'll have to do it anyway. There's almost six million in this bag. Your father asked me to bring this to you."

Mother and daughter exchanged looks.

"Is it true?" Masha exclaimed.

Semyon silently emptied out his bag onto the sofa.

"That's all he could do for you. Now I have to go. Call me, Masha!" Semyon said, hugging the girl, pressing her to his enormous chest.

"You never told us how Father died, Uncle Semyon," the girl asked him shyly and hopefully, not taking her piercing eyes away from him.

"It was a sad accident. Such things happen."

Masha called Semyon a couple months later and said that she entered the law department of the Saint Petersburg State University, that her brother had good grades at school and studied martial arts, her mother still worked as a notary public and they all

expected uncle Semyon for a visit and promised to feed him pies their father loved so much.

Semyon smiled. Somehow he remembered the graduation ceremony at the navy school and saw in his mind's eye himself and his buddy Artyom in dress uniform with lieutenant's shoulder straps, their eyes shining, their hearts still believing that they will live forever.

CAT

I don't know about you, but me, I try to spend the weekends in the country, in Pskov region. There's a place there called Izborsk, an ancient Russian fortress on top of a hill above a picturesque valley. They say the fortress was founded by Prince Rurik's brother. About five years ago I bought an ancient wooden house on the edge of a small village and fifteen hundred square meters of land with an apple orchard for a thousand bucks. I had to change the framework, but the rest I left alone. From the terrace I had the view of the whole valley: the dark spot of the still powerful walls and towers of Izborsk on the left, and on the right, a gently winding line of hills covered by mixed forests. It's still very quiet here: I like a bit of fishing in the morning. Usually the fish here bites quite well: roaches, gudgeons, skimmer bream. I make fried fish for breakfast and inhale whole

chestfuls of fresh air. I still live alone, as a bachelor, which is probably not to my credit, but that's how life turned out to be.

That evening, when the last ray of the sun disappeared behind the tower of the fortress and I, having dealt with the first bottle of beer, moved to get the second one, someone opened the door without knocking. The man standing at the threshold was tall and broad-shouldered, of indeterminate age; he wore a long dark coat and a cap of the same color. For a moment he stood silently, piercing me with a cold look from his deep-set eyes. I wanted to say what he ought to have said — “Undertaker arriving as called!” — but I restrained myself.

“Good evening, Karp Nikolaevich! Sorry I haven't knocked,” the guest said in a low voice.

“Good evening,” I muttered, still not knowing what to expect from this late guest who caught me unprepared.

“Perhaps you've heard about me; I'm Oleg Sergeevich Akulov.”

Of course I have heard about Akulov the Shark — a bold young top shot, president of the Nord Corporation who headed the biggest criminal community of the city. I re-

membered reading a news item about the death of his brother somewhere abroad.

“I need your help.”

“Sit down,” I said shortly. “Do you want some beer? Baltika Seven.”

“With pleasure.”

“Drink and tell me what's the matter. I'm listening.”

The Shark drank greedily half a glass of beer and said:

“A week ago my brother fell to his death in the mountains in Greece. Next morning his girlfriend was found dead in her hotel room. She called me that night and said one word only: “CAT”. Her voice is still ringing in my ears.”

“Cat? Why in English?”

“She's English, interning in our University.”

“All right,” I muttered, “so what do you want?”

“I would like to know whether it's accident or murder. And if it's murder, I have to know who ordered it and who did it,” the Shark said, clenching his massive fist. “Will you do that?”

The Shark's look could spike you like a nail going through a piece of cardboard;

there was just so much power in that grim man. Only a walking dead could refuse such an offer.

"I'll need money to go to Greece," I said, aiming for a tone of independence. The Shark put a package on the table.

"There's fifteen thou here. You'll get twice as much after the case is closed. Do you agree to this price?"

"I do."

"I'll be waiting for news," the Shark said, offering me a hand that looked more like a giant crab's claw.

Just imagine Greece in mid-September, my friends! In a week I tasted a lot of its bountiful offerings. I found the guide, a nice-looking forty-year-old woman who accompanied the Shark's brother and his young girlfriend on that fateful day. For two unforgettable evenings and one day I proudly felt myself a most generous wooer and bon vivant. She could not refuse my modest request, and we spent all day in the Meteor Valley: this is the name the locals gave to sheer granite rocks where the monks settled sometime in the 14th century. Their caves and stone monastery houses with red tile roof on top of the rocks looked more like swallows'

nests. Today they could be visited by going up the steep steps. Me and Marina — for that was my new friend's name — went along the same route where another couple now out of this world travelled just a few days ago. We stood on the top deck, and below us, between the granite rocks, there was a valley swimming in greenery. I leaned over the railing and looked down, feeling very clearly the impermanence of existence. From here the car I rented looked like a tiny bug.

"Careful," Marina said, pulling me away by my sleeve. "It was here that everything happened."

The story was new, still widely talked about, and Marina already had told me how our compatriot was killed, saving a boy. Of course I was interested in the details, and, seeing my interest, she went on:

"The foreign girl and I, we were standing near the altar in the small chapel when we heard a cry for help. We ran out to the desk as soon as we could and saw a boy hanging on the base of the railing by the skin of his teeth. You know, there are some children like this, fidgety ones that it's better to hold by the hand all the time. Of course his mother wasn't around. Somehow we pulled him

out, and he said in a trembling voice that some guy in a blue shirt fell down into the abyss, trying to pull him out.

"But who was it who cried who help?" I asked carefully.

"Someone adult," Marina said after some thought.

"What did the mother do?"

"I haven't even seen her; there a panic, the foreign girl had hysterics, and the boy disappeared somewhere. Such a funny boy, curly and freckled, about ten years old."

It was evening already, and we were sitting in a small restaurant drinking rakia, when Marina returned to this topic — something apparently kept troubling her in this situation.

"You know, Karp, there was a strange thing in all this," Marina said thoughtfully.

I grew wary, drinking automatically a big glass of Rakia.

"It was full moon that night, and before the girl died, the attendant on duty heard a cat howl," Marina said, her last words almost in a whisper.

"Perhaps it was a coincidence. The moon, the cat... The young lady had worried too much and she had a heart attack — not a sur-

prising result," I said, chasing up the burning hot drink with an olive. Women are emotional she could have misunderstood something."

Then the bright sirtaki music sounded, and for the rest of the evening we left the topic of that accident alone.

I had no problems finding the hotel attendant who witnessed the sad event. I introduced myself as the dead girl's relative, and that was what I heard from her:

"Yes, really, that night somewhere after midnight a horrid cat's howl sounded. You know, like a crazy or sick child crying. Then the young lady called, asking to bring her some tranquilizers. Of course everyone knew her Russian friend fell to his death. I went up there in about ten minutes, but when I knocked, no one answered. When I entered the bedroom, I found the woman's body, still warm. Her pupils were wide, her face distorted by horror. I looked around; there was a black cat sitting behind the balcony door. I couldn't help crying out; the cat hissed and disappeared in the darkness of the night.

I thanked the woman for information and slipped a hundred dollar bill into her shirt pocket, which made me touch her ample breast. Alone again, I poured myself a drink

of whiskey and, taking a puff of an expensive cigar, pondered on the luck of having such business trips at times. A timid knock to the door made a break in my enjoyable thoughts. The attendant was standing at the door, clutching something in her hand.

"I found this thing in the dead woman's bed. Perhaps it'll help you."

"Come in, sit down and have some whiskey," I couldn't help offering.

"With pleasure," she answered with a small smile. "I am a Serbian refugee, it's the third year that I'm working in Greece."

I opened the package and took out its contents. It was a carefully made mask with openings for eyes and short black fur — a cat's mask. How mysterious, I thought. By the way, I lived in the dead woman's room: it was empty from that tragic day. Before I had time to evaluate what I held in my hand, there was a cat's cry at the window. Our eyes met.

"See," she whispered, "I thought you'd be afraid to stay there alone at night. I won't take any money from you. My name is Ilona."

We drank for tender friendship between our nations. Next day I tried to find a woman with a child who inadvertently had caused the accident, but my search was unsuccessful.

When I was at the Pulkovo airport already, I met up with a friend of mine who worked there at the security service. We had some coffee, and I told him the brief version of the story about dead lovers. I asked him to search for a woman with a boy about ten in the passenger list, and also to find out whether someone had travelled with a cat. I don't know why, but this story with a mystery cat had me worried. Grumbling, my friend promised to do as I asked and to call in 24 hours.

He punctually informed me in due time that he had not found a woman with a boy, but found a circus artist who had a cat with him. In a couple of minutes I had in my hand a fax with information about the artist and his photo. I found his face a bit strange.

That evening, tired from the flight and all its experiences, I started analyzing what I had, settling down with comfort in my summerhouse's living room. The coals were crackling in the fireplace, throwing sparks around. There was a drizzle outdoors; it was an evening for people who like a bit of sadness with a glass of strong liquor — but in the next moment a cat's howl disturbed the idyll. As I've mentioned before, I'm materialistic: I

believe in simple and reliable truths, like the fact that with seven cartridges in the charger you won't shoot eight times. The howling call sounded from the closed door leading to the spacious veranda. Even a dumb animal feels so clearly when a lonely and kind soul is around, I thought and decided to go feed my guest some milk. I went out on the veranda, dressed in my long terrycloth robe and slippers on my bare feet and started calling, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." In the next moment I felt a burning ball crash into the back of my head. My legs couldn't hold me anymore, and I came down onto the worn grey floor.

Somehow I managed to open my eyes, even though my lids felt leaden. The objects in the room were still swimming but I concentrated, using all my will. I was still in the same position, legs stretched out, hands at my chest, but I noted an important detail: my limbs were tied up tightly, and my mouth was covered with sticky tape. There was a huge black cat with a chain on his neck that looked into my eyes without blinking. I heard a stranger's falsetto voice behind my back:

"You had it coming, hadn't you? And you were so close to fulfilling your task."

An almost childish hand flicked a fax page before my nose for a couple of times. A small flame appeared; then it grew, eating up the paper, until it fell down on the coffee table. And then I saw out of the corner of my eyes that a fire was already burning in my room. I was almost sick with worry. Will my career really end today, I wondered with sudden clarity. Meanwhile the stranger went on:

"I came to pick up something I lost during work and to finish you off. You turned out to be an insistent detective. Regretfully, the rules of the genre require not to leave any witnesses. That was the reason for the death of a young lady who noticed too much. You probably want to ask who informed me about your arrival. Didn't you guess? Oh yes, it was that beautiful Ilona. She gave herself to you for love, so to say, but to me she gave tenderness and information for quite different amount of money. Oh, I see your eyes lighting up. You are an inquisitive man. That's right, the cat is the first fiddle in my orchestra. Look carefully." After a pause the stranger went on. "Murzik, say goodbye to this guy."

The fluffy cat got up on his hindpaws and swung his forepaws.

“Now the voice. Allez!”

The cat gave a prolonged groan.

“And you rose to my bait. Your death will be easy: you’ll suffocate. Everyone will see this as an accident. Such things do happen with people who drink too much.”

I was full of silent indignation: to call me an almost-alcoholic was certainly too much.

“Good bye! See you in another life.”

The door creaked, and the stranger with the cat disappeared in the darkness of the night, leaving me alone with the fire. My house was almost totally burned, but I stayed alive by falling into the basement, from where I safely got out into the fresh air.

Several days after that I was walking along Fontanka. It was a lovely evening, gossamers were flying over the river, and finally I approached the circus posters. Perhaps it was curiosity that brought me there. A two meter tall black cat grimly looked straight into my eyes. “An inimitable show: a cat under the cupola of the circus” the bright inscription proclaimed.

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