

VALERY ALEFF

HOMECOMING

CHAPTER 1

Ever since the tumultuous era of Peter the Great, who forcibly cured his country of agoraphobia, the Russians have adored Paris: in the flames of the fire which was to annihilate the wooden splendour of Moscow during the Napoleonic invasion, amidst the aesthetic ruins of the Great October Revolution. A French philosopher quipped that the Russians might have invented Paris had it not existed, tangibly and gorgeously, in Western Europe, not too far from the Atlantic coast. Their invention would have differed from the city we all admire, if only by the quantity of noise and the quality of wine.

Paris, its boulevards and boudoirs, was quite accessible—within trotting distance, as it were—in the days of the three Alexanders and the two Nicolases who reigned over Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the reigns and rages of Stalin, Khrushchev and Andropov, France became far more distant despite the astounding progress of aviation and the decision of the West German authorities to impose no speed limit on their country's motorways. The omnipresent portraits and voices of the Communist Party leaders seemed to have interposed an almost impassable barrier between Western luxury and the inhabitants of the Soviet Union. It was easier for them to travel in the cosmos than on the surface of their own planet.

The Russians who reached the French frontiers before the final bankruptcy of travel agencies throughout the Soviet Union enjoyed, partly or fully, the privileges bestowed upon Parisians during *les années folles* and in the period following the Second World War. The architectural beauty of the city, its inimitable atmosphere, were accessible to everybody, even to the so-called 'new poor' who wasted their days driving taxis and their nights worshipping at the altar of nostalgia; the other, more exclusive pleasures turned out to be reserved for those who betrayed the leisurely ways of their ancestors by throwing themselves into 'dishonourable' but lucrative occupations.

Nothing threatened the harmony of their lives. With a few exceptions, communists and their sympathisers could hardly boast of any significant attempt at disrupting the French economy; and Soviet tanks had a full-time job elsewhere: they were busy levelling down standards and aspirations within the boundaries of the East-European Community.

Russian Parisians divided themselves into a great many groups and the members of those groups might never have come across each other but for huge social gatherings the unavowed aim of which was to erase any social and political distinction between the survivors of Bolshevik wrath. The princes and their former butlers ate the same Russian gherkins and danced the same waltzes while their children discussed love affairs in perfect French, with unmistakable Gallic elegance and assurance.

After the New-Year balls and summer-solstice cocktails, the survivors of Bolshevik egalitarian ardour would go back home to dream of pillars or blocks of ice, of The Bronze Horseman theatrically screened by the Iron Curtain—the modern substitute for the Great Wall of China.

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky also dreamt of pillars and bronze horsemen; he revered St Petersburg as much as any other émigré did, except for some provincial Muscovites, religious fanatics and the Slavophiles who affirmed that Peter the Great's architectural fantasies bore no imprint of the Russian soul. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky was neither a Slavophile nor a religious fanatic so that, at night, even when he was wide-awake, bronze horsemen wove through marble columns, clattered over bridges, vaulted giant slabs of ice on the neap-tide waters of the Neva. In the daytime, they would storm into his apartment, crushing his armchairs and secretares under the hoofs of their horses.

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky did not place spirituality above human existence; he loved the vainglorious, futile beauty of objects, especially if they reminded him of Louis XV and *la Régence*. The intricate tracery in brass and tortoise-shell marquetry on ebony seemed to echo the mazes and whirls of his soul. Sometimes he had the feeling that his soul was in the shape of a Louis XV commode or armchair; indeed his window-shopping on the Quai Voltaire might be regarded as a mystical search for identity.

His image was redolent of old leather, old money and old Russia. He loved wine and women. He loved English poetry.

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky—his foreign friends, unable to cope with the intricate tracery of Russian names and patronymics, called him KAB—was mainly dreaming of events as if to keep up with the theories and discoveries of modern physics. 'What is life, my life?' he wrote in his notebook. 'Sitting or lying or lolling about. And a hypnotist tells me in monotonous tones that I am becoming more relaxed and sleepy. Should I blame the monotony of my life on the hypnotist?'

When talking to his foreign friends, however, he would merely complain about his exile, about his being a fish out of water anywhere but in Russia. 'We can't breath, deprived as we are of our native air. Have you ever seen a diver working underwater, in rubber underwear? He looks like a gigantic lifeless doll.'

'You said you were a fish *out* of water, didn't you?'

KAB was prone to contradictions.

His life was uneventful. And he might as well have been an inanimate, cumbersome doll for all the good it would have done him. He danced very seldom—only once or twice a year—spending the greater part of the day on his sofa or in one of his armchairs and the greater part of the night in his spacious bed, under its capriciously-painted canopy. Even his movements were now accompanied by a strange grating sound as if his joints needed to be lubricated or repaired. Outdoors this bone-grinding music—the pathetic symphony of his infirmity—would become so excruciating that he heard it above the din of heavy traffic, above the tolling of Church bells and the shouting of children.

His life was uneventful and boring. And his memories failed to enliven it: they were not sufficiently vivid, lovely, picturesque. Akin to dolls and mechanical devices they would jerk around his head whenever he was in the mood for the past. So he preferred the future. On the whole.

KAB was, however, too old to broach a new life in which events might succeed each other with hopeful vivacity, displaying before his eyes and for the sake of his mind and his memory the multifarious facets of human existence: splendid landscapes, beautiful women, faithful dogs. But he was not old enough to reconcile himself to his personal monotony; that stubborn dismissal of human destiny, of its cruelty and fatality, seemed to be the only positive feature of his daily routine.

*Haste therefore eche degree,
To welcome destiny*

KAB was neither young nor middle-aged. Whisked out of revolutionary Russia at the age of four, he would easily have succumbed to the allurements of rejuvenation by altering the year of his birth at cocktail parties, had he not been extremely proud of being born in St Petersburg, on the banks of the Neva. In point of fact he saw the light of day in Petrograd, in 1915; but the city was the same, for all its linguistic metamorphoses. And the Neva was the same; nor did it change after the Revolution.

He was past the age when masculine beauty stirs the hearts and blood of sensitive women. However, he had not yet reached that sublime summit of physiological and psychological perfection from which he could gaze down indifferently on female charms and curves. On occasion the latter still played havoc with his nerves and peace of mind. He still recalled some beautiful and touching females and would shed a tear as he turned on his bed or fidgeted in one of his armchairs; his precarious peace of mind, which might elicit a nod of approval from an orthodox priest, was shattered and replaced by a war of the mind—a fortuitous homage to Tolstoy. Women, or rather their imprints in his soul, interrupted his immobility.

'Do you still think about women?' asked Victor Pavlovich who, after seven decades in this vale of tears, had begun to focus his attention on death and registered nurses.

'Always,' lied Belozerkalsky.

Victor Pavlovich looked his friend up and down and asked him a superfluous question: 'How old are you?' He knew that Konstantin Alexeevich had been born in St Petersburg. 'I congratulate you,' he said, slowly shifting his thoughts to an abstract cancer.

'But it's better not to think about them.' Belozerkalsky was polite to a fault and always ready to commiserate with a fellow creature. 'When asked about his ability to make love with a woman, Sophocles replied: "I'm very glad to have escaped from all that." He used to compare carnal desires to slavery, to monsters, to green-eyed monsters.'

Belozerkalsky—the stress is on the penultimate syllable—heard a lot of conversations in which women and death played an important part; for every friend of his had an imaginary or tangible illness, and some of his friends desired to appear young and strong. 'She is superb,' they whispered sensuously and often a shadow of pain—a twitch in their cheeks or eyelids, betraying a twinge in their abdomens—accompanied those idle boasts.

It was too late to dream of women.

*That time of yeare thou maist in me behold,
When yellow leaves, or none, or few doe hange
Upon those boughes which shake against the could*

Belozerkalsky thought about women from time to time: he had every right to think about whatever and whoever he pleased. 'My thoughts are young, are they not? They don't suffer from rheumatism. And they're free, absolutely free.' Even Stalin would not have forbidden him to think about women, about their allure and elusiveness. But it was useless and ridiculous to pin his hopes on their 'Cupertino'. He could count on the efficiency and honesty of a registered nurse—he was wealthy enough to afford one, even in case of interminable paralysis—but the word 'Cupertino', for all its businesslike overtones, was also associated in his broad paradoxical mind with pleasures, with human warmth, with love and ardour. "Certainly absolute freedom would be more beautiful if we were birds or poets; but Cupertino and a loving sacrifice of part of ourselves—are beautiful too, if we are men living together," said George Santayana. 'Yes, we are living together, men and women. Why am I alone? O Solitude! my sweetest choice. They're somewhere, beyond the door. Not on the Moon, not on the Saturn. I wish I were a bird. Everything would be beautiful...freedom, slavery...'

He saw a film once. He was not a regular cinema-goer—there was nothing 'regular' in his life, save its irremediable monotony—yet he did go out two or three times a week, and movie-houses were strewn along his path, along the Parisian streets and boulevards. 'Many a road and track—' Half-naked women smiled at him from a huge poster, from the photographs placed in an innocuous-looking window; he could resist neither female smiles nor female nakedness. Unlike Victor Pavlovich, he was not beyond all cure.

He saw a film about a nurse whose efficiency and talents were not limited to diseases only. She was a beauty and that inborn quality could not but further the sinister scheme of her employers—of her patients' impatient relatives. Husbands, fathers and grandfathers convulsed on their beds as they contemplated her almost absent-minded striptease; they convulsed on their beds in the paroxysm of desire; they beckoned her over. She complied with their last dying wishes and killed them, killed them, killed them—gradually, noisily, succulently. Shortly afterwards the orphans and widows would reward her erotic efforts.

Like many Russians and Germans, KAB was sentimental, romantic, and consequently could appreciate a beautiful death in the arms of a sexual contract killer—a painless, ecstatic transference to the Hereafter. Like almost everybody he was afraid of long, degrading, painful diseases.

In the course of three weeks he saw the film five or six times but did not die in the cinema despite a few involuntary convulsions and gasps. At home he would open the Yellow Pages at Private Nursing and for an hour or two let his fingers do the walking. He had no relatives, no potential heirs to

his fortune who might scour clinics and other medical establishments in search of cruelty, greediness and beauty combined in one person—a registered nurse. And he could hardly profit from his own death. 'Why don't I believe in Paradise? Or in metempsychosis? It's easier to die at night.' He would drop the directory on the floor and despondently sink into the largest and deepest wing chair.

His frequent visits to the porn cinema had no immediate consequences, but they demonstrated that he was somewhat interested in women, that he was young enough to cross the Seine—in a taxi or a bus—and that he was weary of life, of its monotony and monophony.

CHAPTER 2

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky, who was called 'Kostya' by his Russian friends, 'Konstantin Alexeevich' by other Russian expatriates and 'Monsieur Belo...*pardon*' by French policemen and officials, lived in the expensive and respectable 16th *arrondissement*. His less fortunate Russian acquaintances envied him that real-estate felicity, but they were not nasty or rancorous and would forget all geographical discrepancies after a few glasses of vodka and a huge slice of salmon adroitly wrapped in a *blin*. So he was compelled to invite them two or three times a year to his luxurious apartment.

During the preliminary exchanges of non-committal remarks and surrealistic rumours they stared at the mouldings, armchairs and sounded even more gloomy and grumpy than on the telephone; but eventually the convivial atmosphere of a Russian dinner would brighten them up, smoothing their wrathful wrinkles away. Of course they still recalled the reason for their former bad humour:

'I see you have quite a library here.'

'Yes...well...you know...I'm...sort of...'

'I too like reading, but books are so expensive—'

'They are. Not pocket books, though.'

'You have a lot of art books here—'

'Well, you know, I like art—'

They stared at his furniture; they shrugged their shoulders and sarcastically nodded their heads.

'Have you always been rich? I mean, in Russia—'

'I left Russia when I was—'

'I mean your family—'

'What counts is one's attitude to wealth which is the wise man's servant and the fool's master. Seneca said something to this effect. Like any good stoic he could lose all he had at any moment without being a whit less happy.'

'Could he, indeed! Are *you* prepared to lose all you have?'

'Plato also said something of the sort in his *Republic*. "Those who haven't made their own money don't care about it."

'But it's you who have made this money, isn't it? Your child, your own flesh and blood.'

'I don't care about it. What is money? Can you caress it, bring it up to respect philosophers and poets? I've got no children. Please help yourself to the sturgeon.'

'Your health!'

They even begrudged him his sound constitution, wondering loudly why he had not caught flu at the time of the last epidemic. There were individuals to whom he never spoke about his lasting weakness for women. Out of prudence, out of kindness.

He spoke to them about his loneliness and they looked at him compassionately as if there was nothing around them—no furniture, no books. Only his misery and decrepitude. Only his distress and melancholy. They looked at him, they hugged him, they kissed him, they cried with him. They all shared the same predicament.

KAB was not a multimillionaire, but the money he had inherited from his father, who in adversity had proved a clever businessman and a gifted gambler, was sufficient to keep him in creature comforts and healthy quantities of luxury goods. He had also inherited from his father the impalpable particles which, in our biological epoch, are referred to as 'genes'—'good luck' or 'bad luck', in other words. In the fifties he had ventured into the perilous jungle of the Stock Exchange and, for all his incapacity to predict anything, had come off rather well by comparison with his cousin Volodya and his half-sister Anastasia.

He continued along the same lines. As he was not in the habit of squandering his money he soon bought a spacious apartment in the 16th *arrondissement*, not far from a Russian food store. He gave a house warming to which, in addition to his envious friends, he invited his unfortunate cousin and half-sister. His cousin declined the invitation, pleading a chronic disease from which one of his ancestors had apparently suffered in the eighteenth century; his sister showed up and, for some reason best known to herself, cried throughout the evening.

A lover of sayings and proverbs, Belozerkalsky knew that no amount of money could buy him happiness—only its implements, some of them. And had he bought all those masterpieces, which made his brain, heart and soul tingle at innumerable auctions, in countless antique shops, he would still have been unable to buy the things he was longing for so pitifully—events.

He was pretty certain that nothing could happen to him within his own walls. Video-cassettes had already conquered the market, but he was unaware of their existence.

He watched television day in day out. Fleeting images might suddenly burst into a shower of sparks, inflaming his desires and emotions, his carnal instincts and sensual appetites; he needed some time to nurture these desires and instincts, to play with them to his heart's content, solicitously ushering them into the grey monastic cells of his cerebellum; and television afforded no opportunity for any development. Two-dimensional females, their bodies and smiles, would disappear at the whim of a petulant producer. Time and money permitting, they might re-appear on the cinema-screen, shining through the protective gloom of a local flea-pit to the accompaniment of rustling gabardine macs. But no voyeur, however rich, could ask those luminous beauties to come back to the television screen, let alone unbutton their dresses or skirts.

Even the infallible regularity of a soap opera was not compatible with the ever-slackening speed of Belozerkalsky's desires; nor did its weekly rhythm coincide with the capricious beating of his heart. Sometimes he felt confident of success—a worthy reminder of his youthful escapades—but the television screen was dark, irresponsive, irresponsible, uncooperative; sometimes he felt nothing at all

except fatigue and indifference towards the universe, whereas the television screen was pleading for pleasures and love by exhibiting female curves and coves from various angles.

And sometimes his stream of consciousness sounded as follows: 'I really don't need to see *him*. What are they doing with their camera? Can't you pivot the damned thing? Get a move on, for God's sake! For pity's sake! Has your camera been paralysed? Have *you* been paralysed? What kind of film director is this? Is it a psychological study of voyeurism or what? I don't give a damn about this madman! Show me the woman, the object of his desire! Where is she? Do you mean to say she's not at home? What is he staring at, then? At her maid hitching up her skirt in front of a mirror? Or is she trying on her mistress's ballgown? Show me the *woman*. Standing or lying or dancing in the house opposite! I don't care who this woman is or how she earns her living. Or whether she earns her living at all. She might starve tomorrow, for all I care. But let me see her today, tonight. Show me this woman at once or I'll switch you off. I'll switch everything off! Please, be a sport! Be generous! Share your delights with television viewers who have none of your instruments, neither the camera nor the telescope. And they can't turn their heads towards that window over there, the only window of any interest in the house opposite. They aren't allowed to walk over to the house in question and mount the stairs. She might be in the courtyard, for all I know. It's a movie, not a slice of life. Where's the knife designed for the special purpose of cutting slices within human lives, I wonder? It *is* an enclosed space. No admittance to unauthorised persons. I bet they meet at bars and restaurants every night, not to mention their amorous scimmages in the studio. Anyway that house opposite doesn't even exist. It has merely been painted on some wall or other. A wall painting, nothing more. Nothing more. Or a cardboard mock-up. You must be a few paces away from her so-called window. Is she also a cardboard mock-up, a pin-up hanging above someone's couch? I once saw a *trompe l'œil* of grapes which was so realistic that birds tried to peck at them. Well, I won't touch this woman. I won't kiss her.'

There is no denying that he thought about women—not always, as he claimed, but with enviable frequency. And future events were indissolubly linked in his decrepit mind with female languor and fervour. 'It is never too late to fall in love,' as Pushkin said in one of his longish poems; and Belozerkalsky was a staunch admirer of Pushkin. Besides, women have a wide range of interests and ideas and can give rise to situations totally divorced from love and sexual longings.

So he trusted women, counting on their inventiveness and compassion. 'How to extricate oneself from Time? *Quid est enim tempus*? A huge traffic snarl-up. Hours, minutes. Bureaucratic snarl-ups. Do I feel Time because I'm alone and unhappy? Griboedov thought so. Time. Snarling and snapping at my heels like a dog.' He would go out and try to provoke an event or a piquant situation by colliding with beautiful women in the crowded streets and shops, by asking them stupid questions. He would brush against their shoulders and forearms, gazing at them with insistence and sadness as if to allude to past or future intimacies. 'We met ten years ago,' he seemed to impart to their questioning looks. 'Let us have a romantic candlelit dinner for two.'

Those women remained out of reach and thus were quite on a par with the television-generated shadows. The universe had insidiously grown intangible and distant; the nearest flower was probably blooming under the rings of Saturn.

And the last Russian ball turned out to be even more disastrous, unpromising and phlegmatic than any encounter on a boulevard, any casual stare in a restaurant. He walked and talked to no avail. Everything looked and sounded familiar, distant, unreal, translucent. He ate a lot of *pirozhkis* and gherkins; the more he consumed the hungrier and soberer he became. The ball seemed to have taken place a few centuries ago. 'A nice example of jet lag,' somebody murmured into his ear.

And those events he was pining for? They might happen a few centuries after his term of life, in some distant unfathomable future. What a pity. What a pity. On the 13th of March, he braced himself and decided to fight his unfair destiny.

He walked now with greater determination and once almost knocked down a woman whom he had singled out among the motley silhouettes rushing before, behind and past him on the Rue de Rennes. He apologised with pomp and circumstance, but his old-fashioned gallantry made no impression on his victim who obviously preferred conciseness and plainness, modernity and rudeness. Events, events, events, events. All these collisions and glances amounted to very little indeed and could not even be noted down in a diary—only in a margin, only on a crumpled and smudgy sheet of paper.

He thought about women at those periods of time when he was able to think at all, arranging the flashes of his consciousness in decipherable patterns. How to achieve such an objective? The human mind is not an English poem. Often his consciousness crept away from him; he was under the impression that even Shakespeare would not have composed a sonnet of his consciousness. Filled with despair and anxiety, he saw the particles of his brain flee his approach. And he would realise that his brain regarded him as an enemy—a mortal enemy. In the ensuing silence, amid the featureless steppes of nothingness, he had neither strength nor desire to think about women, events and the future. He was already in the past.

It was easier to stay at home and wait.

*Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?*

Things happen even to people who always stay at home. Somebody might ring the doorbell: a distant relative from Moscow, a woman who has forgotten or confused the address of her lover. Somebody might infiltrate into the future from beyond our doors; somebody or something.

One day he found in his letterbox the following advertisement printed on a small scrap of paper:

Here at last is the French edition of a masterpiece of Far Eastern erotica containing more than 400 highly original and highly arousing 'naughty pictures'. This book is sure to add a new and stirring dimension to all of your sexual activities regardless of whether you share its contents with your partner or choose to linger over its pleasures at your own leisure.

For a while Belozerkalsky turned the paper this way and that, searching for the title of the book inside which so many naughty pictures awaited both young and old men: 'To love all ages are submissive,' as Pushkin put it. Nothing. No title, no pictures. 'They ought to have printed a sample of the illustrations,' he thought. There was no address either so that he had no idea where to send a blank cheque along with a request for the catalogue.

Two days later he found another advertisement in his letterbox:

Micro-sex (small sex) is the biological foundation of macro-sex (big sex). About this there can be no argument whatever. All sexual phenomena in nature are designed to produce a result, a blending of the genetic codes of two members of the same species. The glow and sparkle of sex as we humans experience it, the cuddling, kissing, tumescence, copulating, orgasm, all serve one purpose only. They set the stage for a cellular drama that involves the sperm's odyssey through the tunnels and portals of the female genital tract, its quest for the waiting egg, its union with this egg.

De Ropp, *Sex Energy*, p. 4

'This doesn't look like an advertisement, although they mentioned the title of the book and its author,' he thought. 'They even indicated the number of the page where the sperm's odyssey and whatever precedes it were described all the more tantalisingly since the author was reluctant to go into details—on *that* page, on page 4. And what happens on pages 5 and 6? And 7? Or on page 3? What happens *before* the sperm sets on its journey through the female genital tract? What happens on pages 2 and 1...and 0...Are there minus-pages in that book? Or micro-pages?'

The next week Belozerkalsky was so preoccupied with the minus-pages and especially with the zero-page that he forgot to order *Sex Energy*. 'Where *could* one actually order it?' he asked himself once or twice. During that week his letterbox remained empty, sterile, as if it had suddenly become a zero-letterbox or even a minus-letterbox. Through the tunnels and portals of the city nothing was moving towards its aperture, towards its hospitable darkness. Then yet another advertisement was dropped into it.

Packed with over 500 illustrations, some of a most explicit nature, this book is a virtual encyclopaedia on all aspects of sexual love. Easy to read chapters deal with different positions for intercourse, fetishism, sexual aids plus many other topics. The pictures show how females manipulate their own

and their partners' erotogenic zones simultaneously with intercourse to induce heightened pleasure. They show how parts of the body can be fondled and caressed during intercourse, in the very midst of it. They also show to what extent thrusting movements of the legs, thighs and body usually increase satisfaction.

Again no title. And no illustrations. A scrap of paper with some words printed on it. Not a highly arousing scrap of paper. A lowly arousing scrap of paper. When you are young, a mere mention of your beloved's name may lead to what doctors and dictionaries describe as a 'state of sexual arousal'. Even a word sometimes produces the same effect, provided it pertains to sexual intercourse, erotogenic zones or thrusting movements of any kind.

Tantra āsana is a mode of transcending the human condition; through it the gross sexual energy of man and woman can be transformed into superpotency by total integration of opposing polarities. Through planned meditative practices of sexo-yogic asanas, Kundalini, the psychic force lying dormant in the human body, is roused towards its upward move from Muladhara Chakra to the brain centre, Sahasrara. There it is united with cosmic consciousness...The ritual is performed with a partner who is considered the reflection of Sakti, and unless the adept has the attitude of complete surrender to the object of his worship, in this case the female participant who plays the role of the divine energy, the practice of āsana cannot be successful. The 'devout woman' epitomises the entire nature of femaleness, the essence of all the Saktis in their various aspects. She becomes a perennial source of joy.

Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way*

Belozerkalsky continued to receive the words that might have aroused him in his youth, in his early fifties. Was his letterbox aroused by them? How old was his letterbox? He examined it thoroughly and even knocked on it in the hope of deducing its age from the sounds he heard. A piece of concrete music thus created told him nothing about the age and origin of the object which had become an erotogenic zone in its own right. So many words were fondling and caressing it from the inside. 'And those words need no sexual aids, no thrusting movements, no thighs, no arms, no fingers. Did I buy this letterbox? Did anybody buy it? Or was it installed by the builders, by Ibsen's master builder?'

And then he received an anonymous letter:

Dear Mr Belokarzelsky,

I'm writing just to ask you one question: Why don't you buy our books? Over the last three weeks I have sent you a few excerpts from the books we have got in our shop for the benefit of our clients, but you don't seem to pay any attention to them. Why are so sure of yourself? Do you think that you can manage without them? Or have you given up the struggle? Do you think that women have

given you up for dead? Cheer up! Everything will turn out okay in the end on condition that you buy our books.

The medical profession has always scoffed at both the desirability and possibility of impotent males returning to normal sexual life. The desirability is surely the choice of the individual, while the possibility is obvious, when one thinks about it.

An erection is produced by erotic stimulation, transmitted from the brain via the appropriate, 'libidinous' nerves, causing the penis to be literally and liberally charged with blood, which in turn causes it to expand and stiffen. Basically speaking, to bring about the erection, it is necessary to increase the blood flow and stretch the erectile tissues of the penis—the extra blood ought to be accommodated!

These are the two most important problems successfully solved by our books, by their luscious descriptions and lascivious illustrations. Let me ask you the same question once more: Why don't you buy our books? Of course we also have vibrating rubber bedmates who guarantee to satisfy every wish of our clients. But you prefer books, don't you? Even in your childhood you never played with dolls. And it is too late to change your lifestyle now.

Not the usual phoney ads! Also beautiful pin-ups, sexy stories, advice columns. Pick your own choice of a genuine partner from a long list of subscribers.

Plus the longed-for, long-awaited union with cosmic consciousness.

P.S.

By standing on your head and keeping your feet in midair, you are sure to get rid of your grey hair and wrinkles. The exercise should be performed every day, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. But don't forget that a yogi, though handsome and strong like a god and desired by all women, wears a chastity belt, metaphorically speaking. Even if embraced by a goddess, he is not likely to lose a single drop of his sperm.

CHAPTER 3

The doorbell rang persistently and enigmatically. He expected nothing and nobody: no registered letters, no mistresses. The sound that reverberated through his mournful apartment was an event in itself. He opened the door and saw a woman. She resembled at least two people he had been acquainted with many years ago. At his age everything tended to remind him of something. There was nothing new under his sun, under his moon, under his ceiling; and yet he stood on the threshold of a new era, on the outskirts of a *terra incognita*.

He gauged her age and the depth of her eyes. 'She looks like her,' he said to himself. 'But she is dead, she is dead. No motion has she now, no force. She perished in 1945. She neither hears nor sees. They have less in common than I presumed a few minutes ago. This woman is alive, if I'm not mistaken. Alive, alive. Besides, she is German, judging by her accent and manners. Tatiana was Russian.'

Dear loss! since thy untimely fate

My task hath been to meditate

On thee, on thee

The living lady said, 'Good afternoon, Sir. I'm sorry I've been unable to reach you on the phone to announce my visit.'

'On the phone?' he asked. 'Did you want to see *me*?' And he pointed his fingers at his chest as if the seat of his identity were somewhere near his heart.

'You're Monsieur Belozarelsky, aren't you?'

'More or less,' he answered and shifted his gaze to the window so as to disown, if only symbolically, the garbled version of his name.

She was standing beyond his door and therefore beyond his reach. If you attack a woman beyond the boundaries of your walls, which are supposed to deaden her screams and neutralise her movements, she may escape into the gulf of the staircase, putting to the test your rheumatism-stiffened legs and myopic eyes. So he moved his body aside and back to let her come into the hall and the living room where the laws of the outside world might be abolished, forgotten, disregarded. If only symbolically.

'I might hypnotise her,' he thought. 'I read about it somewhere. Somebody had to go on a journey in order to accomplish a rite. An Indian, an adept of yoga. And he needed to protect his wife against Indra's sex appeal. So he just looked at his wife and his spirit insinuated itself into her body which grew as quiescent as a picture. All I have to do is look at her like an adept of yoga. By joining my eyebeams to hers I'll penetrate her body. She is already a picture, a statue, a doll.'

She was not very beautiful. She was not as beautiful as the woman with whom she had something in common and to whose charms Belozarelsky had succumbed in the late 1930s; but she was far from ugly and her figure merited a fuller and closer investigation—without the confusing padding, stuffing and creases of her dress and the thickness of her stockings. She seemed to look younger than her age, whatever her real age might be. She gazed at him without apprehension but still remained in the doorway—a shadow of his dreams and thoughts, a monument to his fighting, ever-juvenile spirit.

'The wind was also mentioned in that book, in Mircea Eliade's book on yoga. Invading the air, making love to it. I'm the East Wind. And she is the air, an illusion, a remembrance. And I'm floating on air.'

Of course he was too weak and dignified to molest or seduce his visitor. His thoughts were much more venturesome and unconventional than his body which had never succeeded in disengaging itself from its dependence on a huge set of traditions and on the education its owner had received in his youth and childhood. Belozarelsky was being torn between his body and mind: he kept on pressing his hands to his chest, forehead, temples and ribs to find out what was likely to happen in the next quarter of an hour.

The German lady was still near the staircase and seemed unwilling to prolong the interview. Why? Because even old men might turn out to be sex maniacs. No, not really. Not sex maniacs. Constitutionally old men are unable to perform their masculine duty. But an old man is liable to have a tantrum—enraged by his own inability—and consequently to manhandle female visitors by throwing trinkets after their running silhouettes. He might also commit suicide in their presence, making them dependent on psychoanalysts for many years to come. So she bowed without a word, obviously taking her premature leave. He said in a hoarse voice that was estranged from both his body and mind:

'Yes, I am Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. Please come in. Let me close the door behind you.' The lady crossed the threshold of his apartment. He closed and locked the door behind her. 'Just a precaution, a mere precaution,' he explained apologetically. 'I always lock the door...otherwise, you know...the draught...'

'Your agent...I mean I'm looking for a flat...a studio...'

Her speech was punctuated by suspension points as if any search for a flat had an illegal, embarrassing touch to it.

'Do you intend to stay in Paris? Forever?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said with a smile. 'Perhaps. Paris is a marvellous city.'

'You should stay here...in the 16th *arrondissement*...because...' His mind was also divided into several parts now. On the one hand, he wanted to explain EVERYTHING; on the other, he wanted to *hide* his innermost thoughts, leaving them where they were—in the innermost recesses of his consciousness. And he also wanted to do something in between: to seduce the lady *naturally*, without violating her personality.

His body did not want anything. 'Tied to me as to a dog's tail. I'm tired of it.' He was enraged by the apathy of his body and might have inflicted a punishment on it by pinching his arms or legs, had he been alone in his apartment. He was not, for once.

She stood near a wing chair. He motioned her to take a seat. He himself remained standing, which enabled him to dominate his loosened nerves and keep an eye on the whole panorama of her movements. Besides, it was easier to camouflage the spectacular disarray of his emotions by pacing up and down the living room. 'I might even go as far as the kitchen—under the pretext of fetching a bottle of port,' he told himself. 'Oh, yes please—a glass of port would be a life-saver.' Imprisoned in an armchair, he would have fidgeted like an impatient, truculent child; he would have sprung up and sat down again like the jack-in-the-box he used to play with in his boyhood. And he had no wish to resemble a toy or a truculent child, although he was trying his utmost to decrease his age by one-third at least, passing himself off as a handsome middle-aged man whose maturity could not but reinforce his virility. 'Don't enfeeble your capacities, don't enfeeble your capacities,' he repeated over and over again, shaking his fists so that his own body seemed to shrink instinctively from the threat of self-inflicted blows.

Belozerkalsky struck his thighs and knees, and a groan of pain enlivened the silence that had so far prevented him from making extensive use of the only means of seduction he still had in his possession—eloquence.

Oh, he *was* eloquent! At that decisive inimitable moment his eloquence lived up to its long-standing reputation; unfortunately he was talking to himself, only to himself. 'I must do something. I must try. I have nothing to lose. Nothing.' He was persuasive. And he did not lie to himself, not this time. 'Of course she might call the police. Why didn't I disconnect my telephone? If she comes again—' He questioned himself closely, wondering at his own negligence and short-sightedness. He was determined to disconnect his telephone after her departure in order to set a professional trap for other female visitors who seemed to close in on his living room from all directions—even from above. Indeed, the present incident had a supernatural, otherworldly nuance which was quite instrumental in transferring the whole scene to heavenly regions; our hero was granted a foretaste of Paradise.

He had to do something about it. About what? His eyes were fixed on a Persian miniature that he had chosen at random in order to look at *something*. 'Shall I close my eyes? Too dangerous. Sleep always comes out of the blue, out of the black.'

Something, something. What to do? What *could* he do? He continued the cross-examination of his ego while she looked at him with surprise and discomfiture as if she had never seen an old man in her life. Silently he drivelled on and on. His lips moved and trembled; his hands were outlining some imaginary bliss. Only two minutes had elapsed between her coming into the living room and the present moment, but the time of old people is far more flexible and extensive than ordinary time. Their time stretches out and touches eternity as they ramble on, waving their arms about the faces of their

visitors. Nothing can make them listen to what others have to say until their old time grinds to a halt and a chorus of angels or devils bursts upon their ears.

'My agent, your agent told me—'

He did not hear her words, and she stood up and leaned over to him, her lips almost brushing against his ears. No Don Juan would have missed such an opportunity. A golden opportunity. But he was no Don Juan, no more. And he was hard of hearing. The word 'agent' ricocheted off his ears several times in a row. 'Was Don Juan hard of hearing? Was he an estate agent?'

He owned a room on the last floor of his building. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. Don Juan owned a lot of rooms and palaces. And he possessed many a woman, more than a thousand: '*Mille e tre*,' as sings Leporello, rounding off the list of Don Juan's conquests. And at that point he sings about his master's Spanish victims—only about *them*. And there were others, many others.

Belozerkalsky owned a maid's room. A nervous, uncompromising old woman used to live in that room of his—up there, on the last floor. 'She was a maid, my maid. Was she really? No, she was a German countess! Nervous, even hysterical. But not old. Middle-aged and beautiful. Why did she live up there? Was she my maid after all? Was she? When?'

His maid. The maid's room. 'I fired the maid on the 13th of...It was a long time ago,' he used to say to himself. Then he limited the history of the maid's room to the unfinished sentence 'It was...' And that was it. That was it.

The maid was succeeded by a brutal yet tidy lodger who paid his rent punctiliously, punctually: he would always consult his watch before passing the envelope with the money to his landlord. The accurate lodger was succeeded by a ruined German countess; her movements, curiously mirrored by the present lady, used to kindle a spark in his body—in some of its muscles and tendons, in some of its nerve fibres. He did not bother to look into the anatomic topography of those sparkling sensations: his excitement was rather misplaced. But he found solace in the undeniable fact that any excitement is much more valuable than indifference; sparkles are better than ashes.

Upon inadvertently touching her in a doorway he might get a tingling in his ears or a titillation in his armpits or both; but in no way could the modest outbursts of his libido be transferred to the more appropriate parts of his body. He would marshal his volition, his self-respect and self-control as he tried to remove those fields of sexual energy from where they seemed to be absolutely useless in order to concentrate them within that sacred area of his body on which he was so loath to dwell in his leisure hours—for fear of a mental block.

He re-read Bergson's *Matière et Mémoire*:

Le progrès de la matière vivante consiste dans une différenciation des fonctions qui amène la formation d'abord, puis la complication graduelle d'un système nerveux capable de canaliser des excitations et d'organiser des actions.

'Am I not alive? Isn't my matter alive? Why doesn't it progress? Does it regress? May it remain as it is—never to regress! I prefer the status quo. I had successfully differentiated the functions, but my achievement failed to bring about the formation of a nervous system. No, I do have a nervous system. Whenever I read on the television screen: "We would like to warn viewers of a nervous disposition that the following programme contains scenes which they may find disturbing," I brace myself. I pull myself together. I always find those scenes disturbing. So I am of a nervous disposition. But what about the gradual complication? There's the rub! The outbursts of my libido are too simple and consequently unable to channel excitements and organise actions.'

In spite of his numerous failures, he still believed that his excitements—a tingling in his ears, a titillation in his collarbones—were far more becoming an elderly dignified gentleman than the apathy of Victor Pavlovich.

After the departure of the countess and the logical, not entirely unwelcome disappearance of the tickling, there came a respite from suffering and toil. There was now in his life a restful void—somewhere up in his building, somewhere down in his body—and he was in no hurry to fill up that void, that blank space of lifelessness. Now he was not obliged to act; he was not obliged to crouch on his bed like an animal who, after waiting for an hour behind a bush or boulder, is ready to spring and pounce on its unsuspecting victim. He could have a meal without drawing up a menu of 'their dinner' or 'their *medianoche*,' without mentally opening a bottle of burgundy to induce her wing-like arms to undulate near his neck, near his chest, in close proximity to his belly.

However, such solitary dinners were not conducive to happiness; nor were they quite in keeping with the self-made image of the dignified gentleman he had grown accustomed to during the last years of his life. That image, his imaginary gentlemanly self, was a sort of yardstick by which he used to measure the amount of his happiness and well-being. He was a pure classical embodiment of 'the Russian fighting spirit' and therefore could not sacrifice the noble idea of 'active dying' for the sake of the petit bourgeois comfort he seemed to enjoy in the total absence of females.

Besides, he was given no opportunity to describe the beauty of St Petersburg, sharing his aesthetic and nostalgic delights with strangers. How can one live on earth without describing the beauty of St Petersburg, every day?

Belozerkalsky was very fond of philosophers and could not restrain himself from quoting some juicy titbits of their lore to his friends and colleagues who would implore him not to pontificate in their presence. He was aware of what Aristotle said about great expectations: 'That when a man doth think of any thing which is past,—he looketh down upon the ground;—but that when he thinketh of something that is to come, he looketh up towards the heavens.'

It is true that Belozerkalsky mostly gazed at his floorboards under which the treasure of his past was hidden. But more and more often he shifted his gaze towards the ceiling, towards the maid's room, as if the events he pined for were lying there in untidy piles. And only a woman was capable of tidying up those events—a beautiful, open-minded and intelligent woman who would not mind listening to his

songs of experience day and night. So he phoned his agent and urged him to 'find somebody, preferably a woman' for the empty room which had become the equivalent of the exile-heightened feeling of vacuity, of hollowness. 'Is sex a hollow pleasure?' he asked himself.

'A woman. Of German origin, as usual,' he told the agent.

The agent's white hair set off the mysterious obscurity of his glance so perfectly that his secretary forbade him to dye it. 'He must have tremendous success with women,' thought Belozerkalsky and in those moments his bedroom mirror reflected his envious grimace. Alas, his mirror was different from the agent's.

*I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, 'Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!'*

'Yes. A woman,' he repeated and rang off. He was not sure his agent had heard the last repetition. But the woman did come; and she was indeed of German origin.

CHAPTER 4

Belozerkalsky believed that German lodgers knew how to earn money and were, moreover, able to keep it, satisfying their own needs and the requirements imposed by social life, by its ethical laws. He believed that the maid's room, if let to a man or a woman of German extraction, would always look tidy and cosy. He firmly believed that on no occasion would its floor be strewn with cigarette butts and crumpled sheets of paper: the discarded drafts of *billets doux*, the lewd photographs negligently torn from erotic magazines.

In the very first discussion with the agent Belozerkalsky made no secret of his preference for German lodgers, whoever they might be—men or women, students or taxi drivers. At the time he had not yet realised that he needed a *female* ingredient in the psychological formula of his everyday life. Somewhere above his head, somewhere within his reach. *A prison de femmes*.

He could not even hear the footfalls of the German countess; they met haphazardly and inefficiently.

She was his lodger—a part of the space he legitimately owned and therefore had at his disposal round the clock. She was like a piece of furniture, a living piece of furniture; a lively piece of furniture. 'We are in it together,' he thought.

Had she tripped over something and fallen all the way down their common staircase—the crooked spine of the same building, of the same universe—he could have rushed to her rescue, demonstrating thereby the whole range of his physical abilities and the immeasurable generosity of his soul. He would also have been given an unprecedented opportunity to speak to her 'in private'—even to murmur into her ear.

He was lying in wait for the golden opportunity. 'The wrought-iron opportunity,' he thought, staring at the staircase. He listened to sounds coming from beyond the door. As his hearing was slightly impaired, he would leave the door ajar so as not to miss anything, not even the footfalls and voices of children who pattered in and out, out and in—going to their schools and returning from their schools, playing their games and turning a deaf ear to the rebukes of their mothers and grandmothers. Life was seething with invisible shapes and bubbling with distant joys and laughter, but that life, however intense and manifold, failed to include the clattering sound of her body and the piercing sound of her cries for help. 'Help, help, help, help,' resounded in his ears and perhaps in his apartment. One afternoon a next-door neighbour peeped into his bathroom to inquire after his health.

'Do you need anything?' the neighbour asked anxiously as if KAB had fallen out of the window and were lying now on the pavement, bleeding and wriggling like a worm.

'EVERYTHING,' KAB might have replied had he been sincere or drunk like a Soviet workman or a Soviet peasant, like a Soviet civil servant or a Soviet high official. But he drank only wine and his own brand of old-fashioned dignity and the fierce independence of his character would not allow him to air his grievances either before his friends or amid total strangers and curious passers-by.

So KAB simply replied: 'Nothing' and the neighbour backed out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He also closed the front door so that even the footfalls and the voices of clamorous, disrespectful children now sounded gentler than Belozerkalsky's own distressful thoughts. 'My life is ruined. It's all over, quite. It's all over and done with.'

The countess had a knack of keeping a perfect balance in circumstances which are usually considered perilous, making a lot of people lose everything—not only balance, but also hope and even life. She seemed to have been trained by a circus acrobat or by a professional rope dancer: her ascents and descents were amazingly flawless. And her frequent walks in the city where one might get knocked down by a health-engrossed jogger—let alone an army of unrestrained drivers—proved to be an even greater disappointment to our virtual rescuer. She bravely dodged in and out of impressionistic crowds; she crossed streets without paying any attention to traffic whose indulgence towards her light-heartedness seemed to increase in direct ratio to Belozerkalsky's despondency. Oh, he did not want her to perish in a car-accident: he was too kind and loveable to harbour such murderous ideas. 'But she could be frightened,' he thought. 'She could jump back or aside and eventually fall somewhere—not too far from my helpful arms, from my agile fingers. I'll unbutton her blouse to liberate her chest from—Yes, she'll be gasping for breath.'

Never once did she fall. He would follow her for half an hour, for thirty-five minutes, through crowds, alongside gigantic wrought-iron railings beyond which schoolboys were kicking balls and stones. 'Here and there, like a ball. We are all kicked around. Hither and thither, as Lermontov put it. There are so few benches in Paris.' And he would resume his walk in the wake of some woman who might or might not resemble the original object of his ever-shifting pilgrimage.

He was prepared to play the part of an anonymous rescuer. His name was a linguistic scarecrow—a hindrance to the carefree exchange of amorous glances and aphrodisiac caresses. Upon hearing the full unabridged version of his name, women raised their eyebrows in embarrassment and wonder. Their arms, which were already on their way to his shoulder or chin, would stop in mid-air, paralysed by his awesome, inexplicable patronymic. Those initiated women remained silent for a long time, their tongues entangled in the jungle-like opulence of his surname.

Incidentally, KAB's surname denotes a very simple, rather trivial object: 'white mirror'.

Had he donned a French pseudonym—'Pierre', 'Paul' or, better still, 'Jean'—they would have stroked his cheeks and hair. They might have fallen in love with Jean.

Nameless and weary, he roamed around Paris. 'No, I'm not nobody,' he thought. 'I'm Jean or Paul.' Jean would go into a bar and have a cup of tea with milk. Paul listened to other out-of-breath Casanovas, to their love stories. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky was weary and frustrated. 'Tea is a good pick-me-up,' he would say out loud.

'In our country, it's traditional to drink brandy with coffee as a morning pick-me-up,' said somebody, one afternoon.

'What country are you from?' asked Belozerkalsky. Nobody answered his question. 'Anyway it's too late,' he thought, consulting his wristwatch. 'Too late, too late.'

These 'breathers' soon became more time-consuming than his sentimental marathons. He could pass a whole afternoon in one of the wicker chairs known so intimately to homeless and penniless lovers who shirk expensive restaurants and quench their thirst for cosiness and homeliness in Parisian cafés, on their hospitable terraces. KAB praised and appreciated the exuberant hospitality of Paris which, in summertime, enables its inhabitants to forsake the closeness of interiors and have their meals in the open air. The sociable atmosphere one may enjoy in a restaurant or a café, in a *brasserie* or a *bistro*, is thus enhanced by the ever-changing presence of pedestrians who often cast an envious or fastidious glance at your plate and stroll away trying to deduce the ingredients of your sauce from its colour, from its texture, and the constituents of your dessert from your main dish.

In summertime, when the world was flooded with women of all ages and conditions, he felt less lonely, especially if a nymphet, misguided by the wildness of her vertiginous game, happened to bump her shoulder against his chair or his chest while knocking the bottles and glasses from the neighbouring tables with her jerky, wandering arms.

He did not like nymphets.

Even in his childhood he preferred to contemplate the figures and gestures of middle-aged women rather than gambol with his coevals who found him aloof and pretentious. Girls of his age were of no interest to him; he rejected them not on account of Oedipus complex—his mother was ugly and foul-tempered—but because he was aesthetically enchanted by the way their immature embryonic contours achieved a perfect harmony in the sculptural bodies of elderly ladies. Driven by his erotic curiosity, which could not be appeased in the kindergarten, he used to crawl under the table at which his relatives and their friends partook of Gallicised but unmistakably Russian dishes. When crawling under that *zakuski*-loaded dinner table in search of a fictitious cherry or honey drop—he would invent them on the spur of the moment to justify his sexual manoeuvre—he was much hampered by the men's shoes and trousers which got in the way and against which he would occasionally hit his nose, losing his balance and impetus. He tried to pay no attention to those items of clothing and yet most of them were remarkable, having being ordered and bought in England by the so-called Anglicised Russians who flaunted them in the Republic of France as a kind of trophy corresponding to the worn-out ideal of their snobbish and whimsical forefathers.

At the age of eighteen, instead of following the example of his libidinous friends who seemed to have deflowered the whole population of Meudon and Clamart, he fell in love with the forty-year-old daughter of his favourite teacher; according to the renowned Russian adage, she was fit to become his mother. And she did become his mother, looking after him in that touching and somewhat pathological fashion which distinguishes childless women from their fertile counterparts. Rumour had it that she even went beyond the sphere allotted by the Bible and Western traditions to ordinary mothers and took advantage of Kostya Belozerkalsky's peculiar inclination.

Understanding between human beings often stems from an encounter of opposite perversions. She preferred adolescents—their freshness and briskness—to the grave maturity of her father's colleagues; he adored matronly women to the detriment of youngish maidens whom he used to call 'embryos' or 'amoebas'. They spent two years together. The daughter of the schoolteacher, influenced by the scholarly atmosphere of her house, taught a great deal to little Kostya. The years of apprenticeship gave him a stoop; his eyes acquired a sort of omniscient perspective in which fatigue and disenchantment seemed to have definitively prevailed over freshness and curiosity.

That distant woman also resembled the German lady who still occupied the armchair in which she had thrust herself at the beginning of his habitual excursion into the 'ladies' room of the past,' as he wittily called his female memories. At the end of that excursion she got up and took a walk in the present. She headed for the nearest window, as many women do when left on their own: windows are the main attraction of the apartments inhabited by old people. But he was not old, he was not. He stood by her side and he was looking at her. A beautiful middle-aged woman. Not too tall, not too small. She resembled all the women he had been in love with ever since his childhood.

'I'm not alone,' he said, leaving for a while the perfumed chamber of the past, where he had been walking to and fro without so much as poking his head out.

'Have you got the key?' she asked nervously.

Deprived of her weight and warmth, the armchair now looked even more forsaken than its master.

'Yes.' He reached the armchair and sank into it. His body had no inkling of what was going on.

'You didn't lose it, did you?'

'What?' He rose to his feet and apologised. He was not alone.

'The key? You know, your maid's room—'

'What makes you think I lost it? Do I look so senile?' He gazed around him, but the only mirror he possessed was hanging in his bedroom—not far from his bed, just opposite his pillow.

This thou percev'st, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

'You should love me stronger, for I'll die very soon,' he told her. His voice scarcely rose above a whisper. Or perhaps it did not rise at all. That's right—his voice was lying low in his throat, in his lungs. So she heard nothing, nothing at all. Isn't that wonderful?

'This morning, upon awakening, you looked much younger than the day before,' he said to himself. 'Do you remember that you looked young and handsome? This morning, just a few hours ago. Do you remember? You jumped from your bed and even danced a tarantella in your bathroom. "I'm young! I'm young! I'm young!" you sang. This morning. Do you remember? You've got a beautiful

voice, by the way. And you knocked your slippers against the bath. And the bath also looked young and dashing—like Niagara falls.'

Now the bath was silent. And he was old again.

He always kept his bedroom key in his pockets, transferring it from his pyjamas to his coat and so on. Just in case, just in case. He wished to enclose in the space of his groundless desires a doll-like female body, manageable and patient: the sleeping beauty of his lifelong fairytale. He would have kissed and violated that body without waking his *prisonnière*, lest she might revolt and disappear. 'To violate' was the verb that some professional writers—perfectionists and seekers for the *mot juste*—would not have associated with the extreme and irremediable frailty of his body; but he was no writer, no linguist, no seeker for the truth and perfection. So he used the verb, silently, motionlessly. In his interior monologues; in the resonant acoustics of his bedroom.

'If you don't mind,' she answered.

'I do mind,' he told her. Just in case. He was appalled by his inability to lure her into the darkness of his bedroom and by the dull aloofness of his libido. 'My body refuses to obey orders. What my mind commands is not done. Why? Because I don't will it entirely? My will is inadequate. If it were consummate, the thing would be done on the spot. Within the province of my body, the will is the thing. As far as my body is concerned...as near...My body isn't far, is it? Seems remarkably unconcerned. Turning a deaf ear to what my soul says to it. My soul wouldn't give orders if it had no longings, no yearnings. But it's not the soul that gets in touch with female bodies. There must be two wills in my mind and one of them isn't fully fledged. Half-souled. Or rather, it's weighed down by bad habits, by uneventfulness. What a pity I don't have two bodies.'

And then he recalled the key. He would have recalled it anyway: the key was suspended under his very nose. He held it in his fingers. And, as his fingers trembled outrageously, the key was dancing its own tarantella which could not pass unnoticed unless the observer was utterly insensitive to the art of dance. And Belozerkalsky was sensitive to the art of dance—to all arts in fact.

'What makes you think I have a bad memory?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'At the university I trained my memory using a mnemonic which is described in the *Ad Herennium*. I would memorise a series of places in buildings—in Petersburg palaces mostly. The Roman orators brought this art to perfection.'

'What art?'

'Of course Petersburg was built much later, many centuries later. So they had to content themselves with Roman palaces, attaching some images to them. When delivering their speeches, they would pluck the images—'

'What images?'

'Those images reminded them of their speeches.'

'Do *you* make speeches?' Her face seemed frozen in an expression of wide-eyed curiosity.

'I know many poems by heart, hundreds of poems. I just pluck the images—'

'What images?'

Belozerkalsky bent down to pick up a poker. At that point he resembled a schoolteacher who is itching for an excuse to thrash the classroom dunce. The German lady understood neither his questions nor his answers and admonitions; she was not as intelligent as he had presumed at first blush.

He remained for a minute in the same posture, leaning forward, back bent, with outstretched arms. 'Give me a lever and I'll lift the earth,' he remembered suddenly. 'Well, I'm lighter than the earth, am I not?' Using the poker for leverage, he propped and then pushed himself into a more or less upright position. With a sigh of relief he dropped the poker into the coal scuttle. His Archimedean experiment had been highly successful.

He had every reason to be proud of himself. Yes, every reason. Yes, yes, yes. He was grinning proudly, delighted with his achievement. Indeed he had managed to restore his perpendicularity and rectitude despite the fatigue and a sort of stage fright whose symptoms he now recognised in his own behaviour, having heard about them some years previously from his late cousin, an amateur violinist. His head was shaking as if exposed to the waywardness and hysteria of the Saharan simoom; and he was longing to stick out his tongue. Not in mockery, however. Just to moisten and soften his parched lips.

Mockery. 'At whom do you laugh? At yourselves,' as the mayor puts it in Gogol's *Revizor*. Gogol, Nikolay Vasilyevich Gogol.

Proud, proud. What was there to be proud of? The discussion dragged on, leading nowhere—not to his bedroom, not even to the maid's room. Being a professional heartbreaker he decided to change the subject: monotony is an enemy to eroticism.

'We have a lot in common,' he announced and even tried to wink at her, which was no easy undertaking: his eyelids seemed to have put on weight and had he closed his eyes, no matter how briefly, he might never have been able to re-open them. 'And I'm sure you like Shakespeare,' he added. He nodded his head—in compensation for all other incapacities of his.

'I do like Shakespeare,' she answered and he nodded again—with more amplitude and conviction. No. He *shook* his head. Never mind, never mind. Encouraged by the sheer number of things they had in common, he managed to bring down his right arm and consequently his right hand, which enabled him to put the key in the right pocket of his dressing gown. The wrong key, the right pocket. He began to fumble in that pocket, hoping to lay his hands on something that might procure him the pleasures he had known in his younger years, in the days of his blooming maturity. And he found a key, another key. The *right* key? He began to brandish it above his head as if to open the gates of Paradise. 'Please,' she continued, 'may I see the room now?'

'You must look carefully, very carefully. You'll live here for years—'

'Two years at most,' she corrected him.

'—for decades. Do you want some Russian vodka? I'm of Russian origin. Or a glass of Sauternes? I've been living in France for almost...for some years...'

'No, thank you.'

'Of course it's not as spacious as *my* bedroom. It's only a maid's room, you know.'

'I know.' She also nodded her head, showing her readiness to agree with him. To agree. Not always perhaps. From time to time. So he had to choose the *right* moment.

'Do you want me to show you my flat? I've got some beautiful pieces of furniture and a mirror.'

'I'm sorry, but a friend of mine—'

'I understand. I also have a business to attend to. Lots of people need me. I'm still useful, you know.'

'Of course. I'd hate to keep you from—' She stood up and took a step in what she presumed was the direction of the maid's room.

'That's all right. I've cancelled all my appointments to assist you in every possible way.'

She dropped into the same armchair and rose again, staring him in the face, studying his numberless wrinkles and the pouches under his eyes. Belozerkalsky cleared his throat.

'I know everything about you. Just a joke. I'm only putting you on. I used to be such a tease. I mean I *am* a tease. My friends say I'm quite witty and sociable. The life and soul of the party, you know. And I've got many friends. Well, of course, some of them died.

'Then can I drowne an eye (un-us'd to flow)

For precious friends hid in deaths dateles night

'It's in the nature of things. It's in the nature of Man. Life is dangerous because we are bound to die, at the end. Or at the beginning. You also must have a friend who died. Perhaps several.'

'My father died last year.'

'But I don't cry every day. I never cry, to tell the truth. I sigh the lacke of many a thing I sought—I sigh, but I don't cry.'

'I believe you,' she said.

'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean—'

To break the ice in a conversation with a stranger—especially a woman—one need only mention the dead or the Hereafter. The dead constitute the common ground for human discussions and negotiations; thanks to their voiceless intervention even the most ferocious antagonists shake hands, smiling and bowing.

Belozerkalsky knew the trick but was reluctant to exploit the dead. He seldom flaunted his knowledge of the Hereafter.

He respected the dead and would not bandy their dead souls about. He broached a funeral monologue only because he was exhausted.

It is easier to describe the dead than the living.

*Nor wonder if my time go thus
Backward and most preposterous;
Thou hast benighted me*

It is easier to converse with a late friend than to seduce a creature of flesh and blood.

CHAPTER 5

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky lived more with the dead than with the quick; he had more friends among ghosts now and their number augmented almost every night, around 2 p.m. When unable to sleep, he would recall his dead friends and relatives, their suits and smiles, gaits and grimaces. Every night he rooted out from the other world another—and yet another—long-forgotten human being, whereupon the air of his bedroom stirred into motion and he saw something or somebody advance upon him with a springy step and swinging arms. There was no need to lock the door of his bedroom: those creatures remained with him as long as he desired and were always sensitive to his charms and words. They knew he was kind and witty. They never doubted the power of his body which was still vigorous and lithe—in the very blossom of its youth. They would allude to the springtime, pristine state of his body, avoiding straightforward remarks and statements.

One of them might say: 'These plums are in blossom now.'

Another friend would chime in: 'The scent of apple blossoms is mingling with that of woodland flowers.'

He made them repeat their soft, allusive praise. Like the victims of the Soviet show-trials they mouthed the script he had concocted for them. Ah, if only the living could behave as nicely as those who are no more!

'What a pity you're still alive,' he told her, endowing his ghost-like thoughts with a sonorous reality.

'How do you mean?' She took a step in his direction. He regained his self-control.

'I mean your father's death must have been an awful shock to you. Under some circumstances it's better to be dead than alive. Not to hear about disasters and catastrophes. Not to outlive our parents, our closest friends, our mistresses.'

'You're right there. I loved my father even more than my mother and my godmother.'

'Please accept my deepest sympathy.'

She had grown limp and tame; he motioned her to the same armchair and she obeyed him without offering even token resistance.

'My best friend died last week,' he said. 'He meant a lot to me. People are so callous and brutal. They don't respect the mystery of dying. They perform their rituals and seem to forget that death doesn't belong to social life. Oh, they're nice—nice and polite and humane. But they ought to have left him alone because we all need to take stock of the situation. One needs to recall one's life and assess one's achievements at their true worth...and failures...at their true worth. Do you understand?'

'I understand.'

'We need silence, silence. Silence is the best music available to human beings. Who said that?'

'I don't know.'

'Silence is the music of our thoughts. We need to prepare ourselves for silence. It's the same silence, you know. The same silence. Silence is always the same. There's no other silence in our universe. Some time ago I had a revelation or rather a vision. The Russians are a visionary people. I just caught a glimpse of the GENERAL PATTERN. We call it the "order of the world". As if I had glanced through a chink or a crack...a crevice...a chink in the shutters...or when a door is left ajar. As if I had peeked through a keyhole. I saw EVERYTHING, in miniature.'

'What did you see?' She seemed curious and prepared to sacrifice *something* for the omniscience he was offering her.

'I can't tell you in a few words, not even in miniature words.' His inveterate sense of humour surfaced for a while, but the dead finally came out on top and he resumed his account of his friend's last days and minutes.

'They drank champagne in his room. "You look better today. Anyway you adored life, didn't you? Want some champagne or vodka?" He couldn't swallow anything but they forced him, they forced him. They thought his mood was more important than the state of his health. He seized my hand and pressed it when they'd left the room. I stroked his face and hair. He was already cold. I see them walking in an Air of glory—'

'They probably wanted him to believe he was in good health, drinking and enjoying life as before. Many people do that.'

She was defending humanity with the skill and eloquence of the renowned Russian lawyer, Plevako, whose Christian name and patronymic Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky had forgotten forever. And he owned no reliable old Russian encyclopaedia to look them up. But even Plevako would have been powerless in the matter: Belozerkalsky had long since written humanity off and nobody—nothing—could make him change his opinion. He had caught a glimpse of the order of our world and frankly he preferred any disorder to that order of ours.

'Many people do that.' He repeated her last words and acquiesced with a downward movement of his arms. 'They follow a ritual. Life is a tissue of rituals, of lies. Oh, they're humane! They do their duty and everybody admires them. They *may* feel something, those bystanders, those onlookers, but they're not attuned to the mystery of life. To the mystery of death. *Ars Moriendi*. Most medieval death-manuals agree that friends and relatives must create the right disposition in the dying, the right attitude. Not to instil false hopes of recovery! We must help them face death and accept it. I accept death, you know. I look him in the face.'

His hand which had been fumbling in his pocket for almost ten minutes touched a key and, after a while, another key. Was it the same key destined to open and lock his bedroom, his front door, his private Paradise or Hell? He was at a loss to explain why he had been so obstinately searching for keys. 'Are they somehow connected with my late friend? Coffins have no locks, no keyholes.' He extracted one key, two keys, three keys, four keys, from his multifarious pockets and became

engrossed in contemplation of their shapes, their geometrical ciphers. Presuming that the story of funeral rituals had come to an end, the German lady rose again from her seat.

'No serious discussion is possible in our world,' said Belozerkalsky. 'Those who touch upon the subject of death and the life-mystery are too senile and weary to develop it. Those who could develop it to some extent are in a hurry and don't even have time to sit down and drink a cup of coffee. Those who have all the leisure and energy to ponder on it are too stupid, too immature. And when two intelligent middle-aged individuals do meet at last in a secluded spot devoid of clocks, mosquitoes and human intruders, they are bound to fall in love with each other instead of tackling the subject of life and death with appropriate thoroughness.'

'May I see the room now?'

She had understood nothing, nothing at all. He had given her a second chance and come to the same conclusion: she was not intelligent. 'Why do I share with this female my views, my anxiety, my fear of death?' he asked himself. She was not listening to his voice and thoughts. She knew nothing about death and the Hereafter. The keys were jingling and jumping in his palms. He remembered the purpose and meaning of his search and mentally reviewed his stratagems, his desires, her erotic appeal. All this had now been relegated to his memory. All this had now been dumped into a remote corner of his memory. His desire, her sex-appeal...

If of her selfe she will not Love,

Nothing can make her:

The Devill take her.

He could hardly make out the outlines of the forty-three minutes that had elapsed since her appearance. He was not even sure he would remember them in a few hours. He wished now to *open* the doors, all of them. He wished to see her off and watch her silhouette dwindle away along the streets of Paris, along suburban roads. He waited for her to leave him alone in the company of his friends, in the presence of their voices and hovering images. But he had to show her the maid's room first—not to renege on his promise. He was a gentleman despite his fatigue and his affinities with the Hereafter.

'I've promised to show you the maid's room and I'll keep my promise. I always do. Follow me, please. I'll lead the way.'

They mounted the stairs and he opened the door. The room was not very large, but there was a bed in it and even a bedside cabinet. There were also two chairs and a wardrobe. And a shower. Her eyes, wandering from one piece of furniture to another, lingered on the shower and the water dripping from the nozzle. She inquired about the hot water and the plumbing in general. KAB reassured her and she nodded smilingly.

'I had a wall pulled down,' he explained. 'Originally there were two maid's rooms.'

'Yes. It's sufficiently large.'

'And comfortable.' He sounded like a promoter or a property developer. Like a real-estate agent. Like *his* agent.

'Is it?'

'Perhaps not. I've never lived here. I've never even slept here.' He did not wish to sound like his agent. He wished to *look* like him—a handsome middle-aged man.

'I'm sure it is.'

'Don't be so sure. And the room is rather small, isn't it?'

'Anyway it's impossible,' he said to himself. 'Whenever circumstance brings some welcome thing your way, stop in suspicion and alarm. Wild animals and fish alike are taken in by this or that inviting prospect. A snare. I thought she was mine when in fact it's my body that was caught. My body, my soul, my ego.'

For a while he continued to speak to himself in the presence of a woman. He understood his own questions and answers; he understood EVERYTHING. 'Utterly out of the question. I'm too old. I must leave my body in peace. What fun I had! It's over now. So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more. Homecoming, from a funfair, from an amusement park. Soon I'll be back home. Swings, roundabouts, shooting galleries, labyrinths with mirrors, mountains. Everything is over and done with. Teetering, tottering, pottering, pattering, puttering on the brink of death. On the threshold of the Hereafter. Women, women, women. Forget it. Why do I go on doing these things? Why not cease? Forget it. Why do I remember it? Them? Women, women. Tatiana. So sad, so strange, the days that are no more. Why live with this German lady under the same roof? I'd torture myself, day and night. I'd never forget what I need to forget. A hole of memory, as the French define it. Instead of a hole I have a hill, a mountain, the mountain Ulysses saw before the shipwreck. *Una montagna, bruna per la distanza*. When shall I leave off doing these things? Leave me alone. Let me die in peace. Life is nonsensical, a mockery. Going through the motions. Repetitions.'

He did not let his thoughts trickle out of his mind. There was silence outside—the silence he appreciated so much on our clamorous planet, on Earth. For this silence he was ready to sacrifice wine, women and music. Yet he rejected self-slaughter—not on religious grounds. Out of weariness, out of weariness.

'A beautiful room,' she said. 'A very nice room.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Personally I like this room very much.' She sat down on the bed, after having removed her shoes. 'I wouldn't live here all my life, but—'

'You said—'

'I don't remember what I said in your apartment.' She raised her legs and deposited them on the blanket, not far from Belozerkalsky's hips. 'May I? I'm sorry. I feel so snug in your room. Do you know the German word *gemütlich*?'

'Of course.'

'It's so...precise.'

'Yes.'

'Very *gemütlich*.' She was now sprawling out on the bed; he stood beside her like a sentinel ordered to protect her against robbers and rapists. Against whom was he protecting her? Against himself? He laughed so feebly that no sound filtered through his lips; and yet his mouth was half-open and could even let out a shriek, a howl of agony. Then he stopped laughing and leaned forward a little to see her eyes, her face, the meaning of her actions. Her lying body was an affront to his age and respectability. He could have fallen on her from where he stood, without moving any closer. The sheer weight of his body would have pressed her to the blanket, precluding her escape from the prison of his desire. His desire. Desire. There was no human language in which this word meant anything for him. It was nothing. Not even in his brain could he find any trace of it. Nothing.

He straightened up and headed for the door.

'Do you mind my being on your bed?'

'It's not my bed.'

'I'm sorry. I just had to try it. The matter is of great importance to me.'

'What matter?'

Why ask her questions and analyse her words? Why think about her thoughts and postures? Waste of time. There is no time left, no time. Waste of breath, of air.

'The bed. I mean I attach great importance to beds.'

Attach, attach. Why not attach her to the bed?

He who binds to himself a joy

Does the winged life destroy

'Do you suffer from nightmares, from insomnia?' he asked. No answer of hers could ever satisfy him.

'From both.' She tossed about for a while, turned once more onto her back, opened her bare arms in a sign of amorous welcome, sat up, collapsed again face downward on the pillow, lay for a minute or two on her stomach and suddenly rolled herself up in the blanket. Shortly afterwards she unwrapped herself, sat up and sprang to her feet.

'Thank you very much. That's enough for today.'

'Are you coming back tomorrow?' he asked.

'Not tomorrow. Perhaps the day after tomorrow or at the end of the week. Anyway I'll come back, I promise. I like your room and your bed very much.'

'Well, I hope you—' He used a non-existent word. The word 'hope' had been removed from his dictionaries. A blank sheet of paper. His destiny seemed to have adopted the standard procedure of

Soviet misinformation. 'The name of a politician or an artist in disgrace is replaced in encyclopaedias by a blank sheet of paper or an irrelevant photograph,' he said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Nothing, nothing. Just a blank sheet of paper. A blank wall.'

What could he hope for? Homecoming from the funfair, as his father said once. Homecoming. No more Russian mountains, no more roundabouts.

'Whatever happens, I like your room,' she repeated as she strode out accompanied by the jingling of the keys. He locked the door and they proceeded downstairs. 'I don't know how to thank you enough—'

'My pleasure,' he said with a slight bow.

'I'll speak to your agent. I'll get in touch with him as soon as possible.'

'As you wish.' He kissed her hand and she disappeared round the nearest corner.

He was left alone—in the company of his dead friends and relatives.

CHAPTER 6

He lay supine on his blanket; his right leg dangled from it, almost touching the floor. One foot in the grave. That position was a part of the training he had subjected himself to shortly after his last illness. 'Death won't catch me unawares,' he thought. Besides, horizontality was more attuned to his talks with the dead who might not have understood or liked his semi-reclining figure ensconced in an armchair. They might have been repelled by his pacing in the living room. So he received them in his bedroom.

He reflected on how people behave in the presence of a dying person. Some of them—the males of the Nozdrev type—imagine they can *bully* you into a perfect state of health. They vociferate into your ear, 'You look better today, old hypocrite. Fit as a fiddle, aren't you?' And they pat you on the shoulders so that your atoms split and your molecules disintegrate under the weight of their ribald optimism. 'I'm sure you've just strained your ankle,' they shout as you limp towards the door. 'I'll put you right in no time. Just a little pull.' You limp faster and faster, trying to get out onto the street where a policeman may save you from the rowdy friend, from the destroyer of your bones.

You have got cancer. Your bones crumble, causing a tremendous pain that no amount of shrieking and moaning can alleviate. He overtakes you on your way outdoors and pushes you into an armchair. He is your benefactor. He will cure you of your ailments in no time at all. You sweat and breathe loudly. He tugs at your legs, at your arms, at your toes. He tugs so hard that the innumerable nerves, tendons and ribs break inside you. And he says to your relatives clustered around your tomb, 'I did my duty.'

'You were his best friend,' they answer with a nod. 'You were always very kind to him.'

The other type of benefactor is distinguished by gentle joyfulness. Nothing is wrong with you. They do not try to talk you into believing that you have just strained something unimportant and relatively small; they may even admit that you have got cancer. But cancer is often cured nowadays. They never leave you alone because you need company, because you fear solitude and death. They cut your thoughts in two or three with their well-meaning interference. They put a multitude of dishes on your stomach, disregarding your assertions that you are not hungry. And when you are both hungry and thirsty, they do not bring you anything, arguing that you ate too much in the afternoon and that a supplementary meal may be harmful to your precarious health. They kiss you and talk to you and fuss over you, incessantly kicking the chamber pot.

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky recalled his late friend—the last one to die. He recalled the birthday party at which his friend had sung two Russian *romances* in a hoarse, crackling, out-of-tune voice.

*My lute awake! perfourme the last
Labor that thou and I shall wast,
And end that I have now begon;*

*For when this song is sung and past,
My lute be still, for I have done.*

In his hands the guitar trembled even more than its strings.

'It's your birthday party. You should sing.'

'Don't be a spoilsport.'

'You're not as old as all that.'

'Even at the end, when cancer racked his body, Anatole was calm and cheerful.'

They pretended to know nothing about his illness as though the simple act of omission could extirpate it from his extremities, chest and backbone.

'He wanted to sing and play the guitar once more,' his best friend declared at the funeral dinner. 'It was his dearest wish, his one desire.'

'We'd asked his doctor to arrange a blood transfusion two hours before the party began,' said his aunt.

'It was symbolic. He had to sing,' said his nephew.

'His last joy,' chimed in his uncle.

'Poor Alexander,' said everyone.

On the following morning he was unable to get up and walk around the garden, as was his wont on sunny days, on sunny afternoons. They propped him up against a few pillows so that he might look like a normal healthy man who had chosen not to leave his bed—out of sloth, on account of the weather. Yet the weather was fine. He neither saw nor felt it. Perhaps his rheumatism was back.

'Why doesn't he take a walk in the garden? Walking in the open air will do him a lot of good.'

'Fresh air works wonders. Why does he remain cooped up in his room?'

'Let's drink some champagne to cheer him up.'

'Give the man a glass. We shouldn't let him believe he can't do what *we* can do.'

He drank two glasses of champagne, ate a spoonful of *foie gras* and a few oysters. Presently he could not even sit up in bed and they had to lower him onto the sheets. They left the room around midnight and Alexander took Konstantin's hand, pressing it warmly. 'It's so nice to be with you,' he said. 'I understand now. Probably I've gone mad, crazy. But I understand now—life has no meaning whatsoever.'

Then he started to breathe so deeply and so fast that he might have inhaled the whole atmosphere of the earth had he lived for another day. He died four hours later. He uttered no other word; he did not change his mind. Life has no meaning whatsoever.

The doctor arrived and said solemnly, 'He is dead.' At once something changed in the room; a hot wind burst inside through the closed windows and the walls; moonlight burst through the clouds and the ceiling; the doctor fluttered about like a caged bird or a net-imprisoned butterfly. Belozerkalsky collapsed on the bed near which he had stood.

Lying supine in his own bed, he reflected now on his friend's last moments. Life still had no meaning, for all his efforts. The more he thought about it the more absurd it grew. The German lady squirming like an eel on the maid's blanket. What did she want? Squirming and wriggling and burning with desires. And he was going home from the funfair.

He lay on his bed, motionless and peaceful like a corpse. And then his body was brought to life by a goading urge whose aim and origin he had forgotten even before his last illness. He lifted his head; the 'goad' was embedded somewhere in his body, but the suddenness of its intrusion was so bewildering that he could not help looking around, as one might upon hearing a burglar sneak into the entrance hall. He sat up in bed and then resumed his horizontal position, trying to locate the goad which, in the meantime, had developed into a kind of sensation. *'L'équivoque du terme sensation employé pour exprimer les modes passifs comme actifs de l'âme: ceux qui affectent comme ceux qui représentent—'* No point in reading scholarly works. He had to find, to uncover—to unearth the sensation. To 'unbody' the sensation. 'My soul is both passive and active,' he thought, touching his stomach. His fingers glided farther and farther and he had to sit up again so as to reach his toes. Nothing. Nothing at all. The sensation was not there. But it was still *somewhere*, otherwise he would already have fallen asleep, which usually happened when he lay in bed for more than thirty-five minutes.

He knew that nearly everything of note had always been located in his cerebrum. He tapped himself on the head for a while, stopped, focused his attention on his cheeks, forehead, lips and skull respectively. Nothing. The sensation was *elsewhere*.

Belozerkalsky realised that he had underestimated and even slandered his body. 'There's still some powder in powder horns,' he muttered jubilantly. *Taras Bulba*. Whenever he was in a perky, optimistic state of mind, he quoted Gogol and Chekhov who are however the most prominent exponents of melancholy and hopelessness in Russian literature.

He continued to narrow down the radius of the search area, blithely propelling himself into the world of the living. It was not in his head, so it was in his body. It was not in his toes, so he looked for it in the upper regions—in relation to his toes. 'The sensation must be situated higher up, nearer the maid's room.' His fingers rubbed and kneaded his flesh, releasing the precious sensation from its bony, muscular confinement. He explored to the utmost the middle region of his body where, in his opinion, the seat of energy, the seed of life, was traditionally located. He was right about the tradition—the seed of life does lodge in the middle region of the human body—but he was wrong about the sensation: it was not there. Was it wise to continue the search under these conditions? Listlessly his fingers slipped down his belly and up his belly—along and around his chest, towards his ribs and armpits. He was ticklish and, to avoid a fit of sarcastic laughter, he bypassed his armpits, swerving towards his collarbones. 'At whom do you laugh? At yourselves!' Gogol is a mouthpiece of hopelessness in Russian literature.

Eventually Belozerkalsky succeeded in 'touching' his sensation. Oddly enough, 'the New Energy' was lurking in his right shoulder. Vibrating under a slight pressure of his fingers; throbbing with life. But that life was of no consequence to his existence. Just an unknown substance, a foreign body one might have in one's eye—a speck of dust, a midge. Yet it was brand-new: his experienced fingers could not be mistaken. And that new life was linked to the sprawling and rolling body of the German lady.

He was alive. He was still alive. He recalled another friend of his who used to say upon awakening, 'Great! I'm still alive!'

At least his right shoulder was in the land of the living. And his right shoulder was part and parcel of his body; and his body was the seat of his immortal Russian soul which treasured and nurtured the majestic Russian countryside—those measureless fields and woods one can contemplate in the Russian version of *War and Peace*—and the harmonious Petersburg streets, canals, gardens, bridges, columns. St Petersburg...his native city...tumbling down, dilapidated...but still alive, alive, miraculously alive.

And Russian scents and flavours and flowers. What about all those inimitable things one can find nowhere else? As an old princess said when watching a pastoral Soviet film: 'Western birds sing differently.'

He was invited to a Russian dinner that night. *Zakusky*, lemon vodka, old vodka, pepper vodka, *zubrovka*, champagne, piping-hot *blinis*. They are still alive, those dinosaurs, those old Russian expatriates entrusted by destiny and history with the safekeeping of the Russian language, culture, softness, dignity, beauty. They are ill and senile and shaky and shadowy; they have one foot or sometimes even two feet in the grave, in their common Russian grave, wherever that grave may be dug—in Paris, in London, in New York, in Munich. But they are still alive. They do not eat in the kitchen, as so many Soviet citizens do; they use napkins—even the word 'napkin' has long since been removed from Soviet dictionaries—and, unlike Soviet tourists, the ex-pats are not gloomy and awkward. Yet, like any Russian person living inside or outside the Soviet Union, they are easily moved to tears; they fraternise with strangers in the space of half-an-hour; they quarrel and embrace and kiss each other and sing and cry and chat far into the night—till dawn.

The grandfather clock struck seven. Jerking and jolting himself along, Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky moved closer to the mirror. He was young and handsome.

CHAPTER 7

Eat not too much: load neither thy stomach nor thy understanding. If thou sit at a bountiful table, be not greedy upon it, and say not there is much meat on it. Remember that a wicked eye is an evil thing: and what is created more wicked than an eye? Therefore it weepeth upon every occasion. Stretch not thy hand whithersoever it looketh, and thrust it not with him into the dish. A very little is sufficient for a man well nurtured, and he fetcheth not his wind short upon his bed.

Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*

'What do you think of Gorbachev, Vyacheslav Timofeevich?'

'Let's wait and see, Ilya Mitrofanovich. So far he has been rather hesitant, indecisive. Fifty-fifty—'

'You mean he is half-radical, half-conservative?'

'I mean he should have given the land to peasants at the first—'

Some of the guests were already assembled on the terrace, talking about the partial or complete resurrection of Russia. Others were still on their way to that tea-permeated terrace which was part of a huge country house surrounded and enlivened by Russian flowers and birds. There, in the bosom of Ile de France, everything looked so Russian that one got the impression of constantly tripping over innumerable samovars and *matreshkas* both inside and outside the house—within a two-kilometre radius.

'That's that, Nicolay Panteleevich. I thought I would never see our motherland, my ancestral abode—'

'Life is unpredictable, Pyotr Svyatoslavovich.'

'You're telling me, Nicolay Panteleevich. Even before the death of my poor wife, of my dearest companion—'

A new couple arrived and entered the house. The gate creaked once more, admitting an elderly gentleman and a young woman. They approached the terrace but somebody called out to them from the other end of the garden; they stopped and grinned.

'Vasily Valeryanovich! How many summers, how many winters!'

'Yes, we haven't seen each other for ages,' answered Vasily Valeryanovich in English: he had recently come from London.

'O-la-la, Vasily Valeryanovich. You seem to have forgotten your mother tongue, my dear old chap.'

Vasily Valeryanovich realised his linguistic blunder and, shaking his head despondently and apologetically, repeated the sentence in Russian, 'How many summers, how many winters!'

'How many winters. The season of the old and the bald, as the Japanese say. Your daughter, isn't it? Beautiful, beautiful. I wish my son had married your daughter!'

'Well—'

'Yes, dear Vasily Valeryanovich, our children have grown mature and independent. I'm sure your daughter still respects you, though.'

'Well, to tell the truth—'

'Looks obedient and demure. Unlike my son. Got out of hand, you know. Quite out of hand. Married a harlot. Love, as they say nowadays. Do you think they know what love is, Vasily Valeryanovich?'

'Well, it depends on—'

'They don't. Nothing is sacred any more. Love is a romantic feeling. Am I wrong, Vasily Valeryanovich?'

'No. I used to believe—'

'You can't fall in love with a harlot, can you?'

'Well, Dostoevsky—'

'Anything can happen in literature. But in *real* life...And he is my son, my only son, don't forget that! I have no daughter, Vasily Valeryanovich.'

For a while, they strode in circles around three stubby bushes; Vasily Valeryanovich stretched his arm towards the terrace. From afar he looked like a statue of Lenin: he, too, was showing the right way to happiness and abundance. The din of voices crystallized into an idle and pointless speculation.

'They're leaving, Ekaterina Petrovna,' said Gennady Maximovich. 'They're leaving—'

'Who?'

'All of them. Do you know how many people leave our motherland every month, every blessed month?'

'No.'

'Today we remember those who laid down their lives for their country,' said a White-Army general.

'Eighty thousand three hundred and seventy.'

'I thought I saw someone skulking in the bushes—perhaps we should call the police,' said Vladislav Fortunatovich.

'Eighty thousand three hundred and seventy?'

'Even more. Many more, Ekaterina Petrovna. And Russia is Russia. It's not China.'

'You mean, Gennady Maximovich—'

'Yes. A Sahara. Russia will become a Sahara. Or a Gobi.'

'Can you smell burning?' asked Galperia Vasilyevna.

'But they're mostly Jews, aren't they?'

'Jews are also human beings, Ekaterina Petrovna.' Gennady Maximovich chuckled contentedly at his own remark.

'They're not Russians, are they?'

Sergey Sergeevich Kurochkin cut in on their conversation.

'Are you speaking about the new wave of Soviet refugees? I met one of them this afternoon. He was Russian to the backbone. Not a Jew, not a Georgian. Wants to stay in Paris, if you please. Why? I ask him. Nothing to eat, he answers without batting an eyelid. Listen, young man, I tell him. I'm not poor. I'm far from poor. I'm rather rich, as a matter of fact. But I would chuck up everything and go back to Russia and settle down in Russia for good—'

'Back to Russia? You were born in Berlin, Sergey Sergeevich,' said Ekaterina Petrovna.

'We were all born in Russia, Ekaterina Petrovna, wherever the actual place of our birth might be situated.'

'Whenever you try to tell a joke, it always falls flat,' said Ekaterina Pavlovna.

'Laughter is the best medicine,' said Vladislav Fortunatovich.

'Our souls were born in Russia. And our souls are immortal.' Sergey Sergeevich clutched at his heart.

'Our hearts were born in Russia too.' Gennady Maximovich brought his smattering of the anatomical lore to bear on the conversation. But Anna Vissarionovna, who overheard the words 'China' and 'Sahara', enlarged once again upon the heartlessness of Soviet refugees.

'Did you read the last Pasternak letter?'

'Which one?' asked several voices.

'The last one. He died shortly afterwards. I suppose it was his last letter. The one addressed to...what-d'you-call-him?'

'Who?' asked Ekaterina Petrovna.

'Akhmatova?' ventured Nicolay Sigizmundovich.

'*Him!* I know, I know—Khrushchev!' Anna Vissarionovna patted herself on the hips. 'Did you read the letter?'

'No,' said two voices in unison.

'Well, Pasternak implored Khrushchev on his knees not to throw him out of Russia. If given a choice between exile and death, he wrote...it's there in black and white, believe it or not. Anyway he opted for death, rejecting the offer of exile. My banishment from Russia is equivalent to death...or something along these lines, you know.'

'I agree, Anna Vissarionovna. We're dead, all of us. Dead and buried, as the French saying goes.'

Nobody was able to identify the speaker, the general attention being riveted on Anna Vissarionovna and her epistolary tale, but everybody remained motionless for a while as if in agreement with the funereal statement.

Belozerkalsky was strolling around the garden with his one-time mistress who, in the course of the last decades, had been demoted to the role of a mere confidante.

'Life is beautiful,' said Belozerkalsky.

'What happened? What's the matter?' said his former mistress.

'Nothing special. It's normal, isn't it?'

'What's normal? You're not quite yourself today, Kostya. Is your rheumatism back? Your liver?'

'I think I'm in love, Tatusya.'

'In love? At your age? It's harmlessly platonic, I assume?'

'Call it what you will, as Goethe said once. Do you know that Goethe fell in love with a nineteen-year-old maiden? He was eighty at the time.'

'Did you fall in love with a teenager? I see you've been reading Nabokov and his likes in spite of my repeated warnings. Shame on you, Konstantin Alexeevich!'

'She is much older than Lolita, Tatusya. As a matter of fact, Lolita would have been about her age now.'

'Think of *your* age. You're no longer in the first flush of youth. When did you meet her?'

'This afternoon. It was a love at first sight.'

'You've always said you don't believe in love at first sight.'

'In love there's only the first sight extended beyond time and space, beyond our grave and destiny, beyond the Hereafter. Love is the only proof of infinity.'

'It's a proof of your stupidity and senility. My God, my God. What have you been doing together?'

'Nothing special, I can assure you.'

'Holding hands or what? Did you try to lure her into your bedroom?'

'It's more than that, more than a physical desire. It's life, Tatusya. Do you remember Tyutchev: "Here life began to speak once more"?''

'Did you speak with her?'

'A great deal.'

'About what?'

'About our future. We'll live together, under the same roof, under the same Parisian sky. I'm happy, Tatusya. Quite happy.'

'I'm glad you're happy. Is she tall or small? What's she like? You used to fall in love with old hags.'

'They weren't old.'

'*You* are old. You're old and stupid. And ugly. And bald as an egg.'

'Never had I more excited, passionate, fantastical Imagination. I'm young, Tatusya. Young people can also be bald. I knew a boy—'

'You have one foot in the grave. Who is this woman?'

'What does it matter? She is my Beatrice, my Juliet, my Laura, my Ulrike von Lewetzov—'

'Are you sure she has none of those awful diseases? Lord's sake, Kostya, be careful!'

'Isn't it wonderful to perish in the arms of your beloved? Anyway I'll die soon, very soon, Tatusya.'

'Don't say that. We'll all die very soon, Kostya. But I'll die before you.'

'Just fancy falling in love on the brink of—'

'I forbid you to speak about funerals or any such matter.'

'All right. I defer—'

'Speak about beauty, food, wine, furniture, young people—'

'All right.'

They resumed their walk and mounted a few steps separating them from the discussions centred upon Russia and her resurrection. And then *Madame* was 'served'.

The *zakusky* and the fish *solnyanka* did not disappoint the lovers of Russian cuisine; they gave the hostess her due, drinking toasts to her health and munificence which they qualified as typically Russian.

'Yes, Maria Pavlovna. You've got no equals,' said Vitaly Maximilyanovich, spilling the champagne from his glass.

'Yes, Maria Pavlovna. French women have nothing on you,' said Stanislav Sabantuevich, picking a gherkin from his plate. The gherkin looped the loop near Stanislav Sabantuevich's mouth, dropped from his fork and landed on the plate of Natalia Surikovna.

'And what about English women? Tell us, Vasily Valeryanovich!'

'Well, as a matter of fact, English women don't—'

'That's exactly what I've just told you—they don't! Did you hear, Prokofy Savrasovich? Our Russian women, on the other hand—'

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky was talking about Russian men with two ladies and an old White-Army colonel; the latter affirmed that he had seen a Russian *poruchik* recover after being fatally wounded in the heart—three times in a row.

'He had three bullet wounds in his heart,' he confirmed, wielding his knife like a dagger. 'The Russian heart is a mystery,' he added, pointing his fork at his stomach. 'And a fourth bullet wounded him in the shoulder.'

'Russian shoulders are a mystery,' said Belozerkalsky who believed that patriotism was all right only in small doses. As if in answer to this irreverent remark, a broad-shouldered man flicked a champagne glass with his fingernail and rose from his chair. The general discussion died away and the broad-shouldered man unfolded a sheet of paper. He glanced around at his future audience and asked in a low voice if anybody present was hard of hearing. Nobody said anything. The man cleared his throat and proceeded to read the text out:

'O wonderful and glorious army of sufferers! Who can worthily glorify you? Blessed art thou, O Russian land cleansed by suffering! Thou hast been through the water of baptism, and passeth now through the fire of agony, and thou too shalt reach peace. Once Christians devoutly gathered the sand from the floor of the Coliseum soaked with martyrs' blood. The places where martyrs suffered were honoured. And now all of Russia is such a place. The ground was consecrated by their blood, and the air by the passing of their souls to heaven.'

Belozerkalsky instinctively cringed and closed his eyes, as he always did when a speaker encroached in public on intimate matters—on sacred, awesome aspects of human existence. And when he opened his eyes he realised that, in addition to Herculean shoulders, the man also had a Falstaffian paunch which seemed to jar with the subject matter of his speech.

'Yea, holy art thou, O Russia! He was right who wrote of old that thou art the third Rome, and a fourth shall not be. Through thy firm stand in the Orthodox faith thou hast excelled the Rome that baptised thee, and thou wilt be unexcelled to the end of the world. Shake off the sleep of indifference and laziness, ye sons of Russia! Look at the glory of her martyrdom and be clean, wash away your sins! Arise, stand up, Russia, thou who hast drunk of the cup of the Lord's anger from His own hand! When thy sufferings are ended, thy truth will go with thee, and the glory of the Lord will accompany thee! The nations will come to thy light and Kings to thy radiance. Then raise up thine eyes and look about thee: for the children come to thee from the west, and the north, and the sea, and the east, blessing in thee Christ forever.'

Belozerkalsky recalled a Soviet film of the forties that he had seen at the communist movie house in Paris. It was a post-war film and the actor entrusted with the role of Stalin stood and sometimes walked on stilts, as the giants do in the Chéreau production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The actor obviously was not used to stilts and his uneasiness seemed to indicate some flaws in Stalin's reign, unknown to the world at large: the treaty with Hitler had been forgotten or attributed to the shrewdness of Russia's and Europe's Saviour and the Gulag was deemed a concoction of envious imperialists. So Stalin mostly stood in the centre of the screen, shifting his gaze and turning his head in order to see what was going on around him. And children came to Him not in dribs and drabs but in crowds; they flocked to Him, carrying His portraits and banners with the names of their respective countries: France, Great Britain, the United States of America, Germany, Poland, Austria, Australia, Argentina. They closed in on Him, asking for His love and eternal protection. And smilingly He promised them an eternal and fraternal protection from Evil.

'Moscow is the third Rome,' said the White-Army general to Belozerkalsky. 'And, God willing, we'll save them all without exception. Just consider what has befallen humanity since the October Revolution! Just think! Degradation! Until the October Revolution Russia had been the bulwark of the earth. And what happens now? We're all living in degradation!'

'The Bolsheviks have at least preserved the beauty of my Petersburg,' answered Belozerkalsky. 'I understand the city is dilapidated, the walls of the palaces are falling down, crumbling. But they exist, they can be rebuilt, restored.'

'Do you know why?' asked the general, raising his knife.

'I beg your pardon?' Belozerkalsky put his fork down on the table as if he knew what was to come.

'Do you know why they preserved St Petersburg and maliciously destroyed Moscow—the bulwark of the Orthodox faith? What other city could compare with pre-Revolutionary Moscow for

the number of houses of God? "Forty times forty," as they used to say. There were almost two thousand churches in Moscow. And now? Who conducted the demolition of all those churches? Who indeed needed to do away with the Orthodox faith—the bulwark of Christianity on earth? Jews, my dear. Jews.'

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky removed the napkin from his lap, folded and rumpled it casually but with unusual resoluteness, put it on the table and got up. He shifted his gaze to the hostess and asked her permission to spend a few minutes on the terrace, pleading heartache and vertigo.

'Konstantin Alexeevich, Konstantin Alexeevich,' said five or six people at once.

'I've told you it's dangerous and ludicrous to fall in love at your age,' said his former mistress in a low voice, but those sitting around her could not help overhearing her medical remark.

'I do apologise,' said Belozerkalsky with a slight bow meant for the hostess and a few other ladies. 'I'll be back in no time at all.'

'Don't be such a spoilsport!' said Oleg Palisandrovich, raising his vodka glass as high as the chandelier. 'There's nothing wrong with your heart.'

Belozerkalsky apologised again and left the table. The hostess caught up with him and he kissed her hand absent-mindedly.

The fresh air did not change his mood; nor did it make him forget what he had heard. He recalled another mistress of his who, unable to handle her Russian and French vocabulary, wished to become mute, which might have allowed her to listen to other people with more attention and concentration. Belozerkalsky wished to become deaf and even blind. He shook his head and lifted up his eyes; inspired by a gust of wind, a page torn out from a newspaper hovered for a while over flowers and bushes. A fly in the ointment. He murmured to himself the Russian version of this saying: *lozhka degtyu v bochke myoda*. A spoonful of tar in a barrel overflowing with honey. He repeated the saying in a shrill voice, descended the steps, opened the gate and started walking away from the house.

CHAPTER 8

Konstantin Alexeevich adored Russia. He adored her all the more unconditionally since he had never lived there with the exception of the four years which had followed his untimely, ill-starred birth. He remembered of course a few smells, a few shapes associated in his mind with St Petersburg and the countryside where his ancestors' estate was located. He did not know whether those smells belonged to his Russian past or had been unwillingly borrowed from Paris or rather its suburbs where his parents had rented two rooms after their brilliant escape from the Country of Soviets. He did not know the origin of those smells, shapes and shadows and he was loath to question himself too closely on the subject—for fear of finding out the truth. Like anything inaccessible or lost forever, Russia had acquired the exuberant beauty of Paradise.

Where did he hear that patter of rain against the windows? Where? And where did that tinkling sound of a brook come from? From Berlin or Parisian suburbs? From Tsarskoe Selo? From a Wordsworth poem? From a Schubert lied? It was harmonious and melancholy; so it belonged to Russia.

Russia seemed to include whatever is beautiful and humane in the world. For all his patience and physical weakness, Belozerkalsky could not tolerate exceptions to that home-made rule. Anti-Semitism was his old enemy—his worst enemy perhaps, on account of its invincibility. Even the horror of concentration camps had failed to vanquish it. What could he do? He was a weak old man who had no opportunity to speak on the radio; he was not even a correspondent of a provincial newspaper. What could he do? This vice seemed to include whatever is evil in humanity: hatred of one's neighbour, envy, injustice, stupidity, brutality, cruelty. Anti-Semitism and Russia. In his frame of reference they were two poles of human world—negative and positive. They were two opposite, conflicting and contrasting principles.

Even if he happened to hear something along the lines of: 'I've nothing against the Jews in general, but I'd never let my son marry a Jewish woman,' he ran away, muttering excuses and slamming the doors and gates behind him.

He rose from the table and left the house where those abominable words had been uttered.

'Why did Konstantin Alexeevich leave us?'

'What fly has bitten him?'

'You know what an old woman Belozerkalsky is—he nearly had a fit because he got a few specks of mud on his shoes!'

'An old *man*!'

'I'd like to be a fly on the wall when he gets home.'

'He went into a hypnotic trance.'

'How rude, how uncivil. When I have a heart attack, I tell nobody about it—I'm no spoilsport. Why should other people suffer because of my frail constitution? So I stay and drink vodka and play cards, if necessary—'

'There's nothing wrong with his heart. I know his doctor personally. We meet and talk at the Salamandrovs every other evening.'

'They had some dreadful old ham in the main part who kept rolling his eyes and clutching at his heart.'

'He said he'd be back in a few moments.'

'In no time at all, if my memory—'

'Your memory is flawless, Lev Nikitich. Do you remember my sister Anna?'

'Anna Karenina?'

Vasily Valeryanovich went on talking to a very old lady whose name he had not bothered to commit to memory—out of prudence. He thought his memory might lose some of its treasures if he tried to accommodate another Russian patronymic. 'Females strive to pick good genes. But how to distinguish good genes from bad ones? Survival of the fittest, you know. Quite a good policy for a female is to set her heart on an old man. You see, old men have proven their ability to survive in spite of microbes and other hostile forces. So a young female is allying her genes with genes for longevity.'

'After several doctors failed to find a cure for her illness, my wife decided to go to a faith healer.'

'Faith will move mountains.'

'Why did Konstantin Alexeevich leave us?'

His departure was and remained inexplicable. He ought to have slapped the speaker's face, exposing him in front of everybody. He ought to have challenged him to single combat; and yet he was quite aware that no-one, not even the old White-Army warier, would have laid himself open to ridicule by fighting a duel in the second half of the twentieth century. He ought to have...

He was sitting in one of his armchairs. He had lost his name and become KAB once more: his television spoke only French and sometimes English but so far had stubbornly refused to learn any Russian. Two men threw their bearskin pelisses onto the glittering alien snow and cocked their pistols. Or their revolvers? Pistols, revolvers, Brownings. Over whom were they fighting the duel? Over a woman no doubt. *Cherchez la femme*. She was unworthy of their love, valour and bravery, but one man was lying dead on the snow and the other suffered agonies of guilt. Nobody could do anything about it now. Now, now, now, now. KAB dozed off, woke up, dozed off and woke up again. He could do nothing about it now. The film was over; so was the dinner.

Evil was spreading all over the world and he had missed an unexpected opportunity to hamper its expansion by interfering with the pernicious flow of the old general's monologue. It had been both an interior and an exterior monologue—the avalanche of Evil. He might have excised its exterior; he might have silenced the wicked patriot, turning his animosity and malevolence into their opposite:

kindness, tenderness, affection, warmth. But he had merely left the room and the house. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. A representative of the Russian intelligentsia. He had merely left the house, letting Evil follow its course, its cosmic itinerary.

Everything around him seemed to be tarnished and vitiated by Evil in spite of the double-locked doors and the imperviousness of the curtains. Like a horror-movie monster on the loose, Evil had stolen into his apartment and was now breathing near his face. The spoonful of tar had spoiled the honey. 'One sentence can destroy the world's harmony,' he thought. 'One gesture, one malicious glance. No happiness is conceivable in a world where such ideas are engendered and such sentences crop up during dinner and cocktail parties. And even if we only think without daring give utterance to our thoughts, if we only dream—'

He recalled what his New York friend had told him once about Auden's lectures on Shakespeare, about *The Merchant of Venice*. 'The Jew represents seriousness to the Gentile, and we don't want to be reminded that something serious exists in the world.' He pondered on these words for a while and said out loud, 'We shouldn't treat such a serious subject as life with frivolity. Actors often say they don't take themselves seriously. Why should they? But what about Dante and Tolstoy? What would they have written?' His voice trailed off hesitantly.

That night he had four nightmares and three soothing, more or less peaceful dreams. The absolute harmony of the universe had been utterly destroyed and there was no hope of its restoration. The past was irredeemable. What event could counterbalance and consequently wipe out from the ever-lasting present the crimes of Hitler and his cronies? He knew he would never be able to forgive them and one memory of this sort was liable to blacken the future forever. 'I will remember them outside your body, in another incarnation,' said his soul. 'I will never forgive or forget them—not even in another world, within the context of another history or another humanity, within the boundaries of another cosmos. I will never forgive them, I will never forget them.'

In the second nightmare Belozerkalsky was granted an interview with his own body; it spoke about decay and the tomb to which it had been recently confined.

'When?' Belozerkalsky put this question to his body with curiosity and anxiety.

'The day before yesterday,' answered the body.

'I didn't notice anything.'

'You never notice anything. You're too old. You should have taken care of me. You should have pampered and nursed me instead of undermining my strength by useless worries and quarrels and desires. A wise landowner knows that ivy debilitates trees, disintegrates mortar in walls and dislodges roof tiles. So he gets his gardener to remove the ivy with which his estate is overrun and burn it. You neither removed nor burnt your ivy. You killed your own body.'

'You're right there. I've had an urge to kill you many times. Many times. You've been so disobedient, so nasty, so apathetic, so amorphous. Even now you disobey and contradict me—from the grave.'

'It's too late now. Let bygones be bygones. No point in squabbling and bickering.'

'Are you really my body? You must be my heart. I fell in love last week, the day before yesterday.'

*'My heart has left its dwelling-place
And can return no more.'*

'No, I'm your body. And your heart is inside me.'

'Could you let me see my heart?'

'Why aren't you interested in your soul?'

*'Fix every wandering thought upon
That quarter where all thought is done—'*

'You're *not* my soul. And I'll never forgive you for your whims and pranks.'

'I couldn't care less about your wrath. I'm independent now, I'm free. I've been detached from you for good. You have no hold over me any more.'

'I can wait! You won't get off lightly when I catch up with you, when I capture you. When I put you where you belong—in a cage!'

'In what cage, in your rib cage? You don't have it any longer.'

'In the cage of my ego.'

'When? When are you planning to do it?'

'And your resurrection at the Last Judgement?'

'Do you remember what Origen said about it? Of course you don't. Your memory is impaired.'

'It's not. I can recite the alphabet, if you wish.'

'Origen said that, at the resurrection, our physical bodies would be transformed into absolutely ethereal bodies. You won't be able to capture an ethereal substance.'

'Origen was condemned for this heresy!'

'In the Hereafter everybody reads Origen. He is extremely popular here.'

Belozerkalsky woke up screaming against the misery of death and resurrection; for two endless hours he fought off the unconscious and its demons. Then he fell asleep once more and soon found himself on the terrace of the dacha from which he had escaped, taking a solemn vow never to return, on no account. The broad-shouldered man was still speaking, a champagne glass in his hand:

'In past centuries there were only a few Russian martyrs. "The glorious army of martyrs", whose blood became the seed of Christianity throughout the world, of whom the Church sings almost daily, were practically absent from among the Saints of Russia. The time came for their ranks to be filled.'

'You mean you're glad that the Bolsheviks increased the number of martyrs in Russian history?' Belozerkalsky rose from his chair.

'Woe betide the man who cannot fathom the unfathomable ways of God! These things happen and must happen. God in His infinite wisdom—'

'Do you think the Gulag was logical? Do you think Russia deserved sixty million deaths?'

'The Russian nation is a religious nation, which distinguishes it from other European nations wallowing in luxury, self-abasement and self-ignorance. Other European nations worship beauty.'

'Many countries and nations aspire to become a centrepiece of humanity and human history,' said Belozerkalsky. 'Nationalistic ideals, regenerated or rejuvenated in the second half of our century, inflame popular feelings, causing damage to the architectural beauty of our world.'

'Russia kneels down before God. Russia had and still has a religious mission, not an aesthetic one.'

'We've got so many affinities with the Jews. There are only two religious nations in the Western world. Actually the Russians are serious too.'

'Even drunkards are serious, don't you think?' asked Andrey Ursulovich. 'They settle down in Hell because living in a fool's paradise is not their glass of vodka. From the depths of Kierkegaardian despair they mock the happy-go-lucky who enjoy themselves without giving a thought to death and distress.'

'The happy-go-unlucky,' commented the broad-shouldered man.

'It's a chicken and egg situation,' said Belozerkalsky. 'Do the Russians drink because life is absurd or does life look absurd when they get drunk?'

'Even Oblomovs are serious because they know that all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?' Andrey Ursulovich spooned a little sauce over the fish lying on his plate.

Alexey Aristarkhovich raised his hand and the broad-shouldered man nodded in agreement. 'The Americans say we are slaves. But is it better to be arrogant, overbearing, vainglorious? American tourists think that Italian coffee is good only because *they* drink it.'

'And only *when* they drink it,' said Andrey Ursulovich.

'Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth,' said Alexey Aristarkhovich.

'And heaven.' Andrey Ursulovich pointed to the chandelier.

'What will the conceited inherit?' asked Alexey Aristarkhovich.

'Only money,' answered the broad-shouldered man.

'What's more, meekness is not incompatible with greatness.' Alexey Aristarkhovich raised both hands and traced a circle under the chandelier as if to show what he meant by greatness. 'Mandelstam was meek,' he added, unexpectedly offering his listeners a nice example of a smoker's cough.

'There are lots of coughs and colds going around at the moment,' said Tatusya.

'In the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century Russia forewent her duty to God and thereby betrayed the Russian vocation and mission,' the broad-shouldered man went on. 'The Russians became interested in secular art. Instead of creating icons they started to paint landscapes. Instead of writing comments on the Scriptures and Sacred History they composed novels and poems. And they ended up in jail—I mean they were severely punished by God. Such punishments befall only religious nations that betray their destiny and mission. France isn't worthy of God's fury.'

'Did Gumilev deserve it? Did Mandelstam deserve it?' asked Belozerkalsky. 'The Russian nation consists of individuals. Pain is personal, death is personal.'

The broad-shouldered man drained his glass of champagne and continued to read the text out:

'After the October Revolution a countless number of martyrs were added to Russian history. Every age group, every province contributed to the new martyrs.'

'Martyrdom is not an income tax!' Belozerkalsky swallowed a mosquito accidentally and had a sudden coughing fit.

'I need to buy some more cough mixture,' said Tatusya.

'In the later stages of the disease the victim will start to cough up blood,' said Andrey Ursulovich, casting a quick glance at Belozerkalsky.

'Russia was sanctified by their blood.' The broad-shouldered man sat down and helped himself to a slice of sturgeon. 'May I have some more champagne, please? Yes, Russia was covered in their blood from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, from Kiev to Vladivostok,' he added as he tipped the bottle up. 'And the Russian soil was sanctified by it. And the Russian air—' He interrupted the speech to munch the morsel of salmon he had adroitly put into his mouth right after the words 'their blood'. 'I haven't had a morsel of food since I left the house early in the morning. What a dainty morsel! Morsel, morsel, morsel. Must come from Petrossian, if I'm not mistaken. As I was saying, the Russian air was sanctified. By what?' He stared Belozerkalsky in the face. 'By what?'

'By the passing of dead souls to heaven, to Paradise.' Belozerkalsky seemed to be mesmerised into obedience.

'Souls can't be dead, especially those of martyrs. The human soul is immortal, not immoral! Is the human soul dead or immortal?'

'Immortal, alive forever.'

'You're not a bad pupil after all. Don't be so naughty, next time. Do you hear me? Otherwise I'll give you a good thrashing. All right. You may sit down and have a slice of salmon. But no caviar, today. You haven't deserved it.'

Andrey Ursulovich sprang up, eyed Belozerkalsky from head to toe, shifted his gaze to the caviar and bowed to the broad-shouldered man. '*Monsieur le Professeur*, I'd like to say a few words about the temptations swarming around us like black clouds of locusts, stretching around us like an ocean—'

'And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth; and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. What kind of temptations? Greediness?'

'With all due respect, *Monsieur le Professeur*, I meant ecumenism which suggests to all a union in one Faith, no matter what religion one adheres to.'

'Okay. But stop staring at the caviar.'

'Those who invite us to participate in this ecumenism say that every Christian faith has a part of the Christian Truth of Christ and that every faith must contribute its part of the Truth to this new emerging, all-encompassing Faith. This sounds like an attractive idea, doesn't it? But, for the sake of this attractive idea, we're expected to declare that we have only a part of the Truth; in other words, we have to admit that not all our Faith is true, that our Orthodox religion is true only to a certain degree.' And again he eyed Belozerkalsky from head to toe.

'What's *your* opinion?' asked *Monsieur le Professeur*, staring Belozerkalsky in the face.

'All religions are true,' answered Belozerkalsky. 'The important thing is to feel God's presence everywhere.'

Andrey Ursulovich grabbed hold of Belozerkalsky's nose and gave it a violent twist. He then walked towards the chair on which Belozerkalsky had been sitting, took a fork and drove it into the slice of *balik* lying on Belozerkalsky's plate.

'What Orthodox Christian will agree to the proposition that some part of the Holy Orthodox Faith is not correct? That only a part of our Faith is just and true? Never will the Christian Orthodox conscience accept such a thing. What would St Seraphim and St John of Kronstadt tell us? They who lived in this Faith, they who celebrated it, who found joy in it. What would they say if we were to acknowledge that in our and their Faith not all is true? Our Orthodox Church knows that it stands within Absolute Truth.' Andrey Ursulovich swallowed the *balik* and smashed Belozerkalsky's plate against the nearest wall. A long snake-like whip was descending from the ceiling.

'Doubt is a wonderful human sentiment!' shouted Belozerkalsky, but luckily no-one heard him, for he had slipped into his fourth and last nightmare through which he was now floundering. He ran into one of his former Russian mistresses—in the 6th *arrondissement*, near the Place de Furstenberg. She obviously did not recognise him. As he turned back and went in pursuit of her figure a policeman stopped him.

'Fiddling while Moscow burns,' he shouted furiously. 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' KAB took out his identity card, but the policeman paid no attention to it as if he could deduce everything he needed from the face of the culprit. 'I know who you are—an old man who can't tear himself away from his youth. You should prepare yourself for death. From the middle of life onward, only he remains vitally alive who is ready to *die with life*. A youthful septuagenarian. *Alter Junge*. A psychological monstrosity. Anyway you don't look young for your age. Straighten your back—try not to slouch. Only young and vigorous men are allowed to court women. That man over there.' KAB looked around but saw only middle-aged women and an old cyclist crossing the street. 'You should

buy a pair of glasses or a monocle. You can't see anything.' And the policeman covered KAB's eyes with his hand. Suddenly KAB saw the agent, the real-estate agent. And the agent was talking to him:

'For a while you taught at a school for "difficult" children, remember?'

'I remember nothing of the sort.'

'Of course you don't. Though not actually delinquents, those children suffered from some kind of emotional disturbance—a fact that didn't prevent some of the older girls, aged between fourteen and fifteen, from being fully developed physically. Since you were young and inexperienced as a teacher, you found yourself becoming a particular butt for these older girls. One of their favourite tricks was to remove their pants during your classes and to sit in deliberately provocative ways. They would also walk over to where you stood and kiss your hand. They called you "father" and they would point out they didn't mind being raped. "Parents should rape their children," they shouted. "It's a law of nature. You must know it as a teacher. Why don't you love your daughters? Why are you acting so selfishly, Father? What are you writing on the blackboard? We don't need your scribbles. We need your caresses." And they would throw your books out of the window.'

'I remember nothing of the sort.'

'What if those teenage girls attack you? Just like in the old times, in the good old days. As an under-sized boy you were often a victim of playground termagants. I recall that once you were pinned against a fence by a strong girl while a number of other girls played around with your school cap. You struggled, but she only pushed and kneaded you more with her ample buttocks until you—'

At this point the policeman removed his hand from KAB's eyes and the agent vanished into thin air.

'I once saw a trompe l'œil of the forbidden fruit which was so realistic that everybody tried to pluck it,' said the policeman. 'Why are you following this woman?'

'A distaste for solitude...a craving for society. Natural instinct draws one human being to another.'

'The wise man is content with himself.'

'She is my former mistress.'

'I don't think you've ever had a mistress. Not even in your youth.' The policeman touched KAB's body in several places, pressing his fingers against KAB's bones that crunched and crumbled. 'It's not your body, is it? Your body was buried yesterday.'

'The day before yesterday, *Monsieur l'agent*.'

'Anyway, even *that* body, the one which is in your tomb, wasn't fit for the job—I've no doubt about it. And this thing here isn't a body. It's nothing, nothing.' The policeman touched KAB's body once again. 'I do love the feel of nothingness,' and the policeman touched the air near KAB's right cheek. 'There's nothing like nothingness. It's so light, so pure.'

'You've touched the air. And the air is *something*.'

'Not in your presence,' retorted the policeman. 'You create an absolute nothingness around you. Within a five-metre radius approximately. So if you try to clasp to your heart a lady after your own heart you're bound to fail pitifully. Unless you love nothingness as much as I do.'

'I hate nothingness, especially the one created by my presence.'

'You've no choice, though. You're a *Platzhalter des Nichts* who spends his life in a sentry box. A sentry of nothingness. I drove over to Moscow last summer. And at night I parked my car outside the French embassy, within sight of a sentry box, to deter thieves.'

'You've been to Russia? Please tell me about your trip.'

'Russian militarism and expansionism!' shouted the policeman all of a sudden.

'But the treaty our president signed recently contains an important clause to quell fears of territorial expansionism.'

'The Russians have always signed hypocritical treaties, throughout their history. What interests them in fact is the conquest of other countries, the usurpation of other thrones and prerogatives.'

'One throne is enough for us,' said *Monsieur le Professeur*.

'One country is enough for every man,' said Belozerkalsky.

'One body is enough for you, KAB,' said the policeman. 'I saw you pursue a woman and I thought, "If I don't stop that old womaniser, who must have escaped from an old people's home, he is sure to blow his brains out or swallow something indigestible. In a fit of pique." So I barred your way and stopped you. Out of pity and compassion. Do you know that, to escape the hunter, a beaver bites off his own testicles?'

'Could you please let me have another go at it? Perhaps this time—'

'Don't try to touch them,' said the policeman in a confidential tone of voice. 'You may look at them from afar. Buy a strong pair of glasses first. Incidentally, Plato approved of nude living. In his *Laws* he advocated games in which young men and women competed against one another in the nude. In Sparta, as well as in other Greek cities, maidens and married women practised gymnastic feats and danced stark naked in public.'

'One vase painting depicts an enthusiastic male audience applauding a pair of Spartan girls,' agreed Belozerkalsky.

'But never get close to those girls, however great the temptation. Not even with your new glasses on. Never picture to yourself what might happen if you were tête-à-tête or rather *bouche-à-bouche* with one of them in your room, let alone in your bed. And if you do find yourself in the company of a beautiful girl, you should dislodge from both your mind and body whatever pertains to sexual delights.'

'He is already empty-headed and empty-bodied,' shouted Andrey Ursulovich. 'And empty-handed into the bargain. He always arrives at parties empty-handed, even when it says "Please bring a bottle" on the invitation.'

'Why don't you go solo instead?' asked the policeman. 'Diogenes used to indulge in the luxury of self-abuse outdoors—in the market-place, if you please! And that one-man show is widely regarded as his masterpiece.'

KAB thanked the policeman for his advice and began to walk and then to run in the hope of catching up with his former mistress.

I am content to follow to its source

Every event in action or in thought

He was surprised to find that he could run for an hour or so without gasping for breath. His body seemed to have a large enough stock of air to see him to the Moon and back. 'A Russian cosmonaut on the Moon,' he thought.

'Running can strengthen your heart and muscles, but conversely, it can also damage your knee joints and the bones in your feet,' said Tatusya.

He lowered his eyes and looked at his knees, at his shoes, at the space surrounding his shoes. He instantly realised he had not budged an inch from the spot where he had encountered the compassionate police officer. 'It was less tiring running on the way back because I had the wind in my favour,' he thought. There was nobody and nothing in sight—no trees, no cars, no houses, no men or women. Only the Moon, only the Moon.

With how sad steps, ô Moone, thou climb'st the skies,

How silently, and with how wanne a face

'Did he say five metres or five kilometres? Within a radius of five metres or five kilometres?'

KAB put the scattered pieces of his memory together and politely asked them to remember the exact words of the policeman. Strenuously he wormed his way into his memory's confidence, courting the past with ingratiating remarks and endearments. He overdid it, overshooting the mark. Too many things emerged from his memory; too much sadness rose to the surface of his consciousness and was reluctant now to sink into oblivion again, for all his supplications and entreaties. And sadness is akin to a Russian guest who, on his way out, loiters before the front door, bidding you farewell every five minutes. 'Don't be afraid of a sitting guest but fear the one who stands up,' as a Russian saying goes.

'Leave me alone! What have I done to you? Why do you torture me? I have come to the borders of sleep—'

At last he recalled he was asleep in his armchair and promptly woke up. His television was showing an old man and a young woman. A presenter asked the young woman if she had married the old man out of love or for the sake of his 'lifestyle', as he put it. By way of an answer she shifted her

gaze towards Belozerkalsky and the other television viewers. The radiant smile and the sparkle in her blue eyes were the clear signs of a woman deeply in love.

'I know I'm an old man,' said the old man, showing an attitude of quiet resignation. 'And I've no illusions about what I can offer my wife. Beauty and vigour remain the prerogative of youth. Experience and money—'

'You're my father now,' said the young woman.

'When did your parents divorce?' asked the presenter.

'My father died two years ago. And my husband was my father's best friend.'

'I hope your husband won't identify with your father to the point of passing away.' The presenter gave a toothy grin and Belozerkalsky switched him off.

Why was she looking at me? The sparkle in her blue eyes. She was in love, wasn't she? With whom? What a pity I'm not her husband. I might have married her if I had asked the agent to find a *young* lady for the maid's room. Why have I always preferred middle-aged women? Don't I need a child, a daughter? I might teach her how to enjoy life to the utmost. She might fall in love with my lifestyle, with my sense of beauty. Style is the man. Style is always young and vigorous. I would relish her beauty and lavish paternal care and love—'

Suddenly he recalled that he was *already* in love. What kind of love was it? Paternal, unrequited, senile, sterile? *Peu importe!* He was in love. He was in love with a middle-aged lady. Whatever nightmares he could traverse in his sleep or in reality, his love was something reliable and permanent. He still felt its fire burning in his bosom. He even touched it and its intolerable heat scorched both his hands. He knew he was dreaming once more; he also knew that his present dream had nothing in common with nightmares.

*Cease dreames, th'imag'ry of our day desires,
To modell forth the passions of the morrow*

He dreamt of his love. He rushed towards the only door he had spotted in his dream and opened it. She stood on the threshold. He put on his new glasses and she obediently minced into his bedroom. He reached for her dress in order to unbutton it, but his fingers encountered no resistance as if she had already stripped her clothes off. As his fingers continued to float near the pillow, the truth of the policeman's statement dawned upon him. 'I love the feel of nothingness,' he told himself and she smiled. 'I love the feel of *your* nothingness.' She smiled approvingly. And she said something. He did not hear what she had said, but he smiled too, watching her lips move up and down. A feather fell away from her hat and fluttered to the floor. He bent down and picked it up. The feather was real, tangible, beautiful.

CHAPTER 9

Upon the death of his brother-in-law—the husband of his half-sister—Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky came into the possession of many books devoted to the country of his birth. In past centuries and even at the beginning of our untrustworthy century that country was called Russia and sometimes St Russia, depending on the personality of the speaker. But finally her inhabitants, who had been swaying from one extreme to the other for more than a thousand years, grew bored with history and decided to change EVERYTHING, including the destiny of humanity. In passing, they changed the name of their motherland.

Russia, *Rossiya*. When speaking about *Rossiya* in the present tense, Konstantin Alexeevich would refer to her neutrally as 'USSR'. In the past tense he might call her 'our motherland' or 'our former motherland', which often led to an outburst of sympathy on the part of his American acquaintances.

'Come on, KAB. It's still *your* Russia, don't you think? Russia is eternal and indestructible. Presidents come and go but Russia stands, abides, persists. Anyway justice will prevail, as it always does. Soon you'll visit your Russia, your eternal motherland. Don't cry! Cool off!'

'I'm not crying. I'm not crying.'

'There are tears in your eyes and your voice is trembling.'

'I slept awfully last night. My eyes are smarting and I have a tingling in my ears. And my rheumatism is back. And—'

'Don't hide your tears. There's nothing to be ashamed of. All Russians are nostalgia-stricken and sentimental. The more times I visit France, the more the French way of life grows on me.'

'I can assure you I'm not crying.'

He was. And his hands were not large enough to cover his tears. So he would totter to the nearest window, fumbling for his favourite handkerchief in his cavernous pockets.

He knew from bitter experience that even his favourite handkerchief was too thin and small—utterly unequal to the occasion. Most of the time he was obliged to seek refuge in his bedroom.

He was kitted out with all kinds of anti-lachrymal objects: tissues, towels, cotton buds, sponges and Optrex eye-baths. His friends and acquaintances knocked at the door of his bedroom, shouting:

'Of course you lost everything after the Revolution. Your estates, your serfs.'

'I've lost nothing. All my possessions are with me.'

'We won't speak about it any more. This memory always brings tears to your eyes.'

'I don't remember anything. I was two years old.'

'You must go there. You'll remember an astonishing number of details, important and unimportant. And you'll see St Petersburg, Russian snow, Russian faces—'

One of his American friends suggested he should go to Russia in his dreams.

'But how to create appropriate dreams?' asked Belozerkalsky. 'I know there are special places...sacred sites dedicated to divinities.'

'I read a book recently,' his friend replied. 'In this book the science of dream incubation is taught—how to *set up dreaming*! You start by doing something very simple. Just look at your hands—in your dream. The next step is to learn to travel. Quite similar to the way you look at your hands. You just have to will yourself to move, to go places. You want to go to Russia, right? What stops you from going there? Just will yourself to go there!'

A crowd speaking the Russian language. A Russian murmur in the streets; the air quivering with Russian sounds. The snow grunting and grumbling under one's shoes. His Russian thoughts were teeming with trivialities, but he did not analyse them in terms of artistic beauty. He *felt* them.

He could have travelled to Russia in the fifties, during the period of 'Thaw'; he hesitated and the melting snow of liberalism hardened into ice again. But the frontiers remained more or less open—like his front door. Of course there was a sentry on guard; many objects and subjects had been crunched under his boots. The sentry was guarding the portals of Soviet Law.

On several occasions Belozerkalsky spoke with the Russian émigrés who had taken the plunge and, unmindful of warnings and scepticism, visited the Soviet Union. 'How was it? Is it still Russia? How is Petersburg?' The snow was the same; yet, in the course of Soviet History, it had become somewhat dirty, losing its proverbial purity. The émigrés shook their heads, shooed away importunate ghosts with their arms and refused to answer his questions.

French tourists were more talkative—in the past.

On traverse la Néva en voiture ; la glace, de deux ou trois pieds d'épaisseur malgré quelque dégels temporaires suffisants pour faire fondre la neige, ne bougera plus qu'au printemps, à la grande débâcle ; elle est assez forte pour supporter des chariots pesants, de l'artillerie même. Des branches de pin désignent les chemins à suivre et les places qu'il faut éviter.

La Perspective Nevsky est à la fois la rue marchande et la belle rue de Saint-Pétersbourg ; les boutiques s'y louent aussi cher que sur le boulevard des Italiens : c'est un mélange de magasins, de palais, d'églises tout à fait original.

L'hôtel de Russie, situé au coin de la place Michel, près de la Perspective Nevsky, n'est guère moins grand que l'hôtel du Louvre à Paris ; ses corridors sont plus longs que bien des rues, et l'on peut s'y fatiguer. Le bas est occupé par de vastes salons où l'on dîne et que décorent des plantes de serre. Dans la première salle, sur une espèce de bar-room, du caviar, des harengs, des sandwiches de pain blanc et de pain bis, du fromage de plusieurs sorts, des flacons de bitter de kummel, d'eau-de-vie, servent, selon la mode russe, à ouvrir l'appétit aux consommateurs.

Now they confined their descriptions of St Petersburg to smiles and vague answers: 'Yes, very beautiful. Yes, a lot of vodka.' They also shook their heads and waved their arms as if holding something at bay.

'What about the Taurida Palace? What about its Rotunda decorated with busts and statues in marble and lit by the windows of the lofty ornamented cupola? And the double range of Ionic columns leading to the ballroom which can scarcely be described in words?'

'Dirty, very dirty. There's a statue of Lenin in the middle of the ballroom.'

'Is the ballroom two-hundred-and-eighty feet long and seventy-eight wide?'

'Hard to say. The statue of Lenin is so big that anything else seems quite small.'

'And what about the eighteen Ionic pillars? Apparently their shafts are decorated with gold and silver festoons in imitation of laurel—'

'Now they're decorated with the busts of Khrushchev.' And several years later: 'Now they're decorated with the busts of Brejnev.'

'A superb lustre bearing sockets for seven hundred wax tapers—'

'No. A huge hammer and sickle—'

Belozerkalsky went to the Aeroflot agency near the Opera and took a few leaflets adorned with timetables and up-to-date images of St Petersburg. In one of the leaflets there was a text on a blue background: 'The Trans-Siberian route is the shortest and the most convenient route from Paris, London, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Frankfurt or Rome via Moscow to Tokyo.' A big Europe-sized star extending beyond the Western Soviet frontier indicated the whereabouts of Moscow.

He studied the leaflets thoroughly. As he read and re-read the new descriptions of Russian beauties the old chronicles and memoirs were fading out of his mind. Before that visit to the Aeroflot agency, he used to recite, standing by the window of the living room: 'Numerous vessels were sailing down its stream, pleasure-boats and gondolas plied on the still surface,' or 'Many of the arrangements made on that grand occasion, in which Asiatic splendour vied with European taste, still exist in its interior.' Now he had even forgotten the nature of the occasion, let alone the exact wording of the description. His memory was usurped by: 'There is not a single district in the city where one would not find a single monument dedicated to the Great October Revolution. In many streets the houses are furnished with commemorative plaques evoking the heroic pages of the party's and Lenin's life at the time of the preparation and completion of the Great October Revolution.'

'I won't look at them. There must be other things, for instance—' But his memory, instead of supplying him with a respectable name such as 'the Imperial Mews' or 'the Marble Palace', was mumbling perfidiously: 'At the top of the pedestal is fixed a heavy machine gun bearing the inscription, "And three cheers for the Socialist Revolution!"'

'Hypocrisy, calculated bestiality.' He could not visit a country where human thought was constantly distorted into an alien and ludicrous pattern. 'Warping the lives and minds of innocent people.'

'Are you talking about the KGB?'

'They wring, wrench and wrest—'

'*Gulag Archipelago*?'

'Dislocating, distorting—'

'Don't you worry,' his acquaintances repeated reassuringly. 'Justice will prevail. People can't lie forever.'

'They can,' he would answer. 'They can lie and distort and dislocate and torture and kill forever. Humanity is awful, awful.'

Once he went to Moscow without knowing it. In spite of himself. Unconsciously, unimaginably.

His commercial associate sent him a ticket Paris-Tokyo. Belozerkalsky knew the date and the hour of his departure; he did not even look at the ticket. He boarded a JAL flight at Charles-de-Gaulle airport and only on the plane did he realise—'The Trans-Siberian route is the shortest and the most convenient route from Paris to Tokyo.' The most convenient route. He drank a few glasses of champagne; he drank a bottle of champagne. The Russian language everywhere. Moscow. 'Deeply impressive is the sight of the Moscow Kremlin at any time of the day or night, in any season of the year. How many great men (and even more unknown men) have stood enchanted before this product of human genius!' But he would not see the Kremlin. Pity. He would be there in transit only. Pity. *Kreml*!. 'A Russian hears its name, which reminds him of his heritage, and miraculously finds himself in mental union with his forefathers and the millennial history of his people.' Pity. He was sipping the champagne from the wayward, dodging glass. Torture, dislocation, distortion. Pity. 'Why didn't I do it before?' he asked himself. How? As a normal French tourist or as an old Russian émigré who is pardoned and welcomed to his native city. St Petersburg, Moscow, Suzdal, lake Baikal. They do not torture people as much as they used to, In Stalin's days. Conscience, conscience. What is conscience? A name, a mere sound. Can you touch it? No. Can you feel it? Yes, sometimes. A sensory illusion. Moscow, in transit.

'I'll stay,' he said to the stewardess in Russian. 'I won't go to Japan. They'll grant me a visa. I'm old. I left St Petersburg when I was three. Underage. I don't remember anything, I didn't know anything. My parents hadn't divulged their projects. An irresponsible child. My parents are to blame. Why didn't the authorities put my parents in prison? I wouldn't have left Russia for all the world. I'm most unhappy here, abroad, in Western Europe. Man ought to be at one with nature and architecture. And from his ashes may be made the violet of his native land. At least I'll die in Russia, in St Petersburg. But it looks in truth as if the quiet bones were blest among familiar names to rest and in the places of his youth. In St Petersburg, in Pavlovsk. Nobody loves me, humanity is awful. I adore Russia, I adore Russian nature. The nature of Russia doesn't fire the imagination with surprising rainbow-coloured landscapes full of contrasts and exotic flowers. It is soft and modest, appealing to everybody through a particular charm which is nowhere to be experienced except in the Russian countryside, in Russian forests and meadows. Russian nature conceals in its bosom a lyricism beyond

compare that makes us scrutinise the harmony of the surrounding world and perceive it not only through our eyes but also with our heart.'

The stewardess said 'Yes' and brought him a bottle of vodka. He gulped down six glasses in succession. He made inquiries about Soviet customs officers and showed the stewardess his passport. She smiled and said, 'Yes, yes.'

'Do you think they'll let me stay in Moscow for a month or two? I mean in Petersburg? I'd stay in Moscow only a week or a fortnight at most.'

'*Da*,' answered the stewardess. A new smile, quite indistinguishable from the one he had seen before.

'I'd like to go to Vladimir as well. And perhaps to the Black Sea, to the Crimea. We stayed in the Crimea for a while. In 1918, in 1919. Before leaving Russia forever. I'd like to go to *Grusiya*. Georgia,' he repeated in English.

'I've been to Georgia once,' answered the stewardess. 'I like the United States of America. Do you like the United States of America?'

'Russia, Russia,' he vociferated. 'The charm of Russian nature is simple like a sunset. But this simplicity is touching and indescribable. If you let it reach into your heart—'

She said, 'Yes' and bowed ceremoniously.

'Could you issue a visa here, on the plane? You're Japanese, aren't you? The Japanese can do EVERYTHING, can't they? Impossible is not Japanese, is it?' She bowed again. 'Well, never mind. Doesn't matter at all. I'll wait. I've waited for decades—my whole life, actually. I'll wait for another twenty minutes.'

He fell asleep and was awakened by the same stewardess who told him in English that he should disembark immediately and do some shopping in the duty-free boutiques so as not to delay the cleaning of the aircraft.

'Duty-free boutiques, eh? I'm in Russia and you talk about shopping. You can't buy Russia, can you? Even the Japanese can't buy Russia.'

A corridor, a hall. 'Transit?' asked a Russian-looking lady. 'Here, please.' She motioned him in without a smile. Her English accent was dreadful. Submissively Belozerkalsky sat down on a chair. He got up and headed for the rectangular hole beside which stood a military man.

'Transit?' asked the military man.

'Out,' said Belozerkalsky in English.

'Transit?' asked the military man. 'Here.' The military man was speaking English. His accent was even more dreadful than the one Belozerkalsky had heard before.

'I want to go out,' said Belozerkalsky in English.

'Shops?' asked the military man. 'Here.' He directed his gaze to another rectangular aperture beyond which something was shimmering like snow by moonlight.

'No shops,' said Belozerkalsky in English. 'I want out.'

'Transit?' asked the military man.

'No transit.'

'Flight?' asked the military man.

'Visa,' said Belozerkalsky.

'Visa?' asked the military man.

'I want to get a visa.'

'Visa?' asked the military man. 'Passport!' That was no question. Belozerkalsky receded a few steps and came to a standstill in the very middle of the hall. He did not sit down for thirteen minutes. Then he sat down, sprang up, cast a furtive glance at the military man and went out to do some shopping.

The duty-free shop was cluttered with bottles of Soviet champagne and vodka that turned out to be the primary source of the shimmer he had glimpsed during his discussion with the military man. With a grimace he turned away from the bottles and touched a fur coat that hung opposite a huge box of caviar and two *matreshkas* displaying their painted joy. A shop assistant came up to him but said nothing. Belozerkalsky touched the fur coat once again and looked expectantly at the shop assistant. The young lady said nothing; she was rather beautiful. Would she have spoken to him had he touched her uniform? He did not try the experiment. He approached the box of caviar but did not touch it.

'Shall I speak to him, Ksyusha?' There were two young ladies in the shop, two shop assistants.

'Too old and repugnant.'

'Do you think he's a multimillionaire?'

'Maybe. They're rich in the West. Everybody's rich and has a car.'

'Shall I speak to him?'

'Put on some lipstick, first.'

'He's got no wedding ring, Ksyusha,' and she hastily extracted a mirror from her pocket. A mirror and a powder puff.

Belozerkalsky fixed his eyes on Ksyusha, turned round and left the duty-free shop. Their voices, however, continued to resound throughout the terminal. 'There are microphones everywhere,' he thought.

'Impotent. I found him out at once. Impotent and gay.'

'I should have spoken to him. *Popitka ne pitka*.'

Popitka ne pitka. An attempt is no torture. Makes no sense except in Russian, in Russia. It is a torture, as a matter of fact. A sheer torture, an ordeal. Like vapours tost into the nothingness of scorn and noise.

Belozerkalsky sat down on the same chair. The same military man was watching him closely. It was dark. It was not as dark as pitch. It was as dark as Sheremetyevo airport.

'In the passage formed on each side of the room by the double row of columns, there are, at regular distances, chandeliers of cut-glass, the lights of which are reflected by mirrors of great

magnitude. In the centre, a superb lustre, bearing sockets for seven hundred wax tapers, is suspended from the Ionic soffit—'

CHAPTER 10

'I'll go with her. I'll show her the place of my birth, my house, my room, my bed. I'll recognise my room, won't I? I'll show her the ice on the Neva—'

Konstantin Alexeevich adored Russia but he could not go there alone. He needed to share his excitements and disappointments with a kindred soul, with a future wife—with the middle-aged German lady.

As he woke up, after having endured a dozen heterogeneous dreams, he began groping around in his shadowy room for a switch. 'To turn on the light,' he said to himself. He realised he was crawling on all fours in his own consciousness or memory; and the switch was *outdoors*. So he remained for eight minutes in that self-made semi-darkness: he had not awakened yet, not really. He straightened up and headed towards the edge of his sleep, opened a few doors—all of which resembled the door of his room—and ventured along the path leading nowhere, neither to Rome nor to the third Rome—Moscow. 'What's life? What is it? Is it a desire to live or an unquenchable desire to die? What is it?' He stepped into a pool of blood and recalled what he had been trying to recall in the course of the last Russian dream. The floods of joy surged over him and the self-congratulatory applause of his self-confidence and self-assurance burst upon his ears. *Cherchez la femme. Toujours*. Always. A woman of course. His coevals were preparing themselves for funeral rituals and the narrowness of coffins: they wore black clothes and left their beds only to go to bathrooms. But he was young and strong and high-spirited; he recalled that he was young and healthy and handsome and immortal. What share did he have in the troubles of those black immobile people? None, none whatever. And he was in love with his future tenant. And she was in love with him despite the linguistic intricacy of his name; otherwise she would not have promised to come back to his apartment.

Another door.

Yet the day wears,

And door succeeds door

Another door. 'Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter.'

Closets, alcoves.

No sooner the old hope goes to ground

Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark

The last door. He opened it and saw EVERYTHING. Now he was free of care, doubt, uncertainty, disorder—of anything that puzzles the mind and obscures, confuses our existence. He knew what he

wanted. He wanted to combine the two greatest pleasures accessible to a human being: homecoming and honeymoon.

He awoke and immediately patted the chest of drawers on which a tear-off calendar was lying. He consulted it, scrambled up, put on his dressing gown and rushed towards the letterbox at the bottom of which lay a sheet of paper:

Augustine's ninth question: May a man receive communion after a sexual illusion in a dream; or, if a priest, may he celebrate the holy mysteries?

Pope Gregory's reply: The Testament of the Old Law, as I have already mentioned, speaks of such a man as unclean and does not permit him to enter church until evening and after purification. But this is to be understood spiritually in another sense; for a man may be under a delusion and tempted to impurity in a dream, because, having yielded to temptation, he is defiled by real mental imaginings. Then he must cleanse himself with water, thus washing away his sinful thoughts with tears. And, unless the fire of temptation dies earlier, he should regard himself as unclean until evening.

Bede, *A History of the English Church and People* (trans. by Leo Sherley-Price)

'A sexual illusion. Yes, I remember it. When did I have that dream?' Belozerkalsky shut the front door, headed for the bed and put his hand on the pillow as if something were written there in Braille. 'The feather, the feather. Tangible, beautiful. When did I pick it up? Was it a dream?' Again he patted the chest of drawers to which he had recently consigned his notebook. Convulsively he leafed through it, looking for an important rendezvous, *their* rendezvous. 'Memory, memory. The warder of the brain. Where is this warder now? What? A fume. Why do I remember so many poems? Instead of my appointments, instead of my life. I should have jotted it down. Why do I still rely on my memory? Vague memories, nothing but memories.' He leafed through his notebook again, backward and forward. What if she had come *already*? When? Had he been asleep or unconscious? Had he gone into a coma for a while? 'I wonder what the future holds for you and me. How to bring you to my bedroom? Telepathy?'

In the late sixties he read an article on Karl Nikolayev—an actor in Novosibirsk—who had got in touch with his friend Yuri Kamensky by thought transmission. 'Kamensky lived in Moscow, more than 3,000 kilometres away. They were supervised by scientific teams. Kamensky took a screwdriver from his attaché case. And Nikolayev described the object his friend was toying with. "Long and thin." Why do I remember the object? Long and thick. Why do I remember their names? Nikolayev, Kamensky. I must concentrate my attention on a single point of nothingness. Thinking about nothing at all. Just looking at a fixed point and emptying my mind entirely. But this method hasn't worked so far. Similar rhythms in both sender and receiver. What kind of rhythm does *she* have this morning? And what about my rhythm? Do I have any? The rhythm of a funeral march? Trauma and crisis have a

beneficial effect on telepathic communications. No news travels so quickly and efficiently as bad news. Do I have to die? Is that the only way of reaching her brain and body? And soul? A quicker or louder heartbeat. I'm bound to die if we communicate too often. Well, let us synchronise our pulses. But I still don't understand what "alphaphone" means.'

And a film he saw fifteen years ago, twenty years ago. A woman in a laboratory. She was sitting at a table, her fingers spread over a compass, her eyes riveted on its needle. After a while the needle quivered and moved to point in a new direction. 'Why don't their needles point in *my* direction? The compass of love. How can I hypnotise their needles, their hearts? Why haven't I pierced her heart with one of Cupid's arrows? Magnetic fields, the Elysian fields. No magnetic field surrounds my body, apparently. And that woman had an unusual brain-wave pattern. What does *my* brain-wave pattern look like, I wonder? Are there any waves in my brain? Or just still waters, the waters of forgetfulness? I might build a machine—like the one used by the ruler of the world in that Soviet novel. Was it a science-fiction novel or a pure product of socialist realism? He was an old man, the ruler of the world. And he was in love with a maiden. But the maiden was in love with a young man, with a middle-aged man. So the ruler of the world switched his contraption on and pushed a few buttons. And she came to him, to his house, to his bedroom. And he kissed and undressed her. All you have to do is push a few buttons. One button perhaps. Or write something on a sheet of paper.'

He snatched a ballpoint from the Louis XVI bureau and wrote down in his notebook, within the space allotted to the 26th of July: 'The German lady, 3 p.m.' He consulted the calendar once more, bringing it closer to his eyes. Was it really the 26th? And what if his calendar were wrong? How many leaves had he torn off yesterday? An unquenchable desire to die. He might have accelerated the *tempo* of his time, altering the time-signature of his life. *Presto, presto, presto, presto, presto.*

*I am already on the way,
And follow thee with all the speed
Desire can make, or sorrows breed.*

Belozerkalsky dashed towards the telephone and dialled the number of his oldest friend familiarly known as 'Tick-tock'.

'You're renowned for your punctuality and accuracy, aren't you? What date is it today?'

'The 15th of September,' answered Tick-tock.

'September? Are you sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'The 26th of September?'

'The 15th of September. Didn't you celebrate your birthday last week? I phoned you—'

'But it's Thursday, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'I thought it was the 26th of July.'

'The 15th of September.'

'Let me write it down. The 15th of Sep-tem-ber.'

Belozerkalsky hung up and reached for his calendar again. He tore off the outdated leaves and stared at them for a while. His life was nothing but a number of leaves that could be strewn around his bedroom and stamped upon.

He dialled the same number and unintentionally dropped the receiver.

'Hello, hello—'

'Sorry, Tick-tock. What time is it now?'

'11.25 a.m.'

'Another four hours. It's a damn nuisance!'

Belozerkalsky hung up and consulted the grandfather clock. 11.25 a.m. And their rendezvous was scheduled for 3 p.m.

Being your slave what should I do but tend,

Upon the hours, and times of your desire?

He paced up and down the bedroom. He lay down on the bed to make sure the springs were in order. He thrashed his legs and arms as he stirred about feverishly; he jumped to his feet, bumping his head against the canopy. As a result, he fell heavily onto the pillow. The springs were all right, quite all right. He went down to the cellar, chose an appropriate bottle of burgundy and brought it up to his living room. He opened it, smelt the cork and nodded with satisfaction. A few minutes later he sat down and looked at the grandfather clock.

One, two, three, four, five, six—He reached seven thousand and stopped for breath. There was nothing else to do. No, he had forgotten the main thing, the mainspring of his success or failure. Beside that elusive, wayward spring, the springs of his bed paled into insignificance. 'You need music to re-enter the mainstream of human life again,' his Russian friend told him in English. 'The mainstream,' repeated Belozerkalsky. All other streams, brooks and rivers were so barren, so purposeless. Even the Neva was dead in comparison with that life-begetting stream.

'What music do I have to listen to?' asked Belozerkalsky, his ears cocked in expectation. *'Tristan und Isolde'*? The second act? Yes, Nietzsche said something to this effect, although he hated Wagner at the end of his life. But he wasn't speaking of Wagner on that particular occasion, was he? He just said: *'Die Musik ist ein Weib.'* Are you also of the opinion that music is a woman?'

'Of course nothing can replace a woman, her material, mysterious presence by your side,' his friend pointed out with a grin. 'However often you listen to *Tristan und Isolde*—'

'I know, I know,' acquiesced Belozerkalsky, shaking his head despondently.

'Even in Furtwängler's interpretation.' said the friend. 'His recording is awesome, isn't it? Awesome, staggering, breathtaking, towering, hair-raising. But it's only *hair*-raising, if you see what I mean. Do you listen to it often?'

'Twice a week.'

'Music *is* a woman.' On his way to the window the friend touched a box of LPs lying on a console table. 'What's more, the whole world is a woman.' He leaned out of the window and waved his hand as if saluting a pedestrian, a one-time mistress. 'Do you know what Scriabin said once? "I wish I could take the world like a woman." Whenever his meditation focused upon the end of the world, he visualised a grandiose sexual act, a kind of world-wide session of group therapy—especially during his work on the *Poème de l'Extase*.'

'Life is a *poème de l'extase*,' said Belozerkalsky wistfully.

His friend nodded, shut the window and returned to the armchair on which he had already been sitting for an hour or so. 'Do you know that Scriabin was in search of an aphrodisiac chord?' he asked, sinking into the armchair.

Belozerkalsky sprang to his feet. 'I thought his music was more spiritual than—'

'A leitmotif, a leitchord of ecstasy. Better still—ecstasy itself!'

'But surely a work of art—'

'To Scriabin a work of art was always an act.'

'A *sexual* act?'

'Not exactly.'

'Why did you speak about the aphrodisiac chord?' asked Belozerkalsky, sinking into *his* armchair. 'Art is not a pharmacopoeia,' he said to himself in doleful tones.

'Unlike Flaubert, Scriabin never sought to create a perfect work of art,' his friend went on imperturbably. 'He yearned after transfiguration.'

'"'Transfiguration"' is a spiritual word,' said Belozerkalsky, producing a handkerchief to mop his forehead, neck and ears.

'Is anything wrong with your ears?' his friend asked, leaning forward.

'Nothing is wrong with my *ears*,' answered Belozerkalsky. He pocketed the handkerchief and gave his friend a long stare. 'If there's such a thing as an aphrodisiac chord, I'll hear it.'

But his friend was already talking about Scriabin's theory of two 'I's, as if affected, contaminated by the word 'spiritual' that Belozerkalsky had imprudently uttered twice in the space of one minute.

'The small "I" is conscious of being part of Universal Consciousness. The big "I" on the other hand *is* Universal Consciousness—God. In a moment of ecstasy the small "I" identifies with the big "I".'

'Which "I" am I?' wondered Belozerkalsky. He was alone again. The 15th of September. 'The small "I" of course. The tiny "I", the weeny "I". The weeping "I".'

He rose from the same armchair and put on a Soviet recording of the *Poème de l'Extase*. He listened to it for five minutes, for seven minutes. Nothing. The piece was over. Nothing. 'What kind of ecstasy is it? An inner ecstasy? A mental ecstasy? A *spiritual* ecstasy? A musical ecstasy? Music is a woman. Where's that woman? She'll come shortly. Of course she'll come to my flat. What shall I do? A silly question. I know *what* I'm supposed to do. But *how* to do it? *How*? To do or not to do. Shall we both listen to the *Poème de l'Extase*? Did Scriabin say anything about the way his music should be listened to? His ecstasy is meaningless when you listen to it alone. Meaningless, ineffective. Is any piece of music meaningless when you listen to it alone?'

After much hesitation he put on another recording: *Tristan und Isolde*, act II. Nothing. Five minutes, seven minutes, seventeen minutes. Nothing. Nothing doing. Perhaps something *was* wrong with his ears. Perhaps he had no ear for music—no ear for the *Poème de l'Extase* at least. And for *Tristan und Isolde*. 'Was Wagner also searching for an aphrodisiac chord? Is the famous Tristan chord aphrodisiac? Or did he think in terms of aphrodisiac melodies? Is that what "infinite melody" means?'

The upshot of his interior monologue was that he had no ear for aphrodisiacs. 'I hope she won't come,' he said out loud.

He picked up the receiver and put it down again: he did not know the number by heart. He fumbled in the wastepaper basket, found the telephone number in question and dialled it.

'Could I speak to Monsieur Douchgoube?'

'He's not in.'

'Where is he?'

'I don't know. He'll be back in the afternoon.'

'When do you expect him back?'

'I don't know. He has an appointment—'

'With whom?'

'I don't know. Who's speaking?'

Belozerkalsky rang off and sprang up. His agent was not in his office. Where was he? It was none of his business. Of course the agent might give him *some* information about the German woman, but everybody is entitled to have lunch around 1 p.m.—everybody. His agent was no exception to the rule. On the contrary, he was a well-known gourmet and would not skip a meal for anything in the world.

Belozerkalsky walked over to the chest of drawers, pulled out the upper drawer and rummaged in it for a while. His fingers lighted on two sheets of paper which he began to read out loud:

You're very nice. I might live with you for a week, if you were just normal. But you're so nice. I don't think it would be honest to stay with you, to have sex with you several times a day. You might suffer afterwards. How could you forget me and my body? We'd better part at once. I'm thinking about your

nerves. You might have a nervous breakdown, you know. One of my friends had a nervous breakdown last year. But he's not as nice as you are. So I don't mind, actually. You're very nice. You're a little darling. Really! I don't want to hurt you.

I love you, but I won't let you touch me. Because if you touch me I'll never forget you, never. And I wish to forget you as quickly as possible. Tomorrow afternoon. And please don't say you're in love with me. You shouldn't tell lies. And you shouldn't touch me. If you touch me, you'll leave an imprint on my body. An imprint of your soul. Do you understand? Do you believe in imprints?

Two old letters. Two old women who used to be young and beautiful. Actually the first was not beautiful, but he found her incredibly attractive because she seemed so full of life and fun. And the second had a haunting beauty. What a pity she believed in imprints, in ghosts, in eternal love. 'Do you believe in *something*?' she would ask him now and then.

'I believe in your beauty,' he said, staring into the distance.

'Do you remember my voice?' she asked.

'I remember everything. And now I believe in ghosts too.'

They might have talked for a few hours, for a whole week, but he was differently engaged that afternoon. So he apologised profusely, dropped the letters on the floor, rose to his feet, took the brochures *Moscow* and *Leningrad*—made in the USSR for Aeroflot—and put them down on the Louis XV table. He turned their titles towards the door of the living room and sat down again. He bent over the brochures and opened them up. He found the most beautiful pages, arranged them in a row and sat down once again. And he remembered that he had forgotten something. Something. He could not for the life of him remember what it was. Another brochure? Yes, the brochure entitled *The Nature of Russia*, Aeroflot. He picked it up from the Louis XVI table and put it down on the Louis XV table—just beside the brochures entitled *Moscow* and *Leningrad*. He opened it up and lost himself in the photographs. Which one to choose? It was the hardest task he had ever faced in his whole existence. One photograph made a parade of Russian woods, of their autumnal colours; the next one showed a modest Russian river and a modest Russian church standing on a bank of that river. There was also a polar bear and a tiger exhibiting the depth of his mouth and the strength of his jaws; there was a modest flower and a squirrel staring at a nut. There was a great deal of snow. Which one to choose? The squirrel was touching, the tiger suggestive. And the birch trees were beautiful.

The strident ringing of the doorbell interrupted his Russian meditation. He looked at the grandfather clock. She was on time. Usually they come late or too late. She was so different. 'From now on *she*'ll tackle the problem of Time,' he reflected on his way to the door.

She was not alone. Had she come with a woman he would have risen to the challenge. A middle-aged man, his estate agent. KAB recognised him at once.

The agent inquired about his client's health. The client assured his agent that everything was all right.

'I'm happy to see you,' said the agent. 'Do you recognise the lady I've brought with me?'

'Of course,' answered KAB.

'I'm glad you recognise her,' said the agent. 'Just wanted to see that room of yours. I mean we both—You know, it's hard to make a decision. And I'm a professional—'

'I know.'

'I'm a professional. I've a great deal of experience and people often underestimate—'

'I know.' KAB motioned them in, but they did not budge.

'Did you read Camus' *Notebooks*?' asked the agent.

'No.' KAB did not like Camus.

'Camus wrote the following, "You cannot acquire experience by making experiments. You cannot create experience. You must undergo it." Wonderful, eh?'

'Can't see the point—'

'To the lay mind, symbolic logic can be very difficult. Well, you'll see the point. Sooner or later. And Louis-Ferdinand Céline?'

'What about *him*?' asked KAB.

'"Experience is a dim lamp which only lights the one who bears it." I think it's wonderful.'

'Do you want the key?'

'I'd be much obliged. Do you like French literature? Strange, we never talked about it, did we? And we've known each other for so many years. Business, always business. Personally I adore literature. Do you?'

'But we did talk about it, many times. Poetry, philosophy...'

'I also adore literature,' said the lady.

KAB had no alternative but to proclaim in his turn that he adored literature. Like everybody.

'I've a weakness for German poets,' he added. 'And I read them in the original.' He wished her to realise that they could exchange some words of endearments in her native language. But she kept her eyes fixed on the chandelier as she mentally strode upward—towards the maid's room. And Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky could not bear women who looked elsewhere. His dignity was hurt and he needed the support of his full Russian name and patronymic to get over it. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky.

'The key,' she said.

'I'll fetch the key,' he said. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky.

'Will you join us? You don't have to—I know the way.' The agent gesticulated widely. He smoothed his hair and an instant later ruffled it. He also attempted to stuff his index finger into his mouth. The lady was still looking upward, towards the maid's room. 'There's no hurry anyway. You didn't lose the key, did you? What do you call it in Russian? Key?'

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky did not answer the question. He walked into the bedroom and pulled open the drawer where the key was hidden. They did not talk while he was out of their sight; at least he did not hear them talk. Were they out of his hearing?

He pushed the drawer back and locked it. As he emerged from the living room the agent reached out his hand.

'Let's go,' said Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky.

'Don't you worry. I know the way. It's a strain on the heart. I mean at your age, climbing all these—'

'My heart. Nothing is wrong with my heart.'

'The room is spacious and comfortable. Monsieur Belozarelsky fitted his house up with all modern conveniences. I mean the room. The one we're going to visit straightaway.'

'My doctor said last week—'

'Professional secrecy,' said the agent, laying his index finger on his lips. 'They're reluctant to betray the oath of secrecy. Did you see the film *I Confess*? It's about the seal of the confessional, you know. A very good Hitchcock. A man kills another man—'

'Only my vices and their accessories have decayed,' said Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. 'The spirit is full of life and delighted to be having only limited dealings with the body.'

'Limited dealings...I understand.'

'Both my spirit and body are full of vigour.'

'Do you have any idea what chaos in the heart means? A dynamic system of vital interest to you! The normal cardiac regime is periodic, but there are many nonperiodic pathologies—like ventricular fibrillation—which lead to the steady state of death. To the irreparable, irreversible state of death. Well, no-one's irreplaceable! However, it seems that great medical benefit might be derived from computer studies of a realistic mathematical model which would reproduce the various cardiac dynamic regimes. All you have to do is hold out until they finish their calculations. Might take some time, you know. Anyway it's silly worrying about things which are outside your control. Shall we go? I think we've bored our host to death.' The lady nodded her agreement. 'Bye-bye. See you later, Monsieur Beloziralsky.'

'You should bring the key back. I need it.'

'Of course. I'll bring you the key. Thank you very much indeed for your Cupertino and kindness.'

'Not at all.'

'It's really very kind of you,' said the lady.

'The pleasure is mine.'

They both smiled and proceeded to the staircase. They smiled. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky smiled too. The lady was polite, enchanting and bewitching. And she had taken the

trouble to come again. So she was interested. And she had not come alone. So she was doubly interested. Polite women do not ask those agents to assist them unless—

He rubbed his hands and attempted to sing an old military march in celebration of his victory.

They must have opened the door by now. 'A lovely room, isn't it? Very lovely. And not expensive. Rather cheap, I should say. And it's so much nicer to live in furnished accommodation, don't you think?' KAB looked at the mirror with a questioning expression. 'I can't agree more,' he answered. 'Look at the bed, for instance.' KAB was staring at his own bed now. 'Nice, isn't it? Well, if she doesn't like *that* bed, I'll have *this* bed transferred to the maid's room. I shan't need a bed as long as she stays with me. And we'll never part, never. And I'll live for another twenty years, thirty years. She'll put new life into my body. And of course she'll come down here every day to take a bath. How fortunate I didn't have a bath installed in the maid's room. The shower is nice, though. Very nice. The pipes are sound. And what a dazzling view! Mind-blowing, as the Americans say! You can see the whole of Paris from up here. And the owner of this room is very charming, don't you think? And handsome. And young. And he has a wonderful sense of humour.' Once again KAB shifted his gaze to the mirror as if to make sure there was a sufficient number of jokes in his brain. 'I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men. And I have a thorough knowledge of literature. And last but not least, I was born in the most beautiful city on earth.'

Belozerkalsky walked into the living room again and cast a glance at the brochures. 'One can't see St Petersburg from up there. She'll have to come down.' He stood up and headed for the shelves. After a long search he found the book entitled *Letters from St Petersburg*, opened it and sank into his favourite armchair. How many pleasures there are in the world! Provided you are happy.

He shut the book, laid it down on the floor and rose to his feet, arthritically trying to button his jacket up, all fingers and thumbs. 'Her letter. I must have it somewhere. Her only letter. Where did I hide it? What a pity I don't have a copy of *Letters from Tatiana*.' A few books dropped on the floor as his fingers wormed their way towards a cache behind the shelves. There were many shelves in his apartment and his books continued to cover the floor as if mistaking it for a huge, comfortable shelf. Exhausted, he ended up joining his books on that new shelf, on that bed from which no-one could ever fall, slide down—the thing he feared most. Again he had no alternative but to call on his memory to supply him with the information he needed. His memory was living outside now, outdoors, in another *arrondissement*. And whenever it did not condescend to answer the telephone, he would resort to standing beneath its balcony and calling up to it. Standing there, waiting for it to appear on the balcony.

In that letter Tatiana imparted her desire to stage a Nô play in which he was to perform the part of her brother exiled to a mountain, to the Bare Mountain. '*St John's Night on the Bare Mountain* is an orchestral piece by Mussorgsky,' said a voice. Did the voice belong to his memory? To the same memory? To another memory? Where did *that* memory live? On the Bare Mountain? 'His sister finds

him and they spend a few hours together under a tree, taking shelter from the rain,' she wrote. 'You are my brother, aren't you? And I am your sister. And we are currently in exile, aren't we?'

'I'm not your brother,' he said out loud; and yet he was convinced that the dead could also hear interior monologues.

'The prince was born blind because he had underestimated his religious duties in a former life. You are blind, psychologically blind. You don't see anything. And you neglect your religious duties in this life of yours.' Did *she* believe in God? Like any self-respecting Russian woman, she was both superstitious and sensitive to the beauty of Orthodox rituals. She would never allow a pillar or a shrub to separate their bodies during a stroll, which might have led to a serious breach in their 'friendship'; and she went to Church every Sunday. 'He was a famous *biwa* master. And you can't even play the guitar. You'll learn to play by listening to Oleg.' Did Oleg play the *biwa*? Anyway Nô actors never play the *biwa* on stage; nor do they touch any other musical instrument during their performances. And she was quite aware of that.

'What are you scheming now?' asked Belozerkalsky. 'And do you know that taking shelter beneath the same tree on the Nô stage denotes a karmic connection between the persons involved? We must have been close to each other in our former lives. Already in the fifteenth century I was infatuated with your beauty, your voice, your whims, your theatricals.'

Their conversation was interrupted by the faraway sound of the doorbell. He lifted his eyes, wondering who might call on him at that ungodly hour.

He opened the door. They had the same smile on their faces as if they had done all they could to preserve it.

'Here's your key. Thank you very much. Your room is wonderful.' He was as eloquent as ever. The estate agent. And what about her?

'Thank you very much,' she said.

The agent asked unexpectedly, 'Do you know what Isadora Duncan thought about love?'

'Can't see the point,' he answered.

Slowly the agent shifted his gaze to the staircase. "'I had discovered that Love might be a pastime as well as a tragedy. I gave myself to it with pagan innocence.'" I liked the film about Isadora Duncan. Did you see the film?'

'I saw many other films,' answered Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. 'And I liked some of them.'

'You must go and see that one. She danced so divinely.'

'I still keep my dancing-shoes. A nice memory, very nice.' The lady looked at her shoes. For a change.

'I can imagine!' said the agent, shifting his gaze to her shoes. 'I can imagine! Did you ever dance? *The Sleeping Beauty*, for instance.' That question was addressed to Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky.

'I didn't.'

'I dare say! Right, we're off. Thank you. Bye-bye. Next time I'll talk to you about chaos in the brain.'

KAB did not move, his stillness prophesying the return of the agent. The doorbell rang once more. Once more he appeared in the doorway. The agent, the estate agent.

'Terribly sorry to obtrude upon your loneliness, but I've forgotten to ask you something important and significant. Do you know the Spanish proverb: "Lovers always think that other people have had their eyes put out"?''

'No.'

'And the rule of reciprocity? Does *that* ring a bell? To give, to receive and to return. According to Lévi-Strauss, the system of reciprocity is organised around women. The most important gifts. Share and share alike. Bye-bye.'

His crumpled face. His badly rumpled clothes. Her dress was also rumpled. Was it? Her newly-powdered nose and cheeks.

KAB believed neither his eyes nor his ears. Even in ordinary circumstances he often mistrusted them. Not on philosophical grounds. He stuffed his fingers into his ears and closed his eyes.

'Why on earth did they come?' he asked himself. 'Are there no hotels in Paris? Has the capital of the French Republic been destroyed by Soviet tanks and Molotov cocktails? Does only one house remain in the whole city? Are they all going to make love here, both survivors and invaders? I make a point of avoiding crowds. Whenever I venture on the boulevards, I don't come back home with quite the same moral character—something or other becomes unsettled. And now they'll all settle down in my flat, in my maid's room, in my bedroom. Actually two people are also a crowd sometimes. No, I must be dreaming again. Just another nightmare. Night doesn't remove our worries, bringing them to the surface instead. What's the difference between day and night, between dreams and reality? Nightmares, daymares. War of mind, peace of body. And their bodies—'

He stood near the front door, his arms raised above his head. Unconsciously he was calling down the wrath of heaven upon his inconsiderate visitors. 'Even in my nightmare I would forbid them to turn my maid's room into a brothel.' He felt like crying: his own tears always had a soothing effect on his nerves. But he was offended and wounded; whenever that sort of thing happened to him he would not cry. Nor would he laugh hysterically.

Later on, he seated himself on a Napoleon III chair and, disregarding his dignity and upbringing, began to blink and croak. 'Crumpled, rumpled,' he repeated. 'Did they make love fully dressed?'

'An American friend of yours used to sleep with women who wore panty hose,' said an inner voice. 'He bounced in and out. This elastic resistance fortified him tremendously. Another aphrodisiac.'

KAB imagined what had been going on up there rather vividly, without omitting a single detail—a flashback worthy of *Citizen Kane*'s immortal creator. Right under the roof of the building the agent and his German client had become immersed in the bodily act during which the penis is supposed to enter the vagina—a canal leading from the uterus of a female mammal to the external orifice of the genital canal—for purposes of pleasure or reproduction. In this particular case, the purpose was pleasure and not reproduction. Obviously the agent had a long history of pressing middle-aged women into service and just wanted to add one more female to his vast and enviable roll-call of triumphs. And what about her? 'She sleeps around quite a bit and has done so for some time,' said an inner voice. 'Otherwise she wouldn't have consented to use the maid's room for the purpose of sexual pleasure. She changes her boyfriends as often as she changes her hairstyle.'

'Love a woman? you're an ass!

'Tis a most insipid passion

To choose out for your happiness

The silliest part of God's creation.'

'Harlot! Harlot! Harlot!' cried another voice. 'Trollop! *Shlyukha!* What a sexy dress she is wearing today. One of the sexiest I've ever seen. And her hairdo is different from the one she sported the other day. Did she really go to bed with that filthy swine? She should have said: "Don't let that lecherous man near me.'"

'He must have slept with her on several occasions before coming to my apartment. Why the hell did they come *here*? Many religions are against people fornicating and, all things considered, I'm against it too. Can't they fornicate elsewhere? She is a terrible flirt. She doesn't have a steady. You should see her address books, her notebooks, her telephone books, her bedroom and her sheets. Even as a young girl she knew how to turn on the charm. She was a nymphet.'

'Trollop! Trollop! Trollop! Whore! No man is safe. Did she flirt with me? She did, but I resisted her advances.'

He rose from the chair, opened the front door and climbed a few steps leading to the maid's room.

'Come on, sugar, let's have a cuddle!'

'What if I happen to witness the appalling procedure which is supposed to convey the male semen to the female reproductive tract?'

He descended a few steps and looked up longingly. 'When I meet her again I'll hug her tightly to my body,' he said to himself with firmness and ardour.

'Go back, you fool. Go back. It's all your imagination, nothing more. You're always imagining things! An agent comes to your place to assist you in finding a tenant for your maid's room, and you accuse him of being a lecher and a pervert.'

'Only a sexual pervert can derive great satisfaction from making love in that filthy room of mine, on that narrow, uncomfortable bed. It's hard to decide whether to rent this room or not. Any room, any apartment. So she asks a professional to help her. They take the key—a room can't be opened without a normal key or a skeleton key—and go up the stairs. What's wrong with it?'

'Nothing is wrong with my heart. I could have accompanied them *legally*, just to make sure. I'm allowed to visit my own room, am I not?'

KAB closed the front door and turned his face towards the living room. He was right, for once. Old people do imagine things instead of analysing real life in accordance with its own data. They believe that everybody around tries to harm them, to injure their reputation by slander and innuendoes, to kill them by putting arsenic in their medicine, their croissants—

'Everybody pampers them in their foibles, putting up with their whims and hysterics.'

'Of course there are quite a few young people who want to inherit a piece of land, or jewels, or horses. They engage a beautiful registered nurse—'

He was dripping with sweat; his legs could carry him neither to the maid's room nor to the nearest seat. So he stood in front of a Charles X console and listened to his inner voices—his spiritual and practical advisers. There were three of them and sometimes they spoke simultaneously, interrupting each other with unheard-of rudeness.

'But not this time, not today. In these troubled times—'

'I do expect reasonable politeness.'

'Having a sober mind around might prove to be of some help.'

Those voices were spaced out, being located in different places—inside and outside his body.

The first voice nested deep down, in the burrow of his soul. It was so removed from the surface of his body that sometimes Belozerkalsky had to strain his ears. He would go so far as to demand that the profound voice repeat a word or a sentence.

The second voice was almost on the surface and had, therefore, a penchant for shallow talk, shallow arguments and hasty conclusions. Frankly speaking, the first voice had the same shortcoming, but it always sounded wise and persuasive.

The third voice was located outside his body. This extraneous position enabled it to contemplate Belozerkalsky's behaviour from afar. 'One needs a sort of double to judge one's actions with required objectivity and detachment,' the first voice had proclaimed many years ago. So far the third voice had been carrying out this mission rather successfully. It often called its master—who was also its slave or, to use the Russian synonym, its serf—by the name and patronymic and was in the habit of describing the events it witnessed in a literary style. Its long-winded accounts resembled tales or short novels in which Belozerkalsky was just a character—not always the main one. Unfortunately, the third voice—the 'expatriate', as Belozerkalsky called it—had no aversion to nasty, unverified rumours.

Sometimes all those voices spoke together, saying for example: 'Come on! What's got into you?' and Belozerkalsky would spring from his chair and follow their monophonic instructions. But most of

the time they were far from unanimous and he gazed around or walked in circles, in ellipses, trying to find out what each of them meant. In exceptional circumstances he also had to cope with the fourth and the fifth advisers.

He waited for them now: nothing could be more exceptional than the situation he had become involved in. Strangely enough, the fifth voice outstripped the fourth and chimed in with the others earlier than usual. As might have been anticipated, it was speaking from the maid's room—perhaps even from the bed, from under the blanket.

'Come here, come here,' it said with a sensuous drawl. 'You won't regret it.'

Come hence, let be, lie still; it is enough.

Love is a barren sea, bitter and deep

'What are they doing?' asked the first, second and third voices together. Belozerkalsky rushed to the front door, opened it and looked up.

'You used to see a lot of films, didn't you?' asked the fifth voice.

'What films? What are you driving at?'

'You know, the porn cinema—'

'What are you driving at?' A superfluous question. All his voices—the fourth included—knew what the fifth voice was driving at.

'And there's a large keyhole which they seem to have overlooked in the heat of the moment. A marvellous peepshow, a life-giving peepshow. The best I've ever watched. I wouldn't miss it, if I were you. When people can't get sex, they will often—'

The first voice quoted two verses from George Herbert's poem *The Rose*:

Press me not to take more pleasure

In this world of sugred lies

The sixth voice said: 'It's all over. Too late. They did it half-an-hour ago.'

The fourth voice said: 'You're too anxious and suspicious and senile. They did nothing of the sort. However, if I were you—'

The second voice said: 'They may have been doing *something*. If I were you—'

The third voice said: 'I *am* you and I'll go up straightaway to see what has happened.'

And suddenly all his voices exclaimed in unison: 'Look at the grandfather clock! Look at the grandfather clock!' He returned to the living room and screamed. There were a dozen voices within him now, but his prolonged inhuman screaming drowned them out rather brutally. Four hours, four hours! Four and a half hours! Everything is clear, as the Germans say so often. *Alles klar*. Without a shadow of doubt. They dared, they dared. Love.

He stood with his hand on the doorknob, his whole body trembling and his lips quivering. He sat down but his limbs and lips continued to tremble and quiver—noiselessly, unobtrusively, helplessly. 'Why do you mock me with such unimaginable cruelty? Do I deserve it? What have I done to you? What on earth have I done? You've got the whole earth at your disposal. You come here, to my maid's room. You've chosen my apartment to affront me flagrantly, showing no consideration for my age and feelings. Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?'

All his voices asked this question, but no voice answered it. He looked again at the grandfather clock. They might have stayed up there for another hour, for another two or three days or weeks. A greater amount of pleasure and love. A question of quantity, not of quality. What is done will never be undone.

But past who can recall, or done undo?

Not God omnipotent, nor fate

'Why didn't I interfere? Why didn't I call them to order? In the name of Justice and Decency? On my way to the scene of the crime I could have had my share of the profits by spying on their amorous games. No, no, no, no, no.' He nodded and forgot everything for a minute or two. Then he remembered EVERYTHING and looked again at the grandfather clock. He began to pay attention to the noise coming from outside. Nobody was going downstairs; everyone was going upstairs, to the maid's room. All roads lead to the maid's room. The fourth Rome. What is so peculiar about that room? Another aphrodisiac. Does that room have an aphrodisiac *Stimmung? Atmosphère, atmosphère*. 'Doctors are becoming interested in the healing properties of your—'

Footfalls, footfalls. Up or down? Somebody must go down now and then, otherwise humanity would live in the air, like Russian cosmonauts. Anyway his maid's room is too small to accommodate the whole of humanity. But it is spacious enough to accommodate two people: the woman he loves and his agent. No-one is supposed to drink on duty. Perhaps estate agents are allowed to make love to their clients. Business is business.

KAB climbed up the stairs. Several times he was forced to interrupt his roof-bound journey. He was short of breath and filled with nausea at the sight of the wood that had recently borne his enemies upward—to the haven of their celestial bliss. 'My goodness, my goodness. Must I really check up on it? Beyond a shadow of doubt. Sense of intolerable wrong.'

He unlocked the door. The panoramic view of their love and cruelty opened up before him with appalling frankness. Nothing was in its place: the blanket was lying in a heap near the window, the chair had been pushed towards the washbasin. The bed had been severed from the wall and stood almost in the middle of the room.

Here love ends,

Despair, ambition ends

There was even a stain on the ceiling which seemed to have been borrowed from a Sherlock Holmes story: it was utterly inexplicable.

CHAPTER 11

Despite the incredible length and intricacy of his name, Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky had never experienced an identity crisis which might have split his ego into three different parts, the second one bearing a strong resemblance to his father Alexey Petrovich. Even the third part of his name—Belozerkalsky—had managed to preserve its authenticity in the face of the linguistic tortures inflicted upon it by non-Russian people all over the world. Belozarelsky, Beloziralsky, Belozarulsky, Belozarolsky. He remained Belozerkalsky and was loath to become anybody else, even though his personal fate-ordered existence could not give him as many pleasures as he desired.

On that tragi-comic day, in the morning and in the early afternoon, he was still Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. He heard the promising sound of the doorbell and did what anybody would have done in his place, under similar circumstances—he opened the door. Then something happened to him. At first it was no more than a hint, a change of emphasis, a shift in the wind blowing outside his apartment. Later on, during his sojourn amidst the ruins of the maid's room, he realised that the wind was blowing inside his brain, disrupting its unity and domestic cosiness, knocking about its constituents. In a sense, he was now Belozarilsky or Belozirolsky.

And those voices, those voices. Why are winds so full of voices?

'Why did he do it? Why did they do it? What do you think?'

'She must have been in it from the very start. Perhaps it was *her* idea. What do you think?'

'What's so erotic about it? A maid's room, in a cramped position. An old man waiting downstairs. Is it a psychological aphrodisiac? What do you think?'

He thought nothing and consequently answered none of those questions; but the voices persisted as if there was somebody else in the maid's room, on the staircase, in his apartment—somebody able to satisfy their curiosity.

'I'll be out of the office for a few hours—will you hold the fort until I get back?'

He heard his agent's voice and followed its evasive reverberations; there was another shift in the wind and Kyril Anatolievich Belokaralsky found himself on the boulevard Arago. He could not have walked so far. Who did?

'Well, they could try apologising to you—for all the difference that will make.'

'The estate agent is so smooth that many of his colleagues distrust him.'

He got over it somehow and did what anybody would have done in his place, under similar conditions—he went to the estate agent's office and asked for Monsieur Douchgoubé.

'Monsieur Douchgoubé is out,' said the young lady whom he had never seen before.

'Out? Where?'

'Monsieur Douchgoubé has an appointment with a client.'

'Is he alone?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Another maid's room?'

'Monsieur Douchgoube is very busy but I'm sure he'll fit you in tomorrow.'

'What are they visiting?'

'Who are you talking about?'

'A middle-aged lady. Did she come here this morning? She speaks French with the German accent.'

'We have a lot of German clients.'

'A lady...a middle-aged lady...'

'No.' She seemed to be hiding something from him. She pressed her right hand against her mouth in an endeavour to jam shut the floodgates of truth.

'When do you expect them back? In thirty-five minutes? In an hour?'

'Monsieur Douchgoube might come back around four—'

'Around four?!' He added a few words in Russian.

'You're Russian, aren't you? I'm Bulgarian. I've been to Moscow twice. Are you from Moscow?' Her Russian was incorrect but fluent.

'Please tell me where they are. They must be somewhere. Do you have a maid's room available in the neighbourhood? I'd like to rent a maid's room, please.' He spoke French.

'Just a moment. Please sit down. Now, let me see.' She opened a file that seemed too big to contain any information on maid's rooms. She turned a few pages and stopped. 'I'm afraid we've got only one maid's room, sir. It's rather small but very comfortable. The owner fitted his house up with all modern conveniences. Do you want to visit it?'

'Who is the owner? What's his name?'

'Monsieur Belozerkalsky. Must be Polish. Do you speak Polish?'

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky gave no answer to that question. He had no time to lose, not a minute. He rushed out and raised his hand. He waved his hand for a while. No taxi ever drove through the street where the estate agent's office was located. Even its location was absurd, illogical, sinister.

He shouted, 'Taxi, taxi!' Two women came to a standstill as if his call was addressed to them personally. He rushed back into the estate agent's office and asked the young Bulgarian to find him a taxi as quickly as she could.

'I live two blocks away from here, but I'm in rather a hurry,' he explained.

She slowly rose from her chair, directed her steps to the farthest corner of the room and bent over a pile of books, revealing a pair of beautiful thighs. 'A pair of beautiful thighs,' said the third voice. 'She should have learnt the number by heart. What's wrong with her memory?' asked the second voice. But Belozerkalsky did not ask her anything. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky. Instead he rushed out and shouted, 'Taxi!'

She did not hear him; she dialled the number. He began to run along the street, past the chemist's, past the butcher's.

'They're naked by now. He must have stripped her clothes off, her dress. He likes striptease, he does.' Nobody heard him except the chemist's wife and the butcher's boy. 'Her body, her body, by candlelight. We might have a candlelit dinner, first. Her legs, her legs.'

He ran for the bus and missed it. A taxi thundered by. He entered a café and ordered a cup of coffee.

'Sit down. You seem to be exhausted,' said the waiter.

'They do it behind my back,' he replied.

'Why don't you join in? Let them do it in front of you, below your belly. Join the club! Let the Dionysian power reveal itself. Destroy the *principium individuationis*! The entire symbolism of your body will be materialised, forcing every member into rhythmic movement, into orgiastic dance. At last you'll feel what it means to exult in a collective release of all the symbolic powers because you've already attained that height of self-abnegation—'

'A taxi, please. Do you know the number by heart?'

He gulped down his coffee and rushed out onto the street. The same street. He was walking very fast. The street wound along the river. The waters of the river coiled and hissed. Everything looked unfamiliar and unfriendly.

Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside

As if a voice were in them, the sick sight

And giddy prospect of the raving stream

'It's not the Seine, is it?' he asked somebody.

'What are you talking about?'

'They're fornicating. In my room. What I fear is bound to happen.'

People neither understood him nor listened to what he mumbled. He reached his house around half past four.

He fetched the key of the maid's room and stole up the stairs. The silence sounded suspicious. The walls seemed to hide something from him. He even knocked on one of the impenetrable walls to see if there was anything behind. There was nothing behind, nobody and nothing; he continued his furtive ascent. He neared the door of the room and paused in front of it. He was going to catch them red-handed. He extracted a pistol from his raincoat and cocked it.

'Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand. A revolver? A gun? A Browning? Where does it come from?' he asked himself and received no answer.

His left hand was unoccupied now. Without the slightest hesitation he thrust it into the left pocket of his raincoat. He grasped the key but suddenly found that the door was open. Like robbers

fleeing the police. 'Robbers, robbers, robbers,' he mumbled. 'Too late. I must have an alarm installed in this room. A sex alarm.'

Two hours later he had quietened down and was in a position to resume his walk through Paris. The estate agent's was closed and nobody opened the door, for all his knocking and shouting. He decided to smash the nearest window, but an old lady living next door reminded him that he might be imprisoned for breaking and entering. 'Seven years,' she told him in a confidential tone of voice. Heeding her warning, he relinquished the idea and returned home where his furniture and colour television awaited him impatiently.

CHAPTER 12

'I must see the agent *outdoors*. Nothing will protect him outdoors, neither his secretary's tears nor his associate's muscles. I'll set the alarm clock at 8.30. Where's the alarm clock? Not in my pocket. Near my bed, within my hearing.'

The alarm clock rang at 8.30 a.m. but he did not hear it. Nor was he stirred by the pneumatic drill which, that morning, had sounded the reveille for about ninety people in the 16th *arrondissement*. When he eventually opened his eyes and started to threaten the mirror with a fist, the agent was already sitting at his office desk.

The mirror. Why threaten it? 'Do not chafe at the looking glass if your mug is awry.' Gogol. The epigraph to *Revizor*. *The Government Inspector*.

As was his wont, before performing his daily ablutions, he submitted his body to a number of easy exercises that did not deprive his spirit of its agility and effectiveness. For three minutes he ran around the bedroom and then jumped several times, trying to touch the canopy of his bed. In the meantime the agent had made six telephone calls.

Presently Belozerkalsky confided his aching body to the care of water. As he was emerging from it he saw his pistol lying in the washbasin. 'Why?' he asked himself once or twice. 'Why?' Perhaps he had been trying to clean it before bedtime. 'Where does it come from? A duellist perhaps. An old friend of mine. "If you need a revolver I can lend you one." Why?' After much hesitation he left the pistol where it was—in the washbasin. It still looked dirty and unprepared for the job.

The agent was leaving the office when Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky began his shaving ritual. But the agent was delayed by an unexpected encounter with his former mistress—a Spanish cabaret dancer. In any event he was to pass below Belozerkalsky's balcony on his way to the restaurant where he had a rendezvous with his present mistress.

Belozerkalsky could consider himself happy: fate was on his side that afternoon. At least the geographical and chronological aspects of fate were on his side. As he came onto the balcony to contemplate the panorama of the hostile universe, he spotted the silhouette of the agent striding towards his house. It would have been easy to kill the womaniser from where he stood, leaning on the rail. But the pistol was still lying in the washbasin.

'Where are you going?' cried Belozerkalsky. He knew the answer to *that* question.

'Hello! What a surprise! How are you doing?'

'You know the answer, don't you?'

'I beg your pardon? It's a nice day, isn't it?'

'Could you spare me a few minutes? Don't move, please,' said Belozerkalsky. He wanted to take a careful aim at his adversary.

'Incidentally, she liked your room. I mean the maid's room. The lady. Do you remember? The lady I brought with me. Has no money. Don't you worry—I'll find another one!'

'Don't move! Please don't move!' Belozerkalsky put on his raincoat and went out. The agent had not budged an inch. He seemed to be rather sure of himself.

'Congratulations!' he said. 'The maroon of your scarf tones in with your shoes. You won't need your raincoat, though.'

'Never mind! I want...I want...'

'What can I do for you?'

'A conversation, a discussion. Just a few words.'

'Shall we have lunch together? Let me invite you.'

'Not on your life! I'm determined—'

'I have some surprises in store for you.'

'You should be ashamed of yourself! Disgraceful! Ignominious!'

'Do you like animals?' The agent stroked the head of a poodle who did not so much as glance at him. 'I adore them. They're our friends, you know. Our best friends. They understand humans better than humans. I mean they understand us better than we understand each other. Even our best friends and our girlfriends don't understand us as deeply as animals, as deeply as this poodle. Actually this poodle knows better what goes on in my subconscious than you or even myself. And I am the owner of my subconscious, am I not? Our world is full of mystery and paradox, my dear friend. Animals know what is hidden in my heart of hearts. Better still—in my soul of souls! This phenomenon is called "animal intuition". And we lost that intuition because of our civilisation. Computers don't feel, do they? They have no sixth sense which is the most important sense, mind you—in every sense! The cave man possessed that sort of feeling. He communicated with nature, with trees, with birds—'

'How did you dare? I'm your client.'

'I don't regard you as a client, you know. Anyway my clients are my friends. It's my style, my personal touch. I hate the anonymity of our society, of our modern world. People are not a herd of cattle, are they? We are not animals, are we? Everybody is an individual. It works like a charm, I can assure you.'

They stood in front of KAB's building. The agent stretched his sleeve outward, showing the way. 'We're expected,' he said promisingly.

'I'm an old man. That's what prompted you, I presume. Exciting, isn't it?'

'You're not as old as all that. My grandfather is ninety-four. Still very fond of women. Looks like a middle-aged man. His letters sparkle with wit. You look like a middle-aged man too.'

'Do I?'

'Now, now...come on...!' He gave KAB a prod with his umbrella. 'Cheer up! Your heart is as solid as a rock, isn't it? How often do you go up to your maid's room? Every day, I suppose. All these stairs. Even I had some respiratory problems last time. Which sporting figure of the opposite sex do you admire and why?'

'Why did you do it? What was the reason? Because it was exotic, unusual? I bear you no grudge. I'm an old man. But I'd like to know why you did it.' KAB was walking now. In St Petersburg a few snowflakes would already have fallen on his shoulders and hair, adding a melancholy nuance to the dialogue.

'Why did I do it? A yogi knows the mental states of the people around him. "*Samyama*" they call it. "*Samyama*" and "*pratyaya*". Recently you sought guidance from a famous guru, I'm told. So why all these questions? You know EVERYTHING, don't you? You must also know the hour of your death. It's in the opposite direction, do you hear me? Please—' The agent caught up with him and seized hold of his hand. 'The restaurant. Do you hear? You don't?'

KAB shuddered and wrenched himself free. 'Tell me, tell me,' he insisted.

'What do you want me to tell you?'

'Why use my maid's room for that purpose?'

'For what purpose?'

'Love, love. Why did you make love in my room?' The agent pressed his hand to his heart and shook his head, his eyes winking in astonishment. 'You stripped the lady's clothes off and made love to her in my maid's room.'

'I didn't.'

'All right, you didn't strip her clothes off. You made love fully dressed, both of you. In my maid's room.'

'When?'

'At least twice, as far as I know. As far as I can judge the whole affair. You must have had a second key cut.'

'What?'

'Or else you stole *my* key.'

'I gave it back to you. I'm innocent, innocent.' The agent took a bunch of keys out of his pocket. 'Do you recognise *your* key?' he inquired, his eyes winking faster than before. KAB fiddled with the keys for a while, bringing them closer and closer to his ears. As if every key had a pitch of its own.

'No,' he admitted reluctantly.

'You see, you see,' exclaimed the agent, removing his hand from his heart. 'I'm innocent. Word of honour!' He even started to caper and frisk under KAB's eyes.

'You are not. The door was open.'

'You must have forgotten to lock it. Your memory—'

'There's nothing wrong with my memory.'

'I know, I know,' said the agent smilingly. 'You remember so many poems and Latin tags. But life is a prosaic fragment, I'm afraid. And Latin is a dead language.'

'Leave my memory alone!'

'What if your memory leaves you alone?'

'There's nothing wrong with my memory,' repeated Belozerkalsky as if striving to memorise the sentence.

'There's nothing wrong with your heart either. You're as solid as a rock. Quintus Aemilius Lepidus was also as solid as a rock, but he bruised his great toe in the doorway of his bedroom. And Gaius Aufidius hit his foot against something in the Comitium when he was on his way to the Senate. And Gnaeus Baebius Tamphilus died just after asking his footman the time. And Aulus Manlius Torquatus died while helping himself to a cake at dinner. All those people were as solid as a rock. As solid as you.'

'The door was open and everything in the room was upside down.'

'But I wouldn't worry if I were you. Suppose you died all of a sudden. One of those spur-of-the-moment decisions. The Fates have a tendency to act impulsively, which makes working with them rather unpredictable. You may die after asking one of your obscure questions. So what? Varro records that when he was apportioning lands at Capua a person who was carried out to a burial ground returned home on foot. The same thing occurred at Aquino. And in Rome Varro's maternal aunt's husband Corfidius came to life again after his funeral had been arranged for with an undertaker. And some years later he himself superintended the funeral of the relative who'd made the arrangement. You'll bury us all.'

Vous nous enterrez tous, vous nous enterrez tous. How often did Belozerkalsky hear this expression? 'The door was open and everything in the room was upside down,' he repeated.

'If you don't mind my being critical, I did notice a slight disorder in your maid's room. I'll be quite frank with you—the room was in a terrible mess. The lady wasn't very pleased. My clients are used to cleanliness and order.'

'That's why she didn't rent it, I presume. Is that what you're trying to insinuate?'

'Precisely. At first she was favourably impressed and spoke very highly of you and your apartment, but when she saw the blanket near the window—I'm not *always* nitpicking, you know.'

KAB was walking again: his memory functioned much better when his body was on the move. The agent followed him.

'The blanket wasn't near the window. Not *before*.'

'Before what? Before, after. Try and remember the date, the hour, the minute—' The agent pointed to his wristwatch and even tapped on it.

'Around three in the afternoon, I think. What does it matter? Before your arrival.'

'What was before my arrival?'

'*Your* arrival. You weren't alone.'

'Ah, you remember *that*, don't you?'

'I remember EVERYTHING. The stain, for example.'

'The stain? Where?'

'The stain, the stain...Why did you do it?' KAB closed and re-opened his eyes. A bird flew past him. The bird was tacking right and left as it strove to escape from the world, from life.

'Would it be too much to ask you what kind of stain—'

'Normal...in those circumstances...' KAB gave a little grimace of disgust.

'What do you mean by normal? Gigantic, big, middle-sized, minuscule?' The agent showed the imaginary stains on his raincoat.

Such weight to bear is now the air,

So heavy hangs the sky.

'Why all these questions? Leave me alone, I beg of you. Why did you come?'

'I didn't come. *You* did.' The agent prodded KAB with his index finger.

'I did?'

'You came yesterday, didn't you?'

'Was it yesterday?'

'And today. You were going to pay me a visit this morning, if I'm not mistaken. But something delayed you. Did you sleep well?'

'I'm tired.'

'Then you should indulge yourself and have a siesta. A long siesta.'

'I've run out of sleeping pills.'

'Your insomnia might help you meditate on the following principle: "Those who act unjustly are to be pitied more than others."'

'Others?'

'The people who are unjustly dealt with. There *are* such people, you know. Here and there. And Socrates said they had to be pitied less than wrongdoers. And the latter should be pitied all the more since they seldom get punished.'

'And the former? Who are they?'

'The sufferers. Actually the wrongdoers come first—you can't suffer the consequences of a crime *before* it's committed. You suffered *after*, didn't you?'

'I'm still suffering.'

'Women,' sighed the agent. 'They're to blame no doubt. Why do they lead old men astray, I wonder? Don't they have enough middle-aged men at their disposal?'

'Enough!'

'It's your fault too. Why do you speak about women for hours on end? Why are you so fond of those creatures? Don't you know what they do when left alone?'

'They're not alone.' KAB cast a quick glance at the agent.

'Do you think *I* keep them company? Do you think I can make love to all women at the same time? In your maid's room? It's too small for all of them, isn't it? There are millions of women on earth. And I can't make love to all of them, even if I live two hundred years. Besides, I'm talking to you now. Walking by your side and talking to you. So they're alone—at least some of them. Left to their own devices, if you see what I mean. *Do* you see what I mean?'

'I don't.' KAB shook his head.

'They fornicate with little children by putting them on their shameful parts, by rubbing them—'

'With little children?'

'And they lie down under domestic animals—'

'Leave me alone.'

'A woman I'm courting is in the habit of—'

'What woman?'

'Never mind. She takes a living fish and stuffs it—'

'What kind of fish?' Again KAB shook his head.

'And it dies after a while. Are you following?'

'Why a fish?'

'Because sausages are not alive. Even raw sausages are dead. So she stuffs a living fish—'

'I know, I know...'

'And once the fish is dead she cooks it for her husband.'

'Is she married?'

'Her husband is a fish fancier.'

'Leave me alone, I beg of you.'

'All right, all right. It's a pity, though. A very good restaurant, a fish restaurant. And a surprise. Did you forget the surprise? We're expected—'

'Please!' A quiver convulsed KAB's body.

'There's always a risk of hamming it up if you put too much emotion into a performance. Okay. Well, next time you come—'

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky continued to walk along the street. 'And whom I scorned, those only strong!' He passed again under his own balcony and ran into a small boy who was staring at something. The boy screamed; Belozerkalsky froze in his tracks. Suddenly all his doubts fused into a certitude: the agent had cheated him atrociously. The maid's room had been in shipshape order. All shipshape and Bristol fashion. He had not been up there before, except with the lady herself. Anyway he would not have turned everything upside down, putting the bed in the middle of the room and hurling the blanket as far as the window. And the stain, the stain. 'I didn't make love in that room, neither before nor after their arrival,' he admitted. And had he made love in there, for some obscure reason, he would have asked two charwomen to clean the room from top to bottom. From top to bottom.

Belozerkalsky found the fatal key and mounted the stairs to verify his final conclusions. His heart was beating abnormally as if the agent's hypocritical praise had disturbed its mechanism. He even interrupted his strenuous walk to listen to the beating of his heart; he did not recognise it.

The room was in a terrible mess. The agent was right after all. But he was unaware of the very significant detail: Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky had preserved that sexual chaos on purpose. He needed proof. He needed material proof of the agent's crime.

Belozerkalsky rose from the bed and gave it a push. It occurred to him that he would have remembered the effort required to shift so cumbersome a piece of furniture. And he remembered nothing of the kind. He went downstairs.

'Showing the bed to the judge would be sufficient to put that scoundrel under lock and key,' declared one of his voices.

'Wouldn't the judge tell me I did it myself?' he asked.

'You'll demonstrate your inability to move that piece of furniture all the way from the wall to the middle of the room.'

'I *can* move it,' he retorted. Did the voice belong to his enemy?

'I know you can,' murmured the voice, unabashed and encouraging. 'But let's pretend we're decrepit and impotent. Remember: decrepit and impotent. Let's act the martyr once again. A little ruse and your enemy will be exposed, destroyed. The sword of justice—'

'The sword of justice? A beheading?'

'Just swear on the Bible that the last time you had sexual intercourse was in—'

Belozerkalsky exhaled all the air from his lungs and the voice died away.

An hour later he put all the keys into his pockets and went out, determined to find the agent and unmask him before a reliable, trustworthy witness. If only he had known the address of the restaurant! 'How foolish it was to turn that invitation down!' he shouted. Even a small, intimate restaurant is full of witnesses. 'I'll find them!' he shouted.

'The restaurant! And the witnesses! Your rival wouldn't sidestep the problem in their presence. Some of those young intelligent witnesses might testify in court. In due course, in two or three months. He wouldn't duck questions any longer. Not with all those witnesses around who may easily unravel his—'

This voice died away too. 'I'm eager to hear you out,' said Belozerkalsky. He stopped and listened for a minute but heard only the beating of someone's heart.

Thirst of revenge, the powerless will

Still baffled, and yet burning still!

He continued his pursuit. He was not running for fear of exhausting his strength too quickly: there are a great many restaurants in Paris. 'He can't shirk his duty. What's his duty? To tell the truth! Such is

the duty of honest men. And if he is dishonest, my witnesses will help me during the trial. And the court will find him guilty of dishonesty.'

He looked through open doors and closed windows. Some people were eating and talking; none of them resembled his rival. 'How foolish it was to turn that invitation down!'

'She turns you on, doesn't she?'

'The smell of her breath would turn any man off.'

'But you didn't smell her breath, did you?'

'Thou smell'st so sweet, that the sense aches at thee—'

He looked through all the windows of his *arrondissement*. People had already finished lunch and even five o'clock tea. They were still talking to each other. In spite of his propensity for gossiping, the agent could not be found among them. Chattering and gossiping. And fornicating.

'Did an estate agent have lunch in your restaurant today? He wasn't alone.'

It was dinnertime now and Belozerkalsky resumed his search in the hope that the agent had all his meals in the same restaurant.

'You might go again to the office tomorrow afternoon instead of wasting your time and strength in these deserted streets flanked by unresponsive, uncooperative façades.'

'No,' said the second voice.

'No,' said the first voice.

The noes had it this time.

He was loath to accuse the agent in the presence of biased, 'subjective' witnesses. Those witnesses were bound to side with the agent, doing their best to persuade Belozerkalsky that he was vigorous enough to make love both in his apartment and in the maid's room almost every day.

'And the furniture, the furniture, the bed in the middle—'

'You shift your furniture about to vary the décor. Monotony is an enemy to eroticism.'

Enemy, enemy. He was surrounded by enemies. Even in the restaurants of the 16th *arrondissement* he had to confront a multitude of hostile-looking people whose answers were short and abstruse. 'What agent? An insurance agent? A secret agent? An undercover agent?' they asked him from time to time. Judging from the style of their behaviour, they all knew the agent intimately. They were all double agents, so to speak.

'Sex relations are more than just the sex act itself. A policeman found them petting in the back of a car.'

'In your room, in your maid's room.'

'He says she's a good lay.'

'She reaches her orgasm easily.'

'When people can't get sex, they will often—'

'They enjoy necking in the back seats of the cinema.'

'In your room.'

*Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild or hateful objects fixed.*

He had dinner in a restaurant whose owner was the spitting image of *his* agent; Belozerkalsky thought they might have been brothers or half-brothers. Anybody could have a brother, even an estate agent.

'Do you have a brother?'

The owner shook his head with a sigh. 'But I have a sister, a half-sister.'

Anybody could lie, even a restaurant owner.

'Are you friends with my estate agent? A man around forty-three. Rather small. On the plumpish side. Perhaps you were at school together.'

'I'm afraid I know only agents provocateurs,' said the owner with a grin. His laughter rippled through the restaurant.

'Really? Will you be so kind as to give me the address of a skilful and tactful agent provocateur? I'm acquainted with a criminal who denies knowing anything about his own crime.'

'Did you like the salmon? You did? If you'll excuse me. When duty calls, no man should disobey.' The owner bowed and retired to the kitchen.

Other men were disappearing too. They wriggled out of their responsibilities even before being told about the crime and its perpetrator. 'If you fail to contribute towards the punishment of the wrongdoers, then we have indeed, beyond any shadow of doubt, reached a point when all the limits set to human lust and malpractice and outrage have broken down. All right, all right. I won't insist. But perhaps you could just testify against him in the court. It's easy, isn't it? For the sake of justice. For the sake of harmony.'

They continued to disappear. 'If you're afraid of him you can wear a mask.' Belozerkalsky recalled that during a famous trial, part of which was shown on television, some witnesses wore masks, hiding their identity behind the muzzle of a fox, behind the radiant smile of Red Riding Hood. And he had no objections to his witnesses wearing masks at the trial of his adversary.

They continued to disappear in spite of his concessions. 'I must be off, I must be off,' they chanted in unison. An urgent job, an upset stomach.

*I travel as a phantom now,
For people do not wish to see
In flesh and blood so bare a bough
As Nature makes of me.*

KAB paid yet another bill and went out. He was in the open air once more. Nothing protected him from the rain and the wind. He sought no protection anyway. Not from the rain and the hail and the

wind. They disappeared after a while as if the weather had dozed off. Strange. He was not sleepy. He did not want to go back to his apartment that was located in such close proximity to the maid's room. Within hearing distance. He could not bear the agent's voice. "A good lay." Why can't I find him? I always take myself along with me when I go somewhere. So I can't find either the agent or any woman, any companion, any living creature. It's myself I come across and nobody else.'

He entered a café because nobody talked in it. No voice is heard in absolute silence, not even the voice of the most eloquent, long-winded estate agent. He ordered a bottle of champagne and signalled to the only customer to come over and join him. The man did not budge.

'Will you drink with me?' KAB shouted.

The man looked at him and rose from his chair. 'Tell me a story,' he said. 'Drinking champagne without a story—Well, it's not my cup of tea.'

'I'll tell you a story, a very sad story.'

'I like sad stories,' admitted the man. 'They make me happy because they concern other people. Some must suffer, others prosper. Others suffer, so I prosper. Monsieur Dupont has been shot dead by his mistress. But I'm not Monsieur Dupont. So I'm still alive. And I'll live as long as Monsieur Dupont is dead. In other words, I'm immortal. The more sad stories I hear the happier I become.'

'You'll soon be very happy. The happiest man in the world.'

'I hope you'll keep your promise, my friend. Storytellers are my best friends, my benefactors. Often against their will.'

'It's a story about a maid's room—'

'Was anybody killed? A maid's room is a great place for crime. It's so tiny and not far from the roof.'

'A moral murder...a psychological murder...'

'Then we're dead, all of us. I've lost count of my psychological wounds.'

Enigmatically KAB embarked upon his story. Not once did the man interrupt him. The drunken and cynical stranger was obviously interested. Very interested.

In former times, in other circumstances, Belozerkalsky would not have talked to such a man. Now he confided in him: only cynics and soaks could understand his predicament.

'Kill him!' said the man. 'Bump the bastard off!'

'How? How can I kill him?' asked KAB in a tremulous voice. 'I *was* planning to kill him, to tell the truth. I even borrowed a revolver from my friend, a former duellist. But I changed my mind. Anyway the thing is out of order. I don't want to kill him. I want to punish him.'

'Bump him off!' repeated the man. 'He mortally offended you. Get him in that room of yours, bump him off where the crime was committed.'

'I would have challenged him to a duel...in the nineteenth century. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century.'

'Now you should kill him. Affairs of honour are old hat. Honour goes by the board these days.'

'You're right. That's why I would have challenged him to a duel instead of killing him like a highwayman, like a pirate. In the old days things were noble and infallible. You might get killed but your honour was saved.' Belozerkalsky was about to drink a toast to honour; the man sitting opposite advised him against it.

'Let's drink to punishment,' he proposed. 'The balance of nature was upset by his deed. You should restore the balance.'

'The balance of crime and punishment? A tooth for a tooth?'

'Not exactly. There's no need to have it off with her. You can go one better than that.'

'Better? One better?'

'Biblical punishments were good for the people who moved about in the presence of God. You should *kill* him. Have your revolver repaired and kill the bastard. Do you think human life is sacred, untouchable, unchallengeable, unquestioning? And what about animals, wild and domestic animals? The life of your cat, for instance? Do you have a cat?'

'No, not any more.'

'I do. A nice cat, faithful. Jumps on me every morning. Just to be friendly. Cats are more intelligent than dogs. They don't wish to obey us, although they understand our commands much better than dogs.'

'What about me?' asked KAB.

'Why did you leave your shooter at home? We could have done him in *now*.'

'Would you help me? But don't kill him. I implore you, don't kill him!'

'We drown cats and shoot dogs. And we swat flies. Are they less valuable than humans? Do you think they are less valuable than human beings?'

'Perhaps.' KAB put down his glass. 'Man opens the eyes of nature. *Ein Lichtblick, eine offene Stelle*.'

'Because we've got souls or what?'

'I think so. If it weren't for human beings, nature would be blind.'

'Are you of the opinion that there's a substance in the universe deprived of what we may call a "soul"? Take a stone or a cigarette. How many cigarettes have you killed in your life? Do you smoke?'

'No.'

'Do you mind my smoking?'

'Not at all.'

'And all those stones crunching underfoot. Have you ever thought how *they* feel? You trample them to death and then you have metaphysical doubts—'

'I lost my honour. I have no intention of losing it for the second time.'

'Your honour. There are no duels nowadays. Anyway the Indians say we can't kill. Life is an illusion, a figment of somebody's imagination. Just a puff of smoke, see.' And he puffed smoke into KAB's eyes.

'I won't kill him.'

'Anyone with guts would do it in your place.'

'*Rigoletto*, I remember *Rigoletto*. I used to sing an aria from it. I have a beautiful voice, a baritone.' KAB cleared his throat.

'You should kill him yourself.'

'A duel would be a perfect—'

'Forget about duels. Nowadays we've got lawyers to fight duels for us. No blood, no honour, no valour. You're not dumb enough to get tangled up with lawyers, are you? Paper, paper. No dignity.'

'But in the court of justice—'

'You've got to turn your maid's room into a court of justice. Stick the agent in the docks. Then you can gun him down, point-blank.'

At this point the waiter suggested it was time to go and would brook no disagreement. All of a sudden KAB realised he was rather sleepy.

'Allow me to shake hands with you,' he said to his adviser.

'You agree, don't you? You'll be doing a favour for all the poor sods in history who've been bugged about by wankers like him.'

They shook hands and bowed to each other. Once again Belozerkalsky exposed himself to the whims of bad weather.

CHAPTER 13

On the following morning Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky woke at eight. He was not sleepy any more, although he had slept only four hours. He neither shaved nor took a bath. He had other, far more important things to do.

'The agent,' he announced loudly to make sure he had not forgotten the business of the day. 'The Russian athletes showed their mettle in the final round.' He put on his shoes and left the house.

He arrived too early. The office was closed up and no-one appeared in the windows, for all his knocking and shouting—not even the secretary. 'I'll wait till they come, don't worry your head!' he whispered, anxious to regain his nerves. 'Don't worry your head!' He positioned himself before the front door and folded his arms. Pity he had not brought a swivel chair. Pity. He might have spared himself the trouble of turning his head and sometimes his body in all directions: he needed a panoramic view of the area. 'Turning and turning in the widening gyre—' He wished to forestall every risk and retain every advantage by spotting the approaching figure of the agent as soon as he could.

*Calm soul of all things! make it mine
To feel, amid the city's jar,
That there abides a peace of thine,
Man did not make, and cannot mar.*

Ten minutes passed uneventfully and a fatigue invaded the nether part of his body. He recalled that he had not eaten anything, quite contrary to his morning ritual; not even a croissant or a brioche. He looked at his wristwatch again. Fifteen minutes. Fourteen minutes. He had enough time to avail himself of a croissant and a cup of coffee.

The coffee was bad as usual, but the croissant lived up to his expectations. He spread some butter and strawberry jam on a slice of toast, imparting to the waiter that no other country in the world afforded its inhabitants so many delights. 'France,' he drawled as he took a sip of coffee.

'Do you have any idea how much I earn?' said the waiter sullenly. 'And half of it goes in tax.'

Belozerkalsky returned to the office and looked through the windows. The young lady was sitting in front of him, bent over the telephone directory. 'Still looking up the number,' he thought. As he was pushing the door open she gave a cry.

'Is Monsieur Douchgoube in?' he asked with a stamp of his foot.

'He's busy right now. He has an appointment, a business appointment. I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little. Please sit down. We've got a few magazines over there. Do make yourself comfortable.'

'No, I've waited long enough. And I need an unbiased witness. A stranger, someone from outside.' And Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky reached the door separating him from his enemy. The young lady gave another cry as he pushed the door open.

'At last I've found you,' he said on entering the room.

'At last I've found you,' said the agent. 'Look,' he continued, turning towards his client, the third man, 'this individual has been pursuing me for a month at least. He accuses me of God knows what—I'm still at a loss to understand his grievances—and threatens revenge. He's come many times to the office in my absence and terrified my employees. They were nearly frightened out of their lives. He went so far as to point his revolver at them. Still, he doesn't ask for money or jewellery. I don't see what he's after. It would be easier to get the drift of his ideas if he was a regular burglar or gangster. He's not, otherwise I would already have called the police. But I can't even call the police. I can't.' And he buried his face in his hands. 'Anyway the office is burglar-proof,' he added after a while. KAB endeavoured to deny the agent's words with his fingers. 'And he even has the nerve to suggest I'm lying. Do you know what George Washington said when accused of chopping down a cherry tree? "Father, I cannot tell a lie; I did it with my little hatchet." I'm talking with this gentleman. We're discussing some matters that need to be cleared up urgently. You come and intrude on our discussion, saying you've found me at last, or something to this effect. Do you remember our meeting yesterday? *I* found you. I was tired of his incomprehensible allusions so I decided to have it out with him.' Once more he was addressing his client. 'I went to his place with a view to inviting him to a good restaurant. You've been to the *Faugeron*, haven't you? Superb, isn't it? He refused. He absolutely refused to have lunch with me at the *Faugeron*. Fancy anyone doing that!'

'Indeed,' said the third man.

'Once he asked me to dinner. I came with a friend of mine, a German lady. A very good friend of mine, a very beautiful lady. To the credit of our host I must point out that the dinner was lively, delicious. I do like Russian cuisine: *pirozhki*, salmon, vodka. We drank a lot. There was also an English couple. Wonderful people, especially the man. A renowned traveller. I mean an ambassador or something. A fine talker too. He told us quite a few of his adventures. An elephant hunt, a tiger hunt. I was listening. And when I looked around I realised my friend had disappeared. Our host had disappeared too. The Englishman went on talking, for appearance's sake. I was listening, for appearance's sake. The Englishman told me one, two, three, four—five stories. Five hunting stories and three fishing stories. Then there was a silence and the couple came back into the room. *At last*, as you put it!' He flashed Belozerkalsky a look of contempt. 'Where had they been? Where? A walk around the 16th *arrondissement*? I had no facts so I was reduced to conjectures. Two days passed and I learnt the truth. Believe it or not, this gentleman here accused me of lechery. "My maid's room is not a brothel," he shouted. Imagine that he accused me of making love in his maid's room. With the German lady. Regularly! Five times a week!'

'You're his shadow,' said the third man, 'because the shadow is always of the same sex, according to Jung.'

'You mean that his inflated ego projects its own irrational shadow onto others and identifies them as evil?' asked the agent.

'Exactly. He projects his shadow onto you.'

'His "dark side",' nodded the agent. 'His "Russian side".'

'And in your turn you're projected onto the German lady. Your body, not your shadow.'

'His uncivilised, animal qualities.' The agent swung round. 'The more you denounce us, the more you become a serious problem to yourself. Don't forget that whatever is wrong with the world dwells inside you, not outside.' Once again Belozerkalsky was given an opportunity to admire the agent's piercing green eyes.

'Don't be too hard on him,' said the third man. 'There's no denying that your client is hesitant to recognise the dark aspects of his personality, but self-knowledge as a psychotherapeutic measure frequently requires much work over a long period.'

'It breaks my heart to see how blatantly this man bungles his own life and the lives of others.' The agent produced a large handkerchief and mopped his forehead. 'Why doesn't *he* see that, I wonder? Is he blind?'

'My dog is very old and she's blind in one eye,' sighed the third man.

'He's totally incapable of seeing how much the whole tragedy originates in himself. And he continually feeds it and keeps it going. Not *consciously*, of course.'

'Consciously he spends his time cursing a faithless world that recedes further and further into the distance,' acquiesced the third man. 'But I wouldn't lose any sleep over his appalling plight.'

'My honour is at stake!'

'Complaints are the stock-in-trade of clients all over the world.'

'No-one should be allowed to overstep the limits of good taste. I wouldn't soil my hands with a thing like that, would I? Let alone other parts of my body.' For some reason the agent touched Belozerkalsky's solar plexus. '*You* are the one who showed the maid's room to the German lady—in my absence. So don't try to lay it at my door. Don't try to lay it on my bed. My reason and my body are pure.'

'Five times a week...at your age...You deserve to be put in the *Guinness Book of Records*.' The third man gave Belozerkalsky a look of real esteem.

'The question now on everyone's lips is "How does he do it?" But I'm worried about his health,' said the agent with a touch of anxiety. "Desire is a disease," as St Augustine put it. "*Libidinis morbus*!" And do you know what St Paul said on the subject of coitus?' The question was addressed to Belozerkalsky. "'Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die.'" Well, I'm doing my best to put him off women.' Once more the agent turned towards the third man. 'I tell him they're lascivious and insatiable. And too sociable. You can't satisfy their sexual appetite, no matter how often you make love to them. Even ten times a week wouldn't be enough. Even twenty times—'

'My wife grows tired.' The third man sighed and shook his head sadly.

'Women *may* grow tired now and then,' agreed the agent reluctantly. 'But they're never gratified, never ever. "*Lassata sed non satiata*," as Juvenal put it. Nothing can quench their thirst, not even the blood of the dead. Not even your blood!' The agent prodded Belozerkalsky with his index finger. 'You may die, my dear sir! In your maid's room, on that narrow bed! Caught in the act—by death. And your mistress will run away, fearing she might be accused of murder. And your body will rot for weeks and weeks before your neighbours—'

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky did not hesitate an instant. Without saying a word he made for the door and opened it again. The agent's voice continued to reach him: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.'

The secretary gave no cry. He walked out of the office and headed for the house where he lived. No cars drove by while he walked along the street. Nothing would have disturbed his thoughts, but there was nothing to think about. *Alles klar*, as the Germans say so often.

That man did not deserve a single thought of his. The second man. The first man. The agent. He was untouchable—'unthinkable', as it were. In pre-Revolutionary Russia individuals of that type could not even be challenged to a duel. *Neduelesposobnie*.

Belozerkalsky reached his bed and, like some Dostoevsky heroes, lay down without taking his clothes off. He slept for twenty-six hours.

Upon awakening—it was lunchtime and the weather was gorgeous—he set about cleaning his nails. While cleaning his nails he came to an unprecedented decision. And that decision of his was instantly justified and agreed upon. 'Other people might do it in your place,' he said to himself, bowing to the man whose drunken wisdom was to save him from eternal dishonour. He also remembered the words uttered by Grushnitsky, one of Lermontov's characters: 'There's no room for both of us in this universe.'

He asked a few waiters whether they were acquainted with the man he had spoken to; he described the man in great detail, some of which had been borrowed from Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. All was in vain; the man had disappeared.

Belozerkalsky raised his hand and scrambled into the taxi that had pulled up at the corner of his street. He made himself comfortable and said in a firm, unambiguous voice, 'Please drive me to a place where I can find professional killers or contract killers or hitmen or—What do you call them actually? Never mind. You understand me, don't you? Do you know such a place? A café or something. Perhaps a barn or a basement or a no-man's-land or a wood. I'm looking for somebody like Robin Hood or Zorro. And I'm in rather a hurry.'

The driver said, 'All right, sir' and Belozerkalsky saw the street and the sky and the sun fly away—faster and faster. Eventually they disappeared too.

The driver had understood him. The waves, the waves. No words are needed. The agent radiated a negative power that permeated the air and the hearts of the people walking or driving in the 16th

arrondissement. In Paris, in Europe. 'Evil,' he thought. 'A foul, misshapen mass. The Black Mass. Thin and subtle like the body of the air.'

But he did not want to think. Now he had somebody within his reach, within his magnetic field, within his ocean full of waves. And the person he had within hearing distance could not disappear while listening to his sad stories: that person was strapped in.

'Waves, waves, waves. Do you know what a pendulum is? My aunt uses it quite often. Several times a week, as a matter of fact. It swings to and fro as any pendulum does. It also goes in circles, from left to right and from right to left. Clockwise, anticlockwise. You put a photograph of the person you wish to dissect—psychologically speaking—under the pendulum and you wait, wait, wait, until the pendulum begins to move. Clockwise or anticlockwise. You may also put a sample of the person's handwriting under it. Not a line of her writing have I, not a thread of her hair. You may just concentrate upon the person. No photographs, no letters. You meditate, trying to *see* the person with your eyes shut. And the pendulum goes anticlockwise because the person is bad, frightful, appalling. If it goes clockwise—it never does, very seldom—the person is good. Weird, isn't it? You don't believe me, do you? At first I didn't believe in it myself. I laughed at her folly. My aunt *is* peculiar. But now I've changed my mind. Waves, waves. How strong they are, how powerful! A sample of handwriting. An old letter forgotten in a drawer of your desk, in a pile of old books. Just a thought, your memory of the person under investigation. And the pendulum is set into motion. Your hand remains immobile. And it goes in circles.'

They drove on at the same speed. There were no traffic lights along the road they had taken; no traffic lights, no police officers. But contract killers do not settle in areas where police officers can swoop down on them.

'We live in a world of waves,' Belozerkalsky continued. 'They swell beneath the surface of our lives, they rise, they roll towards us, they spray us, break, sweep over us, they engulf our bodies and souls, they drag us somewhere—even in our epoch when the air is so obstructed with our little ambitions and paltry occupations. A traffic jam, a real traffic jam. They come, following each other. In the Stone Age, in the Golden Age, people must have communicated through the air. They didn't talk, words were superfluous. Telepathy. They communicated with birds too. And with animals. With trees and flowers. Waves glided through the world, silently, perpetually. The air was light and clear. The world was alive. That's why sorcerers could kill people so easily. They drew a figure of their enemy in sand or ashes. Or they made a wooden image of their enemy and ran a needle into its head and heart. Wherever the needle pierced the image, the enemy was seized with unbearable pain. In the same part of his body. Or they burnt the doll and buried the ashes, killing him outright. The air let their hatred through.'

The windows of the taxi let in only the glimmer of distant lights, of stars; as if the windows were obstructed too.

'Where are we going? How far is it? I understand. They can't live in Paris. Somewhere in the suburbs.'

'Their house has its own helicopter pad,' said the driver.

'In most trials it is the accusers who make vigorous appeals for severity. Today it is we, the accused, who make the appeal! How fast you're going! Is there no speed limit? I like it, I like it. You'll never find a Russian who doesn't like speed, said Gogol. Fast driving. Have you read Gogol? *Dead Souls*? The melody of the speed, he says. O *troyka*, bird-like *troyka*. You fly, you sweep through the air like a wind. Do you know what it is, a *troyka*? I'm Russian. I was born in Petersburg. Now it's called Leningrad. Odious name. I was happy there. Have you been to Petersburg? Blocks of ice on the Neva, in springtime. The river washing the gigantic blocks of ice out to sea. And the palaces lined up in the snow. I'll die there. And from my ashes will be made the violet of my native land. I hope I'll die in Petersburg. With perestroika under way—'

Even the stars winked neurasthenically now as if to intimate that the taxi was driving under the ragged canopy of suburban woodland.

O sweet woods the delight of solitarines!

O how much I do like your solitarines!

The trees swayed and tossed with an uncanny swish. Or was it the sea he heard? A far-off swish of surf, of waves? Waves, waves, waves. He felt them, he heard them, he saw them. Waves governing human life.

'My aunt showed me a black pendulum two or three years ago. A dangerous thing, very powerful. That pendulum can inflict a wound on your enemy, a mortal injury. All you have to do is concentrate very intensely on the person you want to destroy. And I'm fully justified in seeking his death. But I've forgotten how the killing is to be carried out. Does the pendulum fly through the air and hit the enemy on a vulnerable spot? A temple, for example? Have you read Pushkin's *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*? A fairy tale in verse. A tsar wants to keep a beautiful lady to himself and is mortally wounded by the golden cockerel. An ingenious contraption fabricated by a magician. The cockerel leaves his perch and flies over the courtyard to hit the tsar on the temple. Or was it the crown of the head, the sinciput? Wait a minute.' Belozerkalsky began to recite the fairy tale. As he had come to the strophe dealing with Shamahanskaya tsaritsa—the lady of unparalleled beauty—the taxi slowed down and stopped.

'It's here,' said the driver.

'Where?' asked Belozerkalsky, lost in the middle of his fairy tale.

'Over there. Just go and knock at the gate.'

KAB walked a few metres towards the house looming ahead of him. There were no trees, no surf. The windows were dark and the moonshine did its best to make the outlines of the house visible

to potential clients. KAB stopped and waited for a sign, a symbol—the howl of a wolf, the hooting call of an owl. He heard nothing. He suddenly felt the water soaking through his shoes. 'Waves, waves, waves,' he recalled. The gate was a few paces away and he made an effort to reach it. The water was soaking now through his trousers and raincoat. He stopped again. He had no desire to catch pneumonia and die before accomplishing his duty. There was another reason for keeping away from the house: beyond the gate, two mastiffs were guzzling and swilling their food on the lawn. Imperturbable, the Moon shone down on the scene.

KAB turned round. The taxi was still there, obviously waiting for him. 'Can you see me?' he shouted and instantly repented of what he had done: his voice might have been heard by the inhabitants of the house. In the meantime, the water had covered him from head to foot as if he were swimming in the Baltic Sea.

They drove off. He had plenty of time to finish *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*, but he did not finish it. The taxi stopped and KAB recognised his own house; and yet the Moon had disappeared from the firmament.

'What to do? Chernyshevsky wrote a novel entitled *What to Do?* A bad writer.'

'So what?' asked the driver.

'What to do?' asked Belozerkalsky.

'Why look for contract killers? Take a plump toad and place it with vipers and asps in a globular bottle.'

'A plump toad?'

'The toad itself is not venomous, but it is a sponge for poisons. The mushroom of the animal kingdom!'

'So I put a plump toad in a bottle—'

'In a *globular* bottle, along with vipers and asps. Let poisonous fungi, foxgloves and hemlock be their sole nourishment during a period of several days.'

'How many days?'

'A week at the outside. Then enrage them by beating, burning and tormenting in every conceivable manner—until they die of rage and hunger.'

'I don't want *them* to die.'

'Sprinkle their bodies with powdered spurge and ground glass—'

'With powdered spurge — '

'Place their bodies in a well-sealed retort and extract all their moisture by fire. Let the glass cool—'

'Are you an alchemist?'

'Separate the ash of the dead bodies from the incombustible dust lying at the bottom of the retort.'

'Like sediment in a bottle of wine.'

'You'll have two poisons—one liquid, the other a powder. The first will be fully as efficacious as the terrible *Aqua Toffana*. The second, in a few days' time, will cause any person who may have a pinch of it mixed with his drink to grow wilted and old, and subsequently to die amidst horrible sufferings or in a state of complete collapse.'

'I wish he might grow old, very old. That's enough, I think. How much do I owe you?'

'Ten thousand francs,' said the driver.

'Impossible. How far have we been? The Soviet Union?'

'If you don't pay I'll report you to the police.'

KAB took out his chequebook. 'Do you have a pen I could borrow?' he asked.

The driver had no pen.

CHAPTER 14

In the long run Belozerkalsky dropped the idea of having the agent assassinated by a drunkard or a contract killer living somewhere in the Paris suburbs, not far from the Soviet Union. The driver's suggestion, on the other hand, presented him with a number of 'insurmountable difficulties'. Where to look for a plump toad? In the Seine? Besides, he was loath to beat an innocent creature to death.

For a while he considered murdering the agent by telepathy. In Lyall Watson's *Supernature* he read about Milan Ryzl, a Czechoslovakian physician, whose patients or guinea pigs would transmit diseases and emotions to each other. 'When the sender concentrated on the anxiety of suffocation and conjured up racking attacks of asthma, the receiver several kilometres away suffered an intense choking fit. When the sender concentrated on gloomy emotions and was given a depressant drug—' For several weeks Belozerkalsky concentrated on gloomy emotions; the agent continued to enjoy French cuisine and women of all nationalities. He knew nothing about his client's murderous disposition. And had he been put in the picture about what was going on four hundred meters away, he might have shrugged the whole thing off or devised a new stratagem for humiliating, dishonouring an old Russian expatriate. 'He'll pretend he's dead in order to make love with impunity—in my bedroom, under my very nose.' Actually Milan Ryzl's experiments seemed to prove that the would-be victim might be left in the dark about his enemy's intentions. But the latter was supposed to prepare himself for action by abstinence and lack of sleep, by drink, drugs and sex. 'And he is further intoxicated by the killing of an animal, the wounding of a human being and in some cases the approach to an achievement of orgasm.' An achievement of orgasm. Belozerkalsky closed the book and, regardless of consequences, dropped it from his balcony.

Of course Monsieur Douchgoube deserved to be taught a real lesson, 'a lesson which will last him his life-time'. He was as appalling as Raskolnikov: the love scene had clearly showed his penchant for killing old men. A real lesson, a life-long lesson. But who was to teach him that lesson? Belozerkalsky did all he could to save the earth from defilement; he failed. Perhaps defilement was inevitable and even a score of contract killers would have failed as quickly and disgracefully as he did. A score of contract killers, a hundred toads. One of the stories in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* is entitled *The Fatalist*. And Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* begins as follows: *Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*. The world is everything that is the case. And the rest is situated outside the world—in another galaxy, in another time that only a time-traveller could reach, explore and exploit to his heart's content. But no such exploit was within our hero's reach for the simple reason that he was not a hero of our time. Or of any other time.

'An eye for an eye. Well, I have only one eye now. And he has two eyes. Nothing doing. The world is also one-eyed, I suppose.'

He might have cured himself of this psychological disease rather quickly, however, had he chosen to thank the agent who, from a philosophical point of view, was his benefactor and not a devil

incarnate. Indeed, for several months the agent had coached him in indulgence, patience, composure and many other qualities that are so indispensable for whoever wishes to become a stoic. But, at the risk of seeming discourteous, Belozerkalsky neither paid his agent another visit nor even phoned the Bulgarian beauty. 'I would rather die of sorrow than express my gratitude to this son of a bitch,' he noted down. 'There are other ways of getting over it. Geoffrey would go and see his psychoanalyst. I am weary of talking to myself, but French psychoanalysts have no Russian. Do their patients cry on their shoulders?'

He needed a Russian shoulder to cry upon. Whose shoulder to choose? He was too weary to go outdoors and he did not wish to violate the laws of his existence by inviting his fellow countrymen to his solitary dinner parties. They might laugh in his face, in his flat.

Whose ear to choose? Nikolay Vasilyevich's hearing was not impaired, but he had a shrill, unmusical voice and swallowed his pills too loudly. As for Victor Pavlovich, he had grown so indifferent to women that he would have understood neither the agent's motives and actions nor Belozerkalsky's wrath.

So he called Monsieur Paduchev. At the age of sixty-three Fyodor Mikhaylovich Paduchev had got married for the first time and was now asking everybody the same question: 'What's the usual procedure for obtaining a divorce?'

'I've never been married. I haven't the slightest idea,' said Belozerkalsky.

'Do you think I should call my lawyer?'

'Of course, Fedya.'

'But what if she refuses to divorce me? My lawyer adores my wife. Do you think he'll adopt her point of view?'

'It's a hard nut to crack, as the English—'

'By the way, have you seen *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty*? The Bolshoi is here.'

'I've been too busy this last month. Awful creatures, aren't they? I mean women. Don't contradict me!'

'Awful. Awful.'

'And estate agents. Fearful.'

'Who? Are you selling your apartment?'

Belozerkalsky told his story in a few words. 'What is quite unlooked for is more crushing in its effect, and unexpectedness adds to the weight of a disaster,' he rounded off.

'What happened next?' asked Paduchev.

'Nothing,' answered Belozerkalsky. 'We should project our thoughts ahead of us at every turn and have in mind every possible eventuality—'

'Did you kill him?'

'I didn't.'

'Why? You're too tender-hearted.'

'I projected my thoughts as far as the murder, but it's easier thought than done.'

'Do you want me to kill that agent? Or the lady? Or both? What's she like? Beautiful?'

'Awful. Fearful, fearful.'

'No regrets, then. Let him make love to her as often as he pleases, in your maid's room. Give them the key. Have a second key cut. The most efficient vengeance you can think of. He'll be punished by her deformities and you'll laugh at them. The laugh may kill, you know. Do you remember what Dudley Fitts wrote on the subject? "The laugh, however wry, goes deeper and hurts more than the snarl or the bullet." The bullet is my addition. Ha-ha!'

Belozerkalsky rang off. He was right, absolutely right. It would have been much more difficult to remove Fedya Paduchev from the living room or from the dining room. Fedya was impervious to the elegant power of allusions. And even plain Russian or plain French or plain German were not plain enough for him. Belozerkalsky rolled up his sleeves and examined his muscles.

Shortly afterwards he reached the writing desk and opened all the drawers. His favourite pen was nowhere to be seen. Where was it? Where the devil had he put it? He threw all the files and notebooks out of the drawers. They crunched under his slippers as he walked through his study towards the living room. He snatched his raincoat from one of the armchairs and turned it upside down. On his knees he examined the papers and trinkets scattered all over the floor. There were four keys among them. 'I don't need them any more.'

He remained on his knees for a while as if paying homage to the past.

He had no time to buy a new pen so he borrowed one from his neighbour who lived on the fifth floor—much nearer to the maid's room.

He wrote a long letter to a former school friend—another Russian expatriate from St Petersburg—whom he had lost sight of in the early sixties. In great detail he described his adventure and discomfiture, pointing out that he was badly in need of friends—'not for the purpose of having someone to come and sit beside my bed when I am ill or dying but because even a self-sufficient man desires a companion. It is an ideal, old-fashioned friendship I have in mind: a person I may die for, a person I may follow into exile.' After putting the letter in an envelope, he phoned their mutual mistress Tatusya.

'Please give me Sasha Belerusov's address.'

'Do you also need his telephone number?'

'No, thanks a lot. No, no.'

Three weeks later he got a reply:

Dear Konstantin Alexeevich,

Very often, nowadays, man departs from loyalty to his Church due to vanity and the materialistic opportunities he constantly seizes to better his life here on earth. But what the Orthodox Christian does not remember is that no matter what he looks for, or strives for, death will put an end

to all. To all! And after death one will be required to give an account of oneself in front of God's Absolute and Divine Justice. Were you true to the Lord our Saviour through the Holy Church and its teachings? If the answer is yes, you shall be blessed with Eternal Life; if it is no, you shall be plagued by grief and sorrow and misfortune.

Let us remember that man is not strong enough to do good, while life has become filthy and depraved as never before. Let us remember that it has become extremely difficult for a Christian to do battle against evils such as vanity, hate, falsehood, lies and deception. Thus we must ask the Lord our Saviour to keep our Faith pure and strong and to bestow upon us the ability and courage to fend off such evils so as not to be true Orthodox Christians merely by name. Amen.

P.S. At the time of death the diabolic forces make their last desperate attempt to divert the soul from its way to Heaven.

Belozerkalsky held up his fist in a gesture of defiance and then covered his face. In a gesture of despair. He made a lot of gestures in the space of four minutes. For once his body seemed to have a multitude of limbs which tore his hair, struck his forehead, clasped his knees, stroked his chest, shoulders and thighs—on their own initiative. What they did caused an idea to germinate in his head. Suddenly a stentorian voice boomed across the room: 'To invite Tatusya!'

At long last he brought his numerous limbs under control and rushed to the telephone. 'Tatusya! Tatusya!'

'What's the matter? Kostya, is it you?'

'Tatusya, I can't bear it any more. They're laughing at me. They're laughing in my face.'

'Who? Who? Calm down, Kostya! Do you hear me? It's bad for your heart. Take an aspirin—'

'They don't even bother to say, "I'm sorry, I can't be more helpful."'

'Few people offer their moral support purely as a philanthropic gesture. They're after something in return.'

'Tatusya, please. I'm tired, tired. I am the self-consumer of my woes.'

'You must go to bed at once. Don't watch television. You may even take a sleeping pill—'

'Come, Tatusya. Come, come. As soon as possible.'

'I'm busy right now. Zinaida Ilyini—'

'Come, I implore you!'

She came. He opened the door, kissed her fingers and sank his head on her right shoulder.

'Kostya, my dear Kostya, don't cry! You're not a little boy, are you? A little boy, a little boy—'

Her touching, consolatory words only succeeded in paving the way to a new, far more ostentatious outburst of sorrow. He literally dissolved into tears. They trickled along his cheeks and dropped down on her dress with such ease and simplicity that one might presume he had been crying all his life—on her shoulder.

'Tatusya, Tatusya—'

'Just look at you. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?'

'Thank you very much. I'm so grateful, I'm so—'

'Are we going to stand here all the time?'

'I'm sorry Tatusya. Please come in.'

They went into the living room and sat down on the sofa. He took her hand.

'Tatusya, my dear Tatusya. Don't leave me.'

'I'm having dinner at—'

'You're not hungry, are you? We can have dinner together. Here or—'

'Kostya! Be reasonable.'

'Please cancel your engagements, your reservations—'

'Kostya, Kostya—'

'Of course everybody *must* suffer, according to some Russian thinkers. If life treats you well you're supposed to treat yourself badly to counterbalance the benevolence of your lot. But it's life that treats me badly, very badly—I don't fake suffering. Perish the thought! In art, fakes are often amusing and sometimes even worthy of the original. A human being imitating a sentiment or a state of soul is immoral, repugnant.'

He was still holding her hand. Presently he released his hold and she stood up. She went to the kitchen, boiled some water in the kettle and half-an-hour later they finished their first cup of tea. They drank a second and a third cup. He started to cry again.

'Kostya, Kostya—' she said as she stroked his arms and chin.

'I've lived too long, Tatusya. I don't know this world, these—'

'You don't have to know them.'

'They're so strange and cruel. And the laws of this world. I mean natural laws. How awful—'

'True, true. We've grown old and weak. But our friends—'

'No, there are no friends. No-one.'

'When in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes,

I all alone beweepe my out-cast state—'

'Calm down, Kostya. You're suffering from overwork or from loneliness or from poor digestion. But you can rely on us. What do you eat? Usually? Vegetables and fruit. And no alcohol, do you hear? You should have married a long time ago, my friend. You should have married Olga.'

'Olga? I thought Tatiana—'

'No, you little fool. Tatiana was a crazy girl. Like Nastasya Philipovna. The roof's come loose, as they say now in Russia.'

'Too late. Rolled round in earth's diurnal course with rocks and stones—'

'She would have sent you to an early grave.'

'I loved her.'

'Don't speak to me of love.'

'Yes. It's awful, awful. And curse my fate.'

She accompanied him to the bed and tucked him in.

'Are you leaving me?' he asked. 'Where are you going?'

'Don't ask me any questions,' she answered.

'Why? Why? I want to know. Are you unhappy with me?'

'Sweet dreams,' she said. 'I'll call you tomorrow.'

'Why do you have to leave? It's my bedroom. At last.'

'It's *your* bedroom. I'll call you tomorrow morning.'

'Tomorrow morning? What date is it today?' But she was already in the living room. 'Wait! I'll see you out,' he whispered and slowly closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 15

Belozerkalsky woke up and at once his memory suffused him with a feeling of well-being and joy. 'Tatusya, Tatusya.' And he broke into the famous Russian *romance* composed by Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka: *Subside, agitation of passion*. He sang it five times in a row, jumped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. The revolver was still lying in the washbasin. He went to the living room and flung it out of the window.

'Tatusya is so nice,' he thought rubbing his hands. 'And we've known each other for such a long time. Precedence due to seniority. Age before beauty, in other words.'

Tatusya's husband had died long before perestroika and she lived with her cousin now. In other words, she lived completely alone. 'There are so many "other words" available to human beings,' thought Belozerkalsky. 'The problem is we always use the same words. That's why we are so cramped for space on this earth of ours.'

She forsook him last night. In other words, she promised to call him upon awakening. And she was free today—in the afternoon and in the evening. And she was free tomorrow. She had nobody to look after: no children, no suffering relatives. Marvellous, marvellous.

He laid all his keys down on the dinner table and fingered them for a while, smiling mysteriously. Tatusya telephoned at 11.22 a.m. After a few convincing moans he complained to her about a severe headache.

'A migraine, in all probability. Nothing to worry about.'

'But I have no aspirin,' he said in a miserable, whining voice.

'You don't need medicine. You're always dosing yourself.'

'And I'm hungry, my fridge's empty.'

'Go and—'

'I can't. I feel dizzy.'

'I saw a tin of caviar on a windowsill, somewhere.'

'I awoke in the middle of the night and ate it.'

She came at 3.45 p.m. He kissed her hands, pressing them warmly.

'I drew a lesson from the unfortunate incident,' he told her. 'That's the only rational attitude—'

'What are you talking about?'

'Just an incident. Life is made up of incidents and accidents. But we must learn something from whatever happens to us. I did. The survival of the fittest, as they say.'

'Are you talking about your rheumatism?'

'Not exactly. Rheumatism is of no importance, Tatusya.'

'May I ask what you consider important?'

By way of explanation he showed her a champagne bucket in which there floated a dozen ice-cubes.

'And the bottle is upstairs,' he said in languorous tones.

'Where?'

'You'll see. I'm afraid we'll have to go out.'

'You can't go out, you told me.'

'Out of my apartment, I mean. It's on the top floor. Can life be a blessing if love were away?'

He lifted the bucket and spilt some water on his trousers and shoes. An ice-cube was rolling towards a leg of the piano.

'Put that thing down,' she said. 'Immediately!'

'Let's go. No time to lose. Please.'

'An attack of dizziness—'

'Hurry up. We'll both regret—'

He tottered out of the living room and looked back.

'Please open the door, Tatusya.'

'No.'

'Please open the door. It's heavy.'

'Put it down.'

'Open the door, please. For the sake of our past—'

She opened the door. 'You're fit as a fiddle. The lift. Why didn't we take the lift?'

'It's always out of order. So many people have tumbled downstairs over the last twenty years. I'm lucky to live on the second floor. Anyway I like walking up and down, all along Time. Don't you? Nothing is wrong with our hearts. We are young, aren't we? And to be young is very heaven!'

He nudged the door closed and they tottered upstairs. Now and then he was tempted to drop the cumbersome thing, but his fingers were benumbed with cold. And he could not bend forward and put it on the floor: his rheumatism was back.

wilt thou go with me

In this strange death of life to be,

To live in death and be the same,

Without this life or home or name

He feared moreover that he might fall backward and tumble all the way down to the street. Luckily, he could not bend backward.

So, for all their fears and mutual reproaches, they were nearing the top floor—the maid's room, in other words.

'Tatusya, open the door, please.'

'What door? Where? Are you being metaphorical? As usual?' They stood motionless on the staircase.

'Poetic licence. I'm sorry, Tatusya. It's not far. I hope it's not far, not far. Very near, in fact. Here we are, at last.'

'A maid's room? Why?' she inquired, squeezing his elbow.

'Please take the key out of my left pocket and—'

'Which one?'

'The smallest key, the left pocket. The other one.'

She opened the door and saw the bed.

'Why does it stand here?'

'Where would *you* put it?'

'Here. Or here.'

'I thought it would be more piquant. Never mind. Let's move it over to the wall.' They moved it over to the wall. 'Now the bottle. Sit down, Tatusya.'

'Where?'

'On the bed.'

'On the bed?'

'If you prefer the chair—'

'Why did you bring me to your maid's room, Kostya?'

An obvious question, a traditional question. But he had prepared no answer.

'I thought it would be more piquant—' She stared at him stonily. 'I'm telling the truth. Let's sit down.' They sat down. 'We'll have to wait. Sorry.'

'Wait for what?'

'The temperature. Twelve degrees, fifteen minutes.'

'Wait fifteen minutes for what?'

'For the champagne.'

'I'm terribly busy, Kostya. My cousin—'

'What's wrong with your cousin?'

'Her children—'

'Pity we've got no children of our own, Tatusya.' He poured some champagne into a glass and propped himself against the wall.

'What are you doing?'

He dropped the glass on the floor and met her eye. 'Do you mind my lying down for a few minutes? Give me a few minutes. Only five minutes.'

He lay down, muttering under his breath, 'Use your initiative, use your initiative.' She remained in her chair, near the window. 'I'm sorry to keep you waiting,' he apologised. 'You're not busy this afternoon, are you?'

'I'm not.'

'Thank you. I'm very grateful to you, my dear. My dear, dear Tatusya.' Suddenly he sat up. 'Shall we push the bed over to the middle of the room?'

'What for?'

'An attempt is no torture.'

They pushed the bed over to the middle of the room. He lay down again. 'Just three minutes, no more.' He was gazing up at the ceiling. 'Where's the stain?' he asked. 'There was a stain up there.'

'On the ceiling?'

'On the ceiling.'

'Your charwoman—'

'She never comes up here.'

'It's another room. I mean you saw it in another room.'

'In the maid's room.'

'In another maid's room.' She picked up a large sliver of the broken champagne glass and examined it meticulously.

'Victor Pavlovich,' he exclaimed.

'What about him? Another death?'

'Is he in Paris now?'

'No idea.'

'He must be in Paris, not in Burgundy. Last summer he bought a *gentilhommière* in Burgundy.'

'Yes, I remember now.'

'Is he in Burgundy?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll be right back.'

Belozerkalsky ran down the stairs, fearless and high-spirited. Presently he was speaking to Victor Pavlovich on the phone. 'Come, my dear. Come. We haven't seen each other for ages. How many summers, how many winters! I'm an excellent cook.'

'Since when have you been an expert at cooking?' Tatusya murmured in his ear; she had followed him down, out of anxiety and curiosity.

'I'm waiting. Hurry, my dear. No time to lose, no time to lose.' Belozerkalsky rang off and looked up.

'Why did you invite him? That bore...'

'You won't see him. I promise, you won't see him.'

When Victor Pavlovich knocked at the door—he had not found the doorbell in the darkness—Tatusya was already sitting in the maid's room. Belozerkalsky opened the door and invited his friend in. Victor Pavlovich smoked a cigarette, and as he stabbed the butt out in a crystal ashtray Belozerkalsky asked him permission to leave the apartment for quarter-of-an-hour at most.

'I must go out and buy a cake, a chocolate cake. Do you like chocolate?'

'I do.'

'All right. Just wait for me here. My library is at your disposal. I'd have done my shopping before you came but a telephone call, a long-distance call—'

'I can go with you,' said Victor Pavlovich.

'No, please. I'll be right back. Awfully sorry. A chocolate cake. I was sure you liked chocolate.'

He locked Victor Pavlovich in and mounted the stairs. Tatusya was sitting near the window.

'What's going on?' she asked.

'I hope I haven't forgotten anything.' He resumed his position on the bed. Tatusya was sitting by the window.

'It looks like rain,' she told him. 'No stars.'

'Give me a few minutes, please.'

A few minutes, a few hours.

'Don't let us talk about the stars, Tatusya. So many worlds. Nonsensical and cruel and—They can't be otherwise. The universe is a huge mirror. The same stupidity and tortures. God isn't inventive. God is a learner rasping away on his violin. I'm tired of the stars.'

'Are you?'

'I'd like to hear the rain. The sound I like most...on our terrace...raindrops drumming on the roof. Our country house.'

'Where?'

'In Pavlovsk.'

'You can't remember Pavlovsk.'

'My father—'

'Victor Pavlovich! What's he doing downstairs? Alone?'

'He left. He must have left by now. I should have left myself. They were sure I would wait downstairs. What would have happened without me? I wonder—'

'Did you take part—'

'They would have managed, I imagine. I've no hand in it, nor anything else. "The Red Bird", "The Coral Bough". Did *they* have anything in it? Did it really happen? Truth will out, as they say. Who are *they*, I wonder? Have they ever seen the truth? No, the truth is always *in*. So many things are in, come to think of it. Even my hand was in perhaps.'

'Where? What are you talking about?'

'She was lying on this bed *before* his arrival. I was alone with her.'

'With your Lolita?'

'Before, after. Everything happens before something...and after something...How to find out what happens before? Before what? An open door, a quiver of the air. A stain on the ceiling. Just a shadow. It's a north-facing room so it doesn't get much light. Only shadows, nothing but shadows.'

They were also shadows, I suppose. Huge shadows, life-sized shadows. The Chinese have a theatre like that. *Ombres chinoises*. A translucent screen.'

'We had it at home,' said Tatusya. 'As a child I often took part in shadow plays.'

'How can you get beyond the shadows of your doubts? You walk and walk and walk...only shadows...What's the use of walking? There's no light at the end of the tunnel. No end, no light. And no tunnel. Just a room with a bed. And a window. Homecoming is a contradiction in terms. Home, coming. We are always at home.'

When he finished speaking, there was silence again; yet he had not asked for it.

'It's started to rain,' she informed him.

'I can't hear anything.'

'Because you talk all the time. Or fidget—'

'I do not.'

'The bedsprings are—'

'They are not.'

'Can you hear now?'

'What am I supposed to hear?' he asked angrily.

Something tapped on the pane of my room

When there was never a trace

Of wind or rain, and I saw in the gloom

My weary Belovéd's face.

'Come. You'll see the drops on the window.'

He got up, came over to Tatusya's chair and pressed his face against the window.

The wind doth blow to-day, my love,

And a few small drops of rain;

I never had but one true-love;

In cold grave she was lain.

The street was dark and empty. The inhabitants of Paris were afraid of something. What were they afraid of? Had a war been declared?

'Let's wait until somebody crosses the street.'

'I saw a passer-by a while ago,' she said.

'Who?'

'A passer-by.'

'Did you recognise him?'

'No.'

'When was it?' Tatusya consulted her watch. 'What did he wear?'

'A beige coat, I think.'

'It was Victor Pavlovich.'

'You also have a beige coat.'

Belozerkalsky recoiled from the window and looked around. And then he looked down as if his glance could reach the figure sitting with hunched shoulders in his apartment, in one of his armchairs. 'I've climbed all these stairs, so many times,' he thought, 'just in order to see myself from afar, from the heights which are quite modest in comparison with Olympus. And yet this maid's room is far enough from my apartment to enable me to realise how small and helpless I am. Alone, forsaken, sitting down there, waiting for something to happen. As if something *could* happen in my life which is no bigger than a page torn out from some tabloid newspaper. Just a dozen interior monologues, one or two headlines in bold type. It's high time I joined myself downstairs—not on account of homesickness, mind you. Body-sickness, soul-sickness, self-sickness. No, I just have to take care of myself. Self-thickness, self-thinness. Thin and subtle like the body of the air. Take care of yourself, as they say. They know not what they say. *Sibi totus animus vacet. In se recedendum est. Sunousia*. A spasm of pleasure, a woman rubbing herself against my body. Like a cat. The cat I had before the war kept rubbing herself against my leg. I don't need another cat. All this ends in a spasm of pain, in a heart attack, in death. I'd rather end it all.'

But despite his resolution to return home, he spent another five minutes in the maid's room, staring at the wall on which there were no pictures, no photographs.

'Shall we join Victor Pavlovich?' asked Tatusya at last.

'Victor Pavlovich? Oh yes, of course. I'm awfully sorry, Tatusya. What has happened can be explained away as an aberration, purely temporary, though admittedly regrettable.'

'We might have lunch tomorrow,' she suggested. 'Here, in your maid's room. If you wish.'

'We'd better have lunch elsewhere. Anyway I'm not hungry, I'm not hungry. I'll never be hungry again. To live like a poem...by heart...'

They found Victor Pavlovich asleep in the armchair. He was snoring.

CHAPTER 16

So many years, so few years. The door opened and was shut again. A lot of people came in and all those people went out. What remains of them? Empty chairs.

Belozerkalsky did not believe in a Christian God. But he obstinately refused to give the universe over to chemical formulas and molecular structures. His world was neither material nor materialistic; spirits and ghosts inhabited it. A long time ago he had decentralised this world of beauty and harmony in favour of pluralism and individualism. *Omnia sunt plena Jovis*.

He might suddenly feel the presence of God. But the door was open; the armchairs were empty.

Oddly enough, his pagan spiritualism would induce him to read the Bible in his bedroom—even on those serene, unclouded days when he sought no guidance, no advice, no solution to eternal problems. He admired the poetry of the Psalms and the intensity of Job's misery but, on the whole, agreed with the renowned Kabbalist who maintained that the Jews would have described God's actions more skilfully had they been compelled to write a story, a fairy tale, instead of copying a sacred book in which every letter counted.

Goaded by his ethical considerations, he was sometimes tempted to defy the Supreme Being—as so many Russians had done—in order to stigmatise the sufferings inflicted on humans, on animals, on insects.

'How can you believe in a God who forgets us?' he asked Pyotr Petrovich.

*And it is strange—though sad enough—
Earth's race should think that one whose call
Frames, daily, shining spheres of flawless stuff
Must heed their tainted ball!*

'God never forgets us, never.' Pyotr Petrovich puffed on his pipe.

'And what happens at the beginning of *Exodus*?'

'*Exodus*?'

'"And God heard their groaning and God *remembered* his covenant with Abraham—" A mere lapse of memory. Humanity suffers because the Supreme Being has a short memory. Amnesia.'

'What do you read *Exodus* for? You should study *The New Testament*. Take, for instance—'

Nevertheless, even Pyotr Petrovich admitted that Belozerkalsky was on the 'right track', for, as Dostoevsky put it, one must be either hot or cold—never lukewarm. 'Your rebellion against God demonstrates that you think about Him, that you love Him in your heart of hearts. From hatred to love is but one step,' he concluded.

'I don't *hate* your God,' retorted Belozerkalsky.

'Our Saviour and Redeemer,' corrected Pyotr Petrovich.

'I'm just saying He is too incompetent to run the universe.'

'The books you've got in your library only add to your confusion. Before the advent of Jesus Christ the universe had been governed by a bunch of incompetent gods. But ever since His Resurrection—'

It was rather late in the day to change his mind now: he used to laugh at the people who start to believe in God because of their infirmities or the proximity of death. He had no wish to fawn upon God at the last minute. As he wrote in a letter to one of his pious correspondents: 'An overdose of painkillers should not affect one's lifelong attitude towards Christianity.' He affirmed that faith was not subject to the caprices of the human body.

On the brink of death Russian atheists often break faith with themselves and resort to the Bible—especially in nineteenth century novels. They find a tattered volume on the table of some prostitute or in a handbag of their travelling companion and ask them—the prostitute or the travelling companion—to read an excerpt from it. While listening to the excerpt they exclaim: 'Marvellous!' 'Incredible!' 'Strange, I've never thought of it before!' 'How true that sounds!' 'I've devoted my whole life to cards and women but from now on—'

Belozerkalsky had never played cards and knew no prostitutes despite his unrelenting pursuit of women. He read the Bible in the nocturnal tranquillity of his bedroom. He read the Bible unassisted. He read mainly *Ecclesiastes*.

They were at one on many issues. What Belozerkalsky appreciated most in the book was its 'lukewarm' quality. The author of *Ecclesiastes* seemed to dislike both the heat of summer and the cold of winter. His favourite season must have been autumn. Tenderness, tenderness. It is a soft autumnal feeling. Whenever Belozerkalsky embraced human existence in a single sensation, he was lukewarm: full of melancholy, pity and curiosity. Such a minuscule, touching thing—our world. You can hold it in the palm of your hand. There is nothing new under the sun, but old events never lose their freshness and beauty. Beauty. His memory endeavoured to avoid the ugliness of the past. He had no time for ugliness now. Nevermore!

Time. Time. A time to enjoy Beethoven and Proust, Schubert and Botticelli.

He pondered over the enigmas of life, of the Hereafter, because he could not help it. His thoughts were going somewhere, hopelessly and laboriously. He was neither a fool nor a wise man, and anyway he saw no difference between wisdom and simple-mindedness, between thoughts and emptiness. Something was still moving in his consciousness; he had no desire to accelerate the movement. Nor did he check it.

He knew that he needed to prepare himself for the disappearance of those circular movements—they were circular, weren't they?—but was at a loss for words, actions and decisions. What was to be done? 'A friend of mine was invited to the Soviet Union at the end of Khrushchev's era,' he remembered suddenly. Before setting out on his perilous journey, the anonymous friend had given Belozerkalsky a Russian hug and said half-seriously, 'Forgive me my trespasses.'

'Forgive me,' echoed Belozerkalsky.

It was high time to forgive everybody and forget human injustice and cruelty. A time to take offence and a time to forgive. And a time to forget, and a time to forget.

'*Je te pardonne tout, et veux tout oublier.*' No, he could not forgive. He preferred to forget life and its inhabitants. Anyway it is easier to forget, especially if your memory is short.

'*On pardonne tant que l'on aime.*' You forgive as long as you love. He loved nobody. Except the dead, except the dead, except the dead. But the dead did not care about his forgiveness. There was no point in forgiving the dead.

He listened to *Parsifal* now, relegating *Tristan und Isolde* to the remotest corner of his memory where nothing could protect it from erosion and corrosion. 'What we are witnessing is the corrosion of moral standards,' said Oleg Olegovich. But some memories are less fragile than moral standards; nor do they become eroded by wind and rain. 'Should I remove them from my memory *altogether*? Didn't I put the recording of *Tristan und Isolde* outside this room? Out of sight, out of memory, out of heart, out of body. How easy it is to cross out a word. And in Petersburg many statues have been eroded into shapeless lumps of stone.'

It was time to forget everybody: out of memory, out of heart. 'The two superpowers agreed to a reciprocal reduction of nuclear weapons,' said a TV newscaster. Belozerkalsky hoped that some day the inhabitants of the earth would agree to a reciprocal reduction of memories and gregarious impulses. At least he had already embarked on a unilateral reduction of attachments and social habits. The only person with whom he still maintained close links could not pay him a visit: Arthur Pavlovich was going blind.

They often spoke on the telephone, mainly about the importance of sight in human existence. Whenever launching into a diatribe against light and its interference in human affairs, Belozerkalsky sought to dislodge from his mind the vestiges of the outside world. Out of light, out of life. Once he quoted these lines from Thomas Gray's poem *Elegy in a Country Church-Yard*:

*Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

'Nobody can see *those* rays. Nobody can see *those* flowers,' he said with unusual ardour, almost vehemence. 'Growing in a desert—'

'Nobody?' Arthur Pavlovich inquired mistrustfully, as if convinced that everybody except him could see even the invisible man. Actually he could not even *hear* those rays and flowers: he had no English.

'Nobody. Neither the far-sighted nor the deep-sighted. What all of them do see instead is appalling, loathsome.'

'Don't they see flowers, other flowers, our flowers? And sunbeams, moonlight?

'What do *these* rays bring to light, may I ask? Our flowers are different from the ones mentioned in Gray's poem. *Les fleurs du mal*. By the way, Baudelaire's flowers do exist for you. More than for others. Isn't that wonderful? You must have a very good sense of smell. Their perfumes...in solitude...

*'Mainte fleur épanche à regret
Son parfum doux comme un secret
Dans les solitudes profondes.'*

'Did you see the flowers from the poem? From the other poem?'

Belozerkalsky ignored the question and continued along the same lines: 'I wish I had been born in the ocean, in its "dark unfathom'd caves". The closer you get to the surface of our so-called Mother Earth, the uglier everything becomes.'

'And those flowers grow on the surface of the earth, in a desert. The flowers from the poem.'

'Sounds and smells are far more substantial, far more consequential. What would you do without Bruckner's *Ninth* and the bouquet of Lafite? Anyway you can't see more than seven points. I mean, nobody can. Your ophthalmologist should provide scientifically-based information—'

'I'm not very scientifically-minded.' Arthur Pavlovich's voice was husky with fatigue.

'Neither am I. You sound as though you have a sore throat.'

'No, I'm just sad. And tired. A sore point—'

'I'm also blind in a way. The blind leading the blind.' Belozerkalsky heard a nervous giggle. 'I can't see further than the end of my nose, otherwise I would have seen it coming,' he said gravely.

'Try and forget your agent and that German—'

'How to forget love? "Seagulls flying over the cliff", "bamboo beside the altar", "ape crying on a pine-tree bough".'

'What are you talking about?'

'About lovemaking. That's how the Chinese talk about it. "Cat and mouse in the hole". Do you know what they call "penis"? "The Red Bird". And also "The Pillar of the Celestial Dragon". And I'm just an ape crying in a bedroom.'

'I've already forgotten love,' said Arthur Pavlovich. 'But I can't forget my blindness. I see it everywhere. And where do you see love?'

'Many people are blind without knowing it. Actually we don't need the world.'

'You don't need it any more because you've been knocking around Europe, Asia and America every since your childhood.'

'There are countries I've never visited: Egypt, Greece, China. To tell the truth, I don't want to visit them. I've got so many books—'

'Your library is magnificent, but I don't envy you *now*.'

'I know how to raise photographs from the dead, from the two-dimensional world. If you're used to collating real sights and the photographs that correspond to them—'

And Belozerkalsky launched into a lengthy analysis designed to prove the importance of experience in human life. According to him, any intelligent middle-aged man had a knack of judging incidents he might get involved in on the basis of incomplete information. 'One detail is enough, one sound.'

'Even one detail I won't see in a few months' time, one point out of seven,' his friend would answer in the same husky voice.

'What do you need these details for? Stains, crumpled clothes. Invisible worlds are far more exciting. And you'll hear as many sounds as you wish: Mahler's *Eighth*, Schoenberg's *Gurre-Lieder*.'

'Your music won't help me see the world, a stain on my trousers.'

'Music is larger than the world, larger than life. The sense of hearing is far more important than the other senses which lead you into temptation and error. All sorts of optical illusions—'

'In my youth I dreamt of becoming a magician to trick my audience with skilful optical illusions, making things appear and disappear. Now things are just disappearing, never to appear again. And I'm a member of the audience, the only member of the audience in a huge, dark circus. But I'm no magician.'

'Melting out of existence. Moving to one's end through nature's own gentle process of dissolution—is there a better way of leaving life than that? This gradual withdrawal is an easy route.'

'But *your* spirit and body are full of vigour.'

'Virtue can't be taught through sight. Only our ears are attuned to it because we mustn't dissociate virtue from *logos*, from human languages articulated by reason and mouth. You can listen to cassettes, by the way. Many novels have been released on cassettes and CDs. Many short stories, many poems.'

'*Anna Karenina*?'

'There are also video cassettes. I came across some of them last year, but I never buy any because X-rated films are useless. My television set creates an absolute nothingness.'

'And what about Andrey Tarkovsky's films?'

'And even if you pay no attention to my words, to my *logos*, something penetrates your mind like an X-ray. The power of philosophy is such that—'

'Why don't they x-ray my eyes? Or do they use X-rays only at airports now?'

'Even the inattentive can benefit from a philosopher's teaching. If you drink a bottle of vodka absent-mindedly, you're sure to get drunk all the same.'

'And I'll be spoon-fed by my wife.'

'What counts is the taste of your food, not the way it lands in your mouth. The taste and the aroma. The thought of all those dainty dishes your wife is cooking tonight makes my mouth water.'

'Nothing special,' said Arthur Pavlovich. '*Un gigot d'agneau braisé aux oignons nouveaux.*'

'What a remarkable wife you've got! How I envy you! What would become of yours truly under the circumstances? A guide dog can't spoon-feed you.'

'Last week my son read a text by Derrida out loud.'

'Didn't you love to have stories read out to you? In your childhood? And we are in our second childhood, all of us. In our third childhood.'

'A contemporary French philosopher, a leading proponent of deconstructivism. Do you know the word? Just a momentary fad, I suppose. He wrote a text for a Louvre exhibition. *Les mémoires d'aveugles.*'

'The memories of the blind. Why don't you dictate your memoirs to your wife? Strolling down memory lane, memory boulevard. The Nevsky Avenue—'

'That's right. Memory is a key factor because Derrida attributes the origin of drawing to it. You don't look at the model when your paintbrush—'

'You can't look at both. And at the canvas.'

'Precisely. There's always a gap or delay. "The artist is blind," said Derrida.'

'And we are artists, all of us,' said Belozerkalsky.

'The process of drawing is blind as well.'

'And the process of thinking? Do we look at the objects of our thoughts? Our models, our ideals, our past, the dead.' Belozerkalsky was speaking with febrile intensity. 'Thoughts are blind, hopes are blind. Only my abhorrence of the outside world is sharp-eyed. The inside, the outside. We can't see both.'

'You can. I'll hear you tomorrow.' And Arthur Pavlovich rang off.

'I wish I were blind,' thought Belozerkalsky, shutting his eyes and inhaling deeply. 'The blind have a good excuse for not seeing further than the ends of their noses. But they can always smell a rat. Their abhorrence of the outside world is sharp-nosed.' He opened his eyes, stood up and headed for the window. 'What would I do without Paris? Without the Place de Furstenberg? Without the Parisian sky, its colours and moods?' He returned to the writing desk, picked up a fountain pen, wrote these questions down in his notebook and recited them like a poem.

Then he shut his notebook and opened Seneca's *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* to refresh his memory of the letter in which Scipio is praised for his withdrawal from public life. And once again he realised that his memory was fresh enough as long as it confined the scope of its activities to the dead, to the distant past. He even recalled that Cato used to keep his memory in good repair by reading the inscriptions on tombstones.

The description of the bath where the famous Terror of Carthage washed his weary body reminded him of his bathroom which was not, however, 'dingy in the extreme'. 'And under that dingy

ceiling, on that dingy pavement, Scipio took care of himself, of his weary, thin self,' whispered Belozerkalsky.

He also re-read *Letter CIV* mainly devoted to the act of suicide from which one should refrain for the sake of one's wife or closest friend, in Seneca's opinion. This renunciation 'will bring you more than a little pleasure and recompense; for can anything be sweeter than to find that you are so dear to your wife that this makes you dearer to yourself?' Wiping off his tears with a bath towel, Belozerkalsky went on reading the letter in which human life is compared to falling leaves, to the autumn and spring. The leaves grow again and the dead are replaced by the quick. 'There's no spring in human life,' he protested. 'Only falling leaves, nothing but falling leaves. And even leaves can't be replaced. There's no spring in nature either. And Keats' nightingale died a long time ago. The nightingale I listened to last summer was just a stand-in, a sorcerer's apprentice. I ought to have got married in the late thirties. Growing old together, day by day, night by night. One leaf at a time. That's what marriages are for. Not for the sake of children or morality. They spare us contrasts and Kierkegaardian leaps—the sight of death. Within a happy household Time runs so smoothly. Time walks on tiptoes.'

Meanwhile Parisian life continued its circular course. The sun rose and the sun set again, and nobody seemed to care about Belozerkalsky; nobody took notice of his seclusion, of his stoic rite, of his rite of autumn. Olga Fyodorovna's *pirozHKis* were as succulent as ever and salmon consumption did not go down despite the leakage of nuclear energy near Norwegian, Swedish and Danish coasts. 'Our earth can't be poisoned,' said Valery Valeryanovich. 'It's too big.'

Dinner parties followed one another with methodical regularity. Somebody inquired about Belozerkalsky, one day; somebody answered that he was ill.

'Have you seen him? How do you know?'

'I called him last Tuesday. Didn't answer. Must have lost his voice. An influenza epidemic—'

'Perhaps he's dead and buried.'

'I don't think so. Nothing is wrong with his heart.'

'Nothing is wrong with his guts either.'

'How do you mean? Just lack of guts?'

'No intestinal blockage, I mean.'

'Do you really miss that pretentious fool?'

'I liked Kostya.'

'Don't speak in the past tense, please! It's a bad omen.'

'A freethinker. *Voltaireyanetz*.'

'A philosopher.'

'And a poet.'

In January Belozerkalsky did not attend the traditional Russian ball. 'I'm worried,' said Tatusya. Another month elapsed, however, before she seized an opportunity to call him on the phone. Nobody

answered. She repeated the call on the same evening. Nobody answered. 'So many people die nowadays,' she thought. 'Each year factories release millions of tonnes of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere. And nuclear waste, my goodness! He shouldn't have eaten that salmon.'

Five days later she happened to do some shopping in the 16th *arrondissement*. On her way home she spotted the building where Belozerkalsky had lived for almost half a century and decided to pay him a visit. 'I'd better ring this sexual pervert up first. He might be with one of his Lolitas.' Nobody answered the phone. Belozerkalsky was not in. Or perhaps he was dead and buried at Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois.

*There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown*

A police officer told her that Monsieur Biloglabalsky might be asleep. 'He can't hear you,' he said.

'He would have heard *me*,' she answered.

'We're very busy, Madam. A murder—'

'I'm busy too. Who was murdered? Where?'

'The getaway car was ditched a couple of kilometres away from the scene of the robbery,' said another policeman.

Two policemen accompanied her to his apartment. The asphalt was slippery.

'The rain set in for the night,' she said, looking at her shoes. Two minutes elapsed in silence. 'Most of what he said was absolute drivel.' Seven minutes elapsed in silence. 'No point in ringing the bell. He won't hear us.'

The door offered no resistance. They entered the living room and stopped.

'Where is he?' asked Tatusya.

'I don't know,' replied a policeman.

'Is he asleep in his bedroom? Should we wake him?'

'Yes,' replied the second policeman.

The bedroom was as deserted as the living room.

'Where is he?' asked Tatusya, sitting down on the bed.

'He's not asleep, is he?' asked the second policeman.

'I don't think so,' answered the first policeman. 'Unless he's got another bedroom.'

'He's not dead anyway,' said Tatusya. 'I'm sure he would have died in here. He was very fond of his bedroom, of its atmosphere and furniture. But he loathed the maid's room.'

'He may have died outdoors,' said the first policeman. 'Many people die outdoors nowadays.'

'Where? He could hardly move.'

'Was he paralysed?' asked the first policeman.

'I haven't seen him for a long time,' replied Tatusya. 'He accuses me of being bored with the relationship when all he's doing is projecting his dissatisfaction onto me!'

'You'll see him. Don't you worry, Madam.' The second policeman looked around and headed for the door. He opened it and went out. His footsteps resounded for a while in the air.

'There are other rooms,' he shouted from beyond the door.

'Of course!' Tatusya stood up. Without hesitation she headed for the bathroom as if she had been told where her former lover usually spent his evenings.

Belozerkalsky *was* in the bathroom; he heard Tatusya's voice that enjoined him to leave his hiding place. He threw the door open and came out. He was naked, unshaven and marked with the flecks of bubble bath.

'What are you doing here?' cried Tatusya. Without waiting for an answer, she began to run like a little girl—away from the building, away from the 16th *arrondissement*. 'Out!' cried Belozerkalsky, his features working hysterically. 'Out! Out! Out! Out! Out! Out!'

The second policeman remained in the bedroom. 'Out!' cried Belozerkalsky.

They left him in peace. He locked the door and returned to the bathroom. The water was still lukewarm and he ensconced himself in the bath.

*Haplye I thinke on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the Larke at breake of daye arising)
From sullen earth sings himns at Heavens gate*

Never again did anyone disturb him.

CHAPTER 17

*J'écoute trop tout ce qu'il dit...
 Il me dit : je vous aime,
 Et je sens malgré moi,
 Je sens mon cœur qui bat, qui bat,
 Je ne sais pourquoi !
 Grétry, Richard Coeur de Lion*

Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky was conceived and born in St Petersburg amidst the people who, with blithe disregard for Bolshevik propaganda, had a great deal in common. Some of them were rich, others poor; but they all had a share in Russian history and culture. In October 1917 their history came to a halt and a few men armed with machine guns and pistols scattered them throughout Central and Western Europe, America, Australia, China.

Konstantin Alexeevich landed in Meudon. His mother died of pneumonia in 1927; his father was unfortunate enough to live until the beginning of Hitler's dictatorship. The family moved to Clamart in 1934, but some of its members gave up the ghost even before the Nazis' annexation of Sudetenland.

Konstantin Alexeevich survived the Occupation and the Caribbean crisis. He survived a few catastrophic love affairs and the death of his goddaughter whom he had regarded as his real daughter—a palpable reflection of his gestures and ideas. Now he was alone in his apartment, amongst his furniture and books with which he had a great deal in common. So he was not alone. He was not alone.

*Now that the winter's gone, the earth hath lost
 Her snow-white robes; and now no more the frost*

The warmth of the spring presented his soul with one desire, a single desire; and his body obeyed his soul. He got up and put on his dressing gown.

The world was still there, unimproved and uninspiring. And associating with people in large and even small numbers was as harmful as ever. Belozerkalsky drew the curtains back and tried to resign himself to another period of indoor monotony. He headed for the bathroom and shortly afterwards the sound of running water invaded his ears. But unexpectedly he returned to his room, drew the curtains again and began to scrutinise the house opposite, thinking of what might have been. A screech of brakes jolted him out of his lethargy. And then another sound penetrated his ears—the sound of running water.

For a while he squelched back and forth across the wet carpet, carrying things out of the flooded bathroom. All of a sudden he shook his head and removed his dressing gown.

He found a folding chair. He also found nine keys but omitted to lock the front door behind him as he shuffled onto the landing, dropped the chair with a crash and kicked it down the stairs.

A taxi stopped in front of him with a clear intention of emphasising his inability to walk and carry the folding chair. He took the taxi and drove past his own balcony.

They crossed the Seine by the Alexander III Bridge and gradually the edifice of the Invalides with its mitre-like cupola replaced the hollow sky. Belozerkalsky waved his hand to salute the Emperor Napoleon whose downfall had inspired so many Russian writers, poets and composers, but the driver braked hard and he was thrown forward and whiplashed back.

'Fasten your seat belt,' said the driver.

'Too late, too late.'

'Have you heard about that prosthesis?'

'What prosthesis?'

'I saw it on television the other day. You just press a button and become young again, young and virile.'

'What prosthesis?'

'Something like an artificial limb, you know.'

'And the button? What about that button?'

'You just press it—'

'A remote control? What if you lose it? Somebody else might press the button. At the wrong moment.'

'Every moment is right.'

'But what if that person doesn't press the button at the right moment? What if it's the *wrong* person?'

'Anyway the button is in the navel. You just press it—'

'Too late, too late. Is it? Last month I lost my keys. And most unexpectedly I found them in a bag. It was the kind of bag in which you wouldn't expect anyone to put anything, least of all my keys. A miracle, a real miracle. And I realised there were other worlds beyond our world. Or beside it. Perhaps there's only one world—much bigger than whatever we look at and touch. Anyway I saw a beautiful knight, suddenly...like that poor girl, that dwarf. She lived in an isolated villa. Her father did all he could to spare her the knowledge of the real, big world. Only dwarfs were admitted into her presence. But once she drew the curtains and saw a beautiful knight riding past on a horse. And she killed herself. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I saw a beautiful knight.' They drove on.

The Place de Furstenberg. One of his favourite spots in Paris. He sank into the folding chair and looked down. A host of memories began to obliterate the present and even the future. At last he saw Tatiana's face distinctly—her hollow blue eyes where nothing dwelt except her death, his death, and human destiny that is rather unassuming. Her eyes seemed to take in the entire universe: her lovers, her fight for freedom, the stars where she might have spent her eternity in his company—with five books and Haydn's quartets. No, her eyes were not hollow; there were infinite. Her aquiline nose. Even

Cleopatra's nose paled into insignificance beside hers; human history would have come to an end in the roaring twenties, but for her nose, her *gorbinka*. Her lips, her lips. There are no other lips.

She was sitting at her dinner table, next to her most ingenious lover. 'You're cowards,' she said. 'There are no more gentlemen on earth. Only the Japanese—'

'What do you wish me to do?' inquired Sergey. He was her youngest lover. (Belozerkalsky was her oldest, her most ingenuous lover.)

'Kill yourself! Can't you sacrifice your body for the sake of the woman you idolise like a divinity? Give proof of your love!'

Sergey smiled ironically. 'Life is so rich,' he said. 'You're only a part of it, a particle of life.' Why didn't he challenge that boorish youngster to a duel?

She tested their courage and faithfulness by suggesting they should blow their brains out. Faire is my Love, and cruell as she's faire. Neither Sergey nor Nicolas complied with her desires. Belozerkalsky went to the adjacent room and she locked the door, segregating him from the world. She was spying on him through the keyhole that seemed to have been broadened in anticipation of his European hara-kiri. The rifle was glimmering on the parquet; he bent over it and, unruffled by the sensual curve of the trigger and the unbending attitude of the barrel, proceeded towards the window. Life is wonderful and beautiful. I can't abandon Paris and Proust.

As he opened the window, yearning for fresh air and a *vita nuova*, she burst into the room and playfully told him that the rifle was not loaded. And then she showed all her lovers into another room decorated with Japanese etchings and masks of the Nô theatre. Like the skin of an exotic animal, a richly-embroidered kimono was lying over a few cushions. Majestically she removed her dress, put the kimono on and performed an updated, personalised version of a Nô play.

*Long ago I lived in this city
And was loved by three young men.
Their love letters would be reduced to ashes
Before reaching my letterbox—
Such was their passion.
If I had yielded to one,
The others would have been offended.
Each of them was always so quick
To take offence. 'Weary of life,
I will go and cast myself
In the Ikuta River of Settsu—
And Ikuta means Field of Life.'
My dying words. So I sank
Beneath my own reflection*

*And that of the cloudless sky.
 Then I was lifted out of the water
 And laid to rest in this apartment.
 The three young men knocked at the door.
 I opened the door and let them in.
 They saw my ghost but couldn't touch it.
 Nor could they hear my voice.
 In vain did I speak to them about
 My anguish and homesickness.
 'O, how I miss the world!' My words
 Were as silent as the grave.
 'Why should you go on living?
 How rude of you!' I cried.
 And, as the evening tide
 Swelled the current of Ikuta River,
 I put three daggers on the floor.
 At once they picked them up,
 Stabbed each other and died.
 I am still tormented
 By feelings of guilt and shame
 Over what I have done.
 Please pray for me!*

She drew three daggers from under a cushion and put them on the floor. How many bottles of champagne did they empty that night?

*Here I spend this afternoon,
 My voice raised in prayer
 For the repose of her soul.*

Tatiana. How he worshipped her! Capricious and touching, she was a symbol of femininity. She used to open the door stark naked and circumstances often overpowered them before they could make it to her spacious sofa on which a few Indian cushions awaited her lovers beneath a bevel-edged mirror.

*You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips;
 But my breath smells earthy strong;
 If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,*

Your time will not be long.

Her breasts and arms. Her small Pushkinian foot. Her voice. And weeped a fresh love long since canceled woe.

He thought she could never be serious. Yet, during the Occupation, she became a member of the Resistance and perished in 1944, on Christmas Eve, in the suburbs of Lyon. They last met in October 1942 and for the first time she kissed him with her eyes closed. Eternity's sunrise. And when he stopped and looked back, tortured by the feeling that it was their last encounter, she was already walking in the opposite direction—a wee white spot of muslin fluff—leaving behind her life and their unfinished, unexplored love affair.

And with old woes new wails my dearer times waste. But I have no time on my hands so I cannot waste it. My hands are empty. No, they are not. Her hair.

Weeping, weeping they parted. As she passed by the grove of cedars her voice grew distant.

He touched the air to make sure she was now beside him—in spite of his dizziness, in spite of wars and the ubiquity of human cruelty.

*Ya vstretil vas, i vsyo biloe
V otzhivshem serdtse ozhilo.*

I met you and the past was restored to life in my dead heart. In my dead heart. Magnificent verses, magnificent. Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev.

She was beside him and, reassured, he passed on to other memories.

How pliable and submissive his memory had become! O Death in Life, the days that are no more. Suddenly he remembered EVERYTHING: his toys, his joys, his native city undisturbed by snowstorms and the outbursts of Russian temperament. St Petersburg. He realised he would never go back to the country of his birth. He realised he was dying.

*But hearken! My pulse like a soft Drum
Beats my approach, tells Thee I come*

A few hours ago he would have welcomed death and the Hereafter: he was greatly in need of diversion and relaxation. Now, imbued with the beauty of his memories, he took fright and began to look about—as if death were to strike him from outside, not from inside. 'What have I done? Why punish me?'

*Still, in den Kranzarterien,
Unumschnürt:*

Ziw, jenes Licht.

Light, life. Poetry is truth, truth music. That is all I need to know.

Soon he forgot his agony and immersed himself in the past which was also the future, his future. And past and present all as one. Whatever happens is eternal. Tatiana's eyes, her courage and whims, her perfume and hair. Everything is eternal. Everything we look upon is blest.

She has never walked away from me. Movement is nothing but immobility. We are blest by everything. We are always sitting on a bench somewhere. Somewhere. Space doesn't count. Paris, St Petersburg. I'm dying in the maternity hospital. Nothing has happened. Everything has happened. Houses, flats, staircases, doors. They're all here, on this square. And Tatiana is the human race—mankind. And these clouds, and these trees. She is everything and everybody. We're wed to one eternity.

But if the while I thinke on thee (deare friend)

All losses are restord, and sorrowes end.

Have no fear, said a voice. He recognised it at once. He was not alone. Nobody is ever alone, lonely, forsaken. Nothing can be isolated in the universe, otherwise these houses would have collapsed a long time ago. The dead, the living, the unborn are here. To join the living with the dead, eternally. On this square. Everywhere.

Have no fear. He thought there were many voices in his existence. He was mistaken. One voice. Only one voice. Have no fear, have no fear.

He had no fear. Life was simple and straightforward; so was death. Simple and straightforward. Actually they were one and the same thing. A permanent, unchangeable state of mind. Whom did that mind belong to? Personal property, common property. Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky, Tatiana, Victor Sergeevich. The universe is one living substance in the shape of the human body. There is no difference between the body and the mind. Nothing differs. My soul is everywhere. That I may lose my way and myself.

...the pledge of a future glow.

My soul spans eternity like a crystalline rainbow.

Everywhere. Eternity. He was sitting on the Place de Furstenberg, in the 6th *arrondissement*; and his grandfather clock, which he could not hear, was striking four—slowly but surely. One, two, three, four, five...

His fellow men. Walking through the square. They knew nothing about his agony, ecstasy and immobility. Nor were they aware of his death, of his past. They did not care a bit about his aching, suffering body.

Their shadows skimmed over his face and raincoat. Perhaps those passers-by were right. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky, an old Russian expatriate. How many times had he already foreseen his own death? Many, many times. On many occasions, in many flats.

One morning he awoke in someone's bed. Besotted with vodka and covered from head to foot with the bluish and reddish vestiges of someone's kisses, he took his own pulse and muttered, 'I'm dead. I'm dead.' Perhaps he was. Who knows. Who knows.

Many times he died,

Many times rose again.

I was the blade of a sword, I was a drop in a river, I was a twinkling star, I was a word in a book. Nothing is wrong with me. A friend of mine wrote a requiem in D Major. Death is a joy, a great joy.

He was not altogether immobile. His fingers were touching the air; his eyes looked up and down, measuring the distance from heaven to earth. And the sky above, below, around us lie. As below, so above. He had no fear.

Everything around him was beautiful.

