

VALERY ALEFF

THE LAST DAYS OF ETERNITY

FOREWORD

In April 1993, after almost a year of intoxicating labours, I completed this novel. Failing to find a responsive publisher, I went on polishing it to make my characters more life-like—or death-like, rather. Yesterday I put the finishing touches to the original and the Russian translation. The reader who is prepared to devour any suburban stuff, provided the plot is set near London or some American city need not be put off by Moscow cityscapes which, over one century at least, have been a playground for demons and angels alike: they must look familiar to both grown-ups and even children acquainted with the Hereafter only through horror movies, musicals and commercials.

When, during a tea party, a heroine's grandmother touches upon *kulaks*—an English plural of the Russian word 'fist'—she does not allude to Bolshevik orators whose hands were far more eloquent than speeches. She merely recalls the peasants deported and otherwise annihilated on Stalin's orders, who thought their fists were holding too many roubles. Actually, there are surprisingly few 'aliens' in this novel despite the impertinence of history and the mysterious country where the protagonist was born and educated. So a long explanatory note would be out of place. However, I feel compelled to shed light on the metamorphosis undergone by the protagonist at the end of the novel where he is awaiting God in his newly-found bed. The story I am about to tell is known chiefly to the Moscow Conservatoire students whose company I have relished for more than forty years.

A man comes to a maternity hospital. 'Is it a boy?' he asks.

'Yes,' says a doctor.

'May I see him?'

'Of course you may, but—'

'He is my son.'

'He's got no arms, no body to speak of.'

'What *does* he have?'

A minuscule ear is lying on a cushion. 'My son!' says the father.

'Speak louder! He's hard of hearing.'

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PART ONE

1

Francis was dozing. An autumnal wind charioted a number of seeds into his skull; there they lay cold and low until the clarion of spring blew over the forgotten universe. The seeds sprouted and grew into English words. 'You are at home,' said the words.

Francis was at home and had no intention of going out. Ensconced in his bed beside a huge Grecian vase, he was at peace with the world which, in other surroundings and circumstances, might cause him a feeling of uneasiness.

His mind was swarming with words now, but the words he considered worthy of his mind and reputation were out of his reach—beyond the walls. 'Other surroundings,' he repeated, probing into the enigma of the words that had come from nowhere and were likely to vanish into thin air at the earliest opportunity. 'Is there anything outside my room? There must be something outside it, otherwise I would have no idea of "other surroundings",' he said to himself.

The words incited him to explore his own body, putting it to a variety of tests; he soon found out that, contrary to his hypothesis, it was not immobile, inert. He could move his arms and his feet and was therefore able to leave his bed and even cross the threshold of his room, penetrating into the outer regions of Space which, according to another hypothesis formed within his mind, swarmed with images and other words. He needed space for the materialisation of his desires and ideals. He also found out that he was not at home: he had no control over the people who, though uninvited and undesired, kept trickling into his room, their eyes glowing in semidarkness, their clothes rustling like dead leaves. 'Where did I hear dead leaves? Why do leaves die?' he asked himself.

There were no dead leaves in his room—another proof of the outside world from which he was still separated by a few panes of glass. 'The earth. The universe.' These words and the series of concomitant images—an undulating crowd of supporters, a city in the North—supplied him with the past, with a truncated perspective of former inklings and itches. He made an effort and created the future which was far more important than the past on account of its pliability. Besides, the space of the future was populated with enemies.

Francis loved his enemies. His triumphs over humans—

All of a sudden the past and the future were annihilated once again as if an atomic bomb had exploded within Time, within human history. Oddly enough, Francis smiled and even chuckled to himself: the destruction of Time—which also meant the destruction of Space—echoed his innermost thoughts.

Francis seemed to favour deserts to the point of being undisturbed and undaunted by the way his own mind looked now. His mind appeared before him—right above the piano, in the middle of the room. The lights had been switched on, revealing the furniture of the room and the contents of his mind. A few words were floating through its jelly-like texture. There was only one name among those words—Francis. 'So I am Francis,' thought Francis as he struggled to his feet, anxious to bring the circulation back to his limbs and to catch a few irrelevant words that seemed to have been smuggled into his mind by a cunning opponent. 'Perhaps *he* is Francis,' thought Francis.

He did not know exactly who he was and the people whom he could question on the subject were out of his reach. He had the feeling that someone—not the Almighty, but an ordinary man—was well-informed about both his identity and his past. Francis was in the habit of thinking big; he immediately multiplied this man by thousands, endowing the earth with an army of spies. He looked at his mind attentively. Those men walked around it in disguise, in plain clothes. They also tried to pass themselves off as words. He put these words under arrest and the lights went out, leaving him confounded and in the grip of fear. 'Conspiracy,' he thought. He was not likely to forget the word 'conspiracy'.

His room looked like a coffin—a large, comfortable coffin that could have accommodated a hundred burly men. Francis had forgotten the word 'coffin' and was therefore unaware of the resemblance. He thought he was at home, near his favourite Grecian vase. He groped for the vase from where he stood and found nothing except an unfamiliar plant; its leaves were sticky, almost viscous. The rocking chair had also disappeared. 'My wife,' said Francis. 'Always shifting the furniture around. One of her hobbies.' She also liked potted plants.

For half an hour or so, Francis fumbled about, trying to find his rocking chair or indeed any normal armchair from the depths of which he could successfully cope with the wayward swerves of Space and Time. He found only the piano that emitted a few sounds as he tottered past it on his way to a harbour of peace.

Francis was very fond of his wife despite her aggressive jaws: she would bite her husband in bed and even during working hours. Once she went so far as to drag him away from his ink-spotted writing desk; her untimely bout of lust prevented him from finishing a paragraph of the utmost importance. He retaliated by burning one of her plants and breaking her only pair of glasses.

That paragraph changed the history of the universe, although he had left the last five sentences unfinished. His cronies must have been dutiful, intelligent and ready to kill for a good cause.

His wife was sexy and had a knack of turning him on whenever she took off her skirt by degrees, making her legs look longer and slimmer. He kept wondering whether he had any right to contemplate her legs from every angle imaginable—for hours on end, in the mirror and in the bathroom. He indulged in this Peeping-Tom pastime three or four times a week, disregarding the qualms of consciousness. 'There are far more important things to do,' he thought while she was sousing her thighs with a French perfume. 'People suffer all over the world.'

People did suffer all over the world, but she continued to undress herself most tantalisingly; and he could not help looking at her.

Recently he had drawn up his will, warning her against the danger she ran: she tolerated the advances of a bully whom she should have shunned and beaten with a rolling pin. Incidentally, the man was one of Francis' admirers. 'Not all of them are loyal,' shouted Francis, addressing a vast audience. He extracted a gun from his pocket and flourished it in the air, sending a shudder through the darkness. But the darkness had nothing to fear: for all his determination and everlasting hate, he was unable to handle arms properly and could kill his enemies and people in general only by proxy—usually from a distance.

Francis hid the gun under the pillow and consulted his watch only to find that it had stopped a long time ago, probably in the first quarter of the century. Yet he was by no means dead and buried: the dead do not walk around their tombs. 'And what about ghosts?' he asked himself. 'What if I'm a ghost? No, I'm not a ghost. I'm not a ghost because I don't believe in ghosts.'

For an hour or so, he paced up and down the room to prove to himself that he was still alive. Exhausted he sank down on the sheets and his wife bit him on the shoulder. Francis could not see his wife; he only felt her all over his body. She pressed herself against his buttocks. She pinched his cheeks and even gave him a prod with her umbrella. Unprepared to fulfil her desires and his own duty, he seized her hand, whose piston-like movement impeded his meditation, and squeezed it with all his might. She screamed and he released his grip on her crunching joints.

'Too busy, are you?' She would have burst into tears at the very outset of their sexual encounter, but for his explicit orders not to cry in his presence, which he regarded as a sign of weakness. She was also forbidden to cry in public.

'I'm thinking,' he said.

'Have you written anything?'

'I've written many books.'

'When?'

'This morning. Yesterday. When did we meet last?'

'Don't you remember? Why don't you remember me?'

'My memory...' For a moment Francis was tempted to air his grievances—he had a lot to complain about—but checked himself, loath to lose face in front of a woman. Nor did he wish to lose ground at such a crucial period of his life: the history of humanity depended even on his minutest whims. 'Do you wear glasses?' he asked instead. He forgot that he had broken his wife's only pair of glasses and it was not easy to purchase appropriate optical instruments in the country where they lived and worked.

'No.'

'You can't be my wife. Who are you?'

'Do your wives always wear glasses?'

'Who sent you?'

'Turns you on, eh? Well, I must have my grandma's glasses somewhere.'

'Have you seen my thoughts?'

She prodded him again with her umbrella. 'You betrayed your wife quite often, didn't you? I'm just one of your mistresses. What's her name again? That mistress of yours. In Switzerland.'

'Why did the lights go off?'

'Sorry, no striptease today. You're being punished.'

'What for?'

'For *everything*! You're always up to some mischief. Even now—'

Francis pushed his wife away rather brutally and she tumbled out of bed. The sound of her fall lasted for a few minutes as if she had crashed down a gigantic staircase. He had already heard this sound—at the turn of the century, during one of their clandestine meetings. In a hurry to get away from the police his friend Boris opened up a trapdoor and ventured down the stairs leading to the basement of the house. He broke two legs and shortly afterwards was carried across the square by two police officers.

'My son, forget this staircase of yours,' said a voice inside his head. It was his father's voice. Francis pressed his hands against his temples to give his father a big bear hug. 'This staircase leads downward, to the regions of Hell. Believe me, my son—there's nothing in the

basement except Hell with all its attributes. You should *climb* the stairs. Find a beautiful staircase and climb, climb...higher and higher. I like your new wife. I congratulate you on your choice. Your taste has considerably improved in the course of these decades. How is your sex life nowadays? Climb up, higher and higher. You're out of breath, aren't you? Rhythmically, step by step, up, up. Do you love her? She is sexy and nice. *Steigen, nachsteigen*. The ascension through the seven planetary circles means the return of the soul to the solar divinity—its true birthplace. Your wife, your Beatrice will guide you all the way to heaven, to the sun, to God. Trust her, rely on her, worship her. Look at her skin and touch it softly; it is smooth and pale—like that of a Russian princess. Egyptians used to put ladders in pyramids. The dead or rather their mummies needed them most badly. There are three worlds in Space. *Primo*: The terrestrial world in which the material man has his power of action. *Secundo*: The known or unknown astronomical world, beyond our field of action yet within our power of thought and observation. *Tertio*: The undefined world that we can penetrate only in our imaginations. This last world is beyond our direct action and our power of observation. The three worlds were held by the Hebrew mystics as bound together. Jacob's ladder is an emblem of this idea. Climb up, my son, up, up, up—'

His father lapsed into silence; his father's ghost opened up the trapdoor in the middle of the room and crashed downstairs. Francis stood near the piano, his large forehead glistening with cold sweat. The lights were on, bringing out the worst in his attire and physique. His enemies might break into the house at any moment. 'Hell is far better than concentration camps,' he concluded, after having leafed through the book entitled *Gulag Archipelago*. He decided to settle down in Hell.

As Francis was flinging his dirty, bedraggled clothes into a suitcase, there was a discrete knock at the door. He rushed towards the pillow but there was no gun under it. He must have lifted the wrong pillow; he must have been looking for the wrong gun. 'What does it matter?' he thought. He was bound to win anyway.

He opened the door. A man whom he recognised at once entered the room and sat down in the rocking chair.

'How are you today? Did you read the book?' The visitor pointed to *Gulag Archipelago*.

'A few pages.'

'Monstrous, isn't it? What do *you* think of concentration camps and torture?'

'You're sitting in my armchair,' said Francis.

'Did your wife pay you a visit this morning?'

'I was alone. I was reading.'

'I think you're lying.' The visitor got up and approached the bed. 'Do you love her?'

'Did you bribe your way in? Do you have an appointment?'

'You remember *me*, don't you? I came yesterday. And the day before.'

'Show me your pass!'

The visitor shook his head, sat down on the sheets and took off his jacket. 'Plain clothes,' he said. 'Actually I wear them all the time. I'm just an amateur, you know. They don't want to send a professional down here. Why? It's anyone's guess. Their ways are unfathomable.' The visitor smiled and rubbed his left shoulder. 'Perhaps they think you're incurable. But there are doctors who continue to look after incurable patients. It's a question of duty and dignity. Even if they're amateurs.'

Francis stared at his body until his skin became diaphanous, revealing the intricacies of his internal anatomy. He saw nothing suspicious—no ulcer, no tumour.

'What's wrong with me?' he asked.

'Do you remember our previous discussions at all? It's so hard to regulate your memory. You see, we don't want you to remember too much. On the other hand your free will—' The visitor opened the bedside cabinet, took out a bottle of mineral water and a glass. 'I can't talk for ever.'

The water sparkled most vividly in the glass. 'Only vodka can sparkle like this,' thought Francis.

The visitor emptied the glass but did not put it away. 'You still consider the universe in terms of atoms. Your *soul* is incurable, not your *body*. Origen alone thinks you can be cured. It's heresy, by the way. Have you read Origen? He maintains that even the devils will be converted and saved, at long last. And devils don't improve with age like wine or whisky. They should be educated by word of mouth and flogged, if necessary. I, for one, am not against corporal punishment.' He poured himself another glass of water. 'Let's take it for granted that numerous worlds succeed one another in the course of eternity, within the infinity of Creation. All along the string of worlds, which are destroyed and built continually, the Verb is given a polish...the divine Verb...the Verb that generated everything. Did you think about Hell this afternoon?' he asked abruptly. 'Did you meditate on its tortures? My assistant—'

'No,' said Francis.

'Strange. I was sure that my assistant—Incidentally, it was his idea...sexy wife. He believed that her body would make you question some of your principles.'

'My principles are unshakeable,' said Francis.

'Let's wait and see. We've got an eternity before us, a succession of worlds. In the next world we'll marry you to another woman. Perhaps even in this world, perhaps tomorrow. You didn't make love to her last night, did you? Our Supercomputer of Vast Capacity broke down.'

'My privacy—'

'I'm happy you've remembered this word. You used to forget it quite often, I'm afraid. You liked transparency, didn't you? Transparent walls, transparent heads. I'd better warn you—there's no privacy in *our* world except when our Supercomputer breaks down. It's for your own good, you know.'

'Who am I?' asked Francis and prodded his chest with his index finger.

'Oh, you're not allowed to ask that question. Of course you *can* ask it, if you wish, but you'll never be answered unless—' The visitor mistrustfully eyed the door through which a number of people were walking in Indian file. 'They're too downtrodden to talk. I'm curious to meet your spouse. When is she coming next? Did she say anything? Whose umbrella is this? Yours? You never go out, do you? The ways of human souls are unfathomable.'

'My wife must have forgotten it.'

'Is it raining today? Does *she* go out? Don't let her leave you for a long stretch of time. Women are bizarre creatures. They care for fame and money, but they often forsake a man who has both—in abundance. Do you have any idea how much your body's worth?'

Francis ignored the question on the grounds of its indecency and reached for *Gulag Archipelago*. 'Bring me other books from your library,' he said.

'Finish this one first. It's your biography, so to speak. You *should* learn who you are.'

Francis settled comfortably in the rocking chair, opened the book on the first page and began to read, moving his lips and nodding approvingly. He also stretched his arm out, pointing to the nearest wall.

'Wait until I'm gone. Aren't you forgetting your manners? Are all the computers out of order today? I must find a governess for you, an English governess or a tutor. Let's start from the very beginning—the only way to eradicate the evil root and branch.'

'*Du passé faisons table rase.*' Francis dropped the book, sprang up and stood to attention.

The visitor roared with laughter. 'Precisely, old chap. Let's make a clean sweep of *your* past. As long as it concerns yourself. I'm fed up with these people. What are they doing here? Haven't they seen you already? Everywhere?'

The people kept trickling into the room; they stared at Francis who, in the meantime, had lain down on his bed; they neither spoke to him nor touched his body. He felt uneasy as

he lay motionless under their scrutiny. He was reminded of his last illness during which his friends and enemies would tiptoe into his room, bend over his face, feel his pulse, discuss the future of humanity and the operation *Red Desert*.

Francis sat up in bed and made a speech, waving his arms about as much as he could: he had come to doubt the efficiency of his own words. Nobody listened to him; the tourists stared at him and shuffled away. He jumped from the bed and took a walk round the room, brushing against raincoats and enormous bags. He then joined the queue and began to move towards the pillow. He did not recognise himself.

'Is it me?' he thought with amazement and disgust. 'Why on earth should I lie in there?' He touched the glass, which shielded his face from the curiosity and iconoclasm of the tourists, and punched his fist through it to awaken himself. 'Am I tired? I can't afford holidays, however much I write and think. The world might have a relapse.' In his writings and speeches, Francis often described the world as being 'sapped by illness' or 'eaten away by a cancerous tumour'. 'Its kidney must be removed,' he wrote in a letter to the Minister of the Interior. His will was done and the patient passed away.

The lights were extinguished once more. 'It's past your bedtime,' said the voice of his mother and blithely he tilted his head against her shoulder. Her hands stroked his hair—gently, lovingly. He grew limp; there were tears in his eyes, along his unshaven cheeks, around his stump-like neck. He was familiar only with other people's tears and therefore could not decide whether he was crying for joy or repentance.

2

Roger awoke at 6.30 a.m., put his trousers on and sat down at his writing desk without so much as brushing his teeth. He clutched his pen vehemently, pulled a pile of notebooks towards his chest, selected the biggest one and began to write down his invectives against kings and emperors. As the grandfather clock struck nine his Aunt Polina kissed him on the crown of his head, leaving a round red imprint on it. She rubbed it off with the sleeve of her nightgown and suggested they should go and have a walk in the nearby park.

'I'm busy,' said Roger somewhat rudely.

'What are you writing about? Kings and emperors again. And slaves of course. Have you mentioned Spartacus?'

'It's no joking matter,' replied Roger. 'Equality, fraternity—'

'Some emperors were intelligent and nice. They didn't always have their subjects flogged in the stables. Your father will tell you more about it.' Upon hearing these words his father entered the room, his arms folded on his stomach. He kissed his son on the same spot, leaving behind the smell of cheap tobacco.

'Nebuchadnezzar, for example, was a marvellous builder. During his reign Babylon became the greatest city on earth. You must have read about the "Hanging Gardens", considered one of the seven wonders—'

'Meanwhile his subjects were starving to death.'

'He also built numerous temples, palaces, roads, walls, gates and even a bridge across the Euphrates, which ran through the city. And his subjects walked along the bridge—'

'Carrying heavy loads, I imagine. Bricks, mortar—'

'Fruit, my son. Fruit. Don't interrupt me, please. The most elegant and beautiful monument bearing the stamp of his artistic and altruistic genius was the Ishtar Gate, housed in the Staatliche Museum. You should visit the museum on your next trip to Germany. Yellow and white lions, dragons—'

'In his diary Marx points out that Nebuchadnezzar was a warmonger. In 586 BC he captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and removed a large part of the population to Babylon.'

'Let's find another emperor or king. Frederick von Hohenstaufen—'

Roger stood up and headed for the window which, imbued with the optimistic light of the dawn, seemed to represent a loophole in the world of social injustice. 'You're the son of a serf, father, and the attitude of tolerance you adopted towards your class enemy—'

'Why are you so class-conscious, son? I am a schoolteacher and give lessons to the rich and the poor alike. Virtue doesn't depend on the amount of money—'

Roger waved his father aside and picked up a newspaper lying on the floor. He used to read all the newspapers he could lay his hands on, in the hope of good news. But, for many years, there had been nothing new under the sun; Roger's wastepaper basket as well as the rubbish bins within a two-kilometre radius were now stuffed with discarded books and magazines.

The earth was going round and round. The world repeated itself too often as if God had become weary of storytelling. 'God must be an old man by now,' he thought. 'What day is it? What year?' Roger had also forgotten his own name and the date of his birth: Roger was not his true name. 'Am I Charles, Alexander, Nicholas? Perhaps it's my birthday today.' He smiled and shifted his gaze to the paper he was holding absent-mindedly in the air, near a 100-watt lamp. His mind had flown off like a butterfly. After circling around the ceiling for a while, it alighted on the grimace of a famous general. The paper was singed at the top and the photograph of the general, which occupied the greater part of the front page, continued to burn with a crackling sound. Roger dropped the paper and, as it slowly reached the floor, stamped on it several times, aiming at the general's face. At last he had an opportunity to express his aversion to the army of the Tsar.

'War, patriotism. Peasants and workmen need peace and bread. We must transform the imperialist war into civil war!' As he was peering through the hole, which had replaced the general's mouth and eyes, a feeling of cold crept over him. He contemplated his own hollow body. There was nothing in it to keep him warm: no muscles, no tendons, no blood. 'How can I live without blood?' His soul flew off—in search of blood. No blood was to be found in the room so that his soul slipped through the window and bounced down the stairs towards the lawn where a stray dog was capering and barking. Apparently, his soul had no fear of dogs. 'Come back,' said Roger to his soul. 'I can't live without you either.' His soul stood up, went to the front door and pressed the button of the doorbell. Roger opened the door and let his soul in. Yet his identity problem was far from solved. His identity did not walk around in the garden; he was unable to call it back and merge with it, becoming himself again. His identity seemed to be away—abroad, beyond some iron curtain. 'There are no more iron curtains in the world,' said a voice inside his head. Whose voice was it? His father's? It was dark in the room and Roger was neither an owl nor a cat. He saw nobody; he saw nothing. He had not even seen the darkness descend upon him. Everything seemed sudden and inexplicable; the earth was moving now in a criss-cross pattern, ignoring its habitual trajectory. Only the

headlines of newspapers had not changed for three years: war, patriotism. As usual he was swimming against the current. Even Socialists had abandoned internationalism for patriotism and supported the war. Roger stamped again on the newspaper, tearing it with the soles of his boots. Presently another headline caught his eye and he squatted down, eager to read the article appended to it: 'At Pskov, on March 15, Nicholas renounced the throne in favour of his brother Michael, who refused the crown—'

Is my name Nicholas? Surely not. I wouldn't have refused the throne in favour of my brother. Have I got a brother? Everybody has a brother. Cain has a brother. Nicholas, Nicholas. What do I have in common with Nicholas? Why did I pay attention to this piece of news? Good news, excellent news. Why? Just because an emperor abdicated. *Le roi est mort, vive le roi*. Another emperor will come to the throne. Not Michael, obviously. Somebody else. Josef, for instance. Names, names. All I've got to do is fetch the telephone directory and leaf through it until I chance upon my own name and my telephone number. I'll then ring myself up and we'll talk it over. Do I have a telephone?

At that point Roger looked up and saw an unfamiliar head that seemed to have been cut off from the body by the edge of the windowsill. The stranger popped up and jumped into the room, knocking down a potted cactus.

'Roger, Roger, did you read the news?'

'Is it my name? Roger?'

'Of course it is. Don't you remember? We agreed on it at our last meeting, in February.'

'Is it my penname?'

'Roger, please, the Tsar has abdicated—'

'So what?'

'You read the paper, didn't you? I threw it into your room this morning.'

'You?'

'The window was open, so I threw the paper—'

'I wasn't in, was I?'

'Roger, we should return to Russia. At once.'

'To Russia?'

'To St Petersburg. It's our golden opportunity—'

'What's Russia? Why do we have to go there? I've got no time. I'm expecting a visitor.'

The door opened and the visitor came in. 'Bravo, bravo. You were just perfect. You didn't recognise your friend, did you? Why *should* you recognise him? In the nineteenth century you fell in with bad company. Where's your gun? Still under the pillow?' Fastidiously

the visitor pulled the gun from under the pillow and handed it to Roger. 'Shoot the bastard! Those who are not with us are against us.' Roger pressed the trigger; his former comrade staggered towards the window and tumbled out.

'What do you feel?' asked the visitor. 'Remorse, nausea? Nothing of the sort? Did they get you to swallow my pills? Have you seen *A Clockwork Orange*? The hero is given injections. Whenever he's up to his old tricks, he vomits. Why don't you go to the pictures, once in a while? You can. You must see the new Derek Jarman. *The Garden*. Superb.'

'What's Russia?' asked Roger.

'Indeed, what's Russia? Doesn't matter. Don't listen to those bastards—they're so obnoxious. The point is you can't really kill them. "He's still alive, he's always with us—" This song was composed in your honour. Why didn't you commit suicide in your youth? You had every reason to do it, several times. Your brother was hanged for conspiring with a revolutionary terrorist group. Of course you never liked your brother. You never liked anybody, but you adored theatricals. Why didn't you upstage your brother's exit? The world would have praised your revolutionary team spirit.'

'I liked *somebody*,' said Roger.

'You liked Marx. Personally I've always preferred the Marx Brothers.'

'I knew I had a brother. I knew it.'

'You'll forget him again. And I'll see to it that you never get hold of *Das Kapital*. Your father tried to teach you the Kabbalah, I hear? I'm not sure he is qualified to tackle such a lofty subject. The other day I had a most interesting talk with a renowned Kabbalist. He thinks you're a demon. As a matter of fact, many people think so, even those not acquainted with the Kabbalah and its postulates. But he views your case through the prism of Nahmanides' commentary on Leviticus 17:7. The waste of snow and ice...ruined cities of the North...an ideal breeding ground for demons. You come from the North, don't you? From Siberia, I suppose. Whatever lies outside Moscow and St Petersburg is Siberia. In Russia, I mean. My friend believes that you weren't created out of the four elements but only out of fire and air. Just out of filth, in my opinion. You can also fly, from Moscow to Switzerland. Today you woke up in Moscow and had your breakfast in Zurich. Have you learnt anything about the future? During your flights you may have approached the princes of the zodiac.'

'Does the future exist?'

'A good question. The future built on your ideas is non-existent, but Time can't be stopped.'

'What's the use of Time? Without my ideas?'

'There are other ideas in the world. In a democracy they're permitted to—'

'Permitted? Who gave the permission? Trotsky?'

'A bout of amnesia will put you back on your feet again, I hope. Shall we listen to some piano music, for a change? You used to say that listening to Beethoven's masterpieces quenched your thirst for blood. What a pity you didn't take piano lessons from that old lady. She lived in your neighbourhood and was greatly appreciated for her devotion to music. None of her pupils participated in the Red Terror. Unfortunately you had no piano at your home in Zurich.'

A noise came from the garden: five workmen were carrying a grand piano across the flowerbeds, trampling the roses underfoot. With the aid of pick-axes and mattocks they enlarged the window and squeezed the piano through it. They set it on the carpet, brought in by the sixth workman, and the visitor nodded approvingly as he opened the lid and touched the keyboard, producing an unbearable cacophony.

'Beautiful, very beautiful. We bought it in Hamburg, at the Steinway factory. Business expenses, of course. And what about the pianist? Did he drive over with you?' The visitor turned round and fixed his eyes on the most robust workman who took off his cap and cleared his throat. 'Well?' The visitor stamped on the pedal and the piano heaved a melancholy sigh.

'No.'

'What? Is he indisposed? Did *he* swallow my pills?' The workman was kneading his hat. 'Can *you* play the piano? Can *anybody* here play the piano?'

The doorbell rang and an old lady entered the room, her long dress rustling and losing its dust. 'Volodya, Volodya, I'm glad you're here. It's much better in Switzerland than in Russia, isn't it?'

'Please don't call him Volodya, Madam. He is Roger now. Are you Roger today? It's hard to keep pace with the merry-go-round of your personalities. Just call him Roger, Madam. And be so kind as not to mention Russia, Moscow, St Petersburg, Simbirsk—'

'You're right, absolutely right.' The old lady nodded her agreement. 'Let's not speak about Russia any more. I moved to Zurich myself. My granddaughter did. But she took me with her. My granddaughter is obedient and nice. She married an old man from Switzerland. They met in Moscow. He was supposed to sign something and give money to somebody. Well, he gave money to us. He's not very young, of course. But he's not very old either. A wonderful man. Very rich too!'

'What's his line of business?' asked Roger.

'Pills. And also mixtures, syrups. So I'm happy, Volodya. Are *you* happy?'

'He is happy,' answered the visitor. 'Your former neighbour is very fond of music now and regrets—'

'Really? You'll have to practise scales and arpeggios—'

'He says music softens him up.'

'While listening to music, I wanted to caress everybody,' said Roger. 'And people should be hit on the heads.'

'Don't beat me, Volodya.' The old lady pulled out a handkerchief from her sleeve as she broke into loud, hysterical sobs. 'Don't throw stones at your neighbours! Do you still have your catapult? For the love of God, don't have me killed. Don't banish me to Siberia, to the Gulag Archipelago. I'll give you lessons. Free. I don't need money now. My son-in-law is a millionaire. And he's got Swiss francs, not roubles.'

'A millionaire? Hard currency?' Roger cocked his ears.

'You won't have to practise six hours a day. Just half-an hour, ten minutes at the most—'

'Is he really a millionaire, your son-in-law?' Roger came up to the old lady and raised his hands level with her mouth, prepared to smother her words if they failed to meet his own expectations and ideas. 'Introduce me to him at once! The money will go towards—Do you trust me? Humanity should be liberated from slavery. Not the whole of it, just slaves and serfs. We'll kill the masters and take the food out of their fridges to nourish the poor. How shall we kill them? With pitchforks, machine guns and cannonballs. But cannonballs and machine guns aren't lying about the streets. We'll have to buy them from capitalists. The Party is short of funds. I won't put your money in my pocket. I'm no thief, although I'm starving. I'll hand the food out to children. I won't take anything for myself except some pastries, some chocolate mousse. If I don't get this money I'll crack up! The cost of living is hellishly high in Switzerland. Everything is cheaper in the Soviet Union: bread, taxis. State-controlled prices, no profit.'

'Why can't you earn money yourself?' asked the visitor.

'I can, I do. But my publishers don't send me my fees. I send them my manuscripts and they send nothing at all. Is it fair? Is that what you call democracy?'

'You wished to abolish money, if I'm not mistaken. You thought an ideal society might and must do without it, reverting to the blissful era of "natural existence". Intellectuals and non-manual workers bargained away family heirlooms in the hopeless struggle to stay alive. Half of Russia was on the roads or railways, carrying or trundling objects. You enjoyed the sight. Would you play something for him, dear lady? Our pianist is indisposed. He caught a chill—it's draughty up there. Down here, on earth, those draughts are called "winds".'

The old lady fell upon her knees and folded her hands.

'My son-in-law will give you everything he's got: his house, his yacht, his bank account. Don't lock him up in a mental hospital!'

'We're not waging war against individuals,' replied Roger reassuringly. 'We're exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. To what class does your son-in-law belong? What's his origin?'

The old lady kissed one of Roger's shoes.

'Rise, rise—' said the visitor, helping the old lady up to her feet. 'You've nothing to worry about. Even if there's a power-cut. We'll put the power back on and repair our computers. He won't harm you, I promise. Play something, will you? He'll become as meek as a lamb.'

'I can only play *Für Elise*.'

'I'm calling for a purge of the Russian land from all vermin: idle rich, priests, slovenly and hysterical intellectuals—' Roger thundered on, unmindful of Beethoven's harmonies.

'Play a little louder, please. He can't hear you.' The visitor took an aeolian harp and plucked out a delectable song, enhancing the effect of the musical therapy.

Tied to a pillar, Roger's naked body presented an easy target for the arrow-like tunes; a sweet pain benumbed his heart and sinews.

Even music is an enemy. Plato was right: whatever expresses sorrow in art should be forbidden. And music often expresses sorrow. The symphony I heard on the radio. Shostakovich. Is life so awful, so gruesome? Is melancholy embedded in our soul? Nothing can brighten human beings. They still suffer in spite of revolutions and prosperity.

Like a balloon, Roger's soul floated around the house, descending towards the floor and ascending towards the skylight and the dormer window. Now and then it grazed against the visitor's forehead.

'Calm down, calm down. I'll sing you a lullaby, in a short while...in English. What counts is the tune...its soothing monotony. History is monotonous and, in a way, soothing. Nothing can happen, nothing. Whatever you do, whatever you undo. Nothing happens. No joys, no torments. It's a kind of state...state of affairs...'

The visitor offered his arm to the old lady and they both headed for the door. One by one the workmen jumped through the window, clambered up to the top of the highest tree and dissolved in the lowest cloud.

'Don't leave me alone!' cried Roger through a megaphone.

His soul glided towards the door and opened it. On the doorstep a soldier was mounting guard. He seemed to be aiming his rifle carefully at heaven.

Roger put a revolver on the bedside cabinet and harangued his soul into obedience and discipline. 'Forget what he's told you! You've been brainwashed and manipulated. As soon as we part you become a plaything of unscrupulous pressure groups. Enemies are everywhere!'

Roger clasped his soul to his heart and stuffed it into his pineal gland. He signalled to the guard to come into the room; the guard obeyed the order. 'Take special measures to uncover these conspiracies,' Roger whispered into the guard's ear.

The guard brandished his rifle and bolted out. A few minutes later he returned to the room, carrying two heads by their hair.

'All the circumstances connected with these heads give grounds for the assumption that there's treachery in the rear,' said Roger. 'Beware of spies! Death to spies!'

The guard brandished his rifle and bolted out. He reappeared with a suitcase.

'Put it on the piano!' The guard heaved the suitcase onto the piano and was about to open it.

'Don't,' said Roger. 'I believe you.'

The guard took three rifles out of a mothball-smelling built-in-wardrobe and resumed his position at the entrance.

A few people stole into the room. In Indian file they approached Roger and formed a circle around him.

'Lie down,' said a middle-aged man. 'You're dead, aren't you? Let's not pretend to each other!'

Roger capered around for a while and even performed a Russian court-dance polonaise which he had learnt at a revolutionary gathering to mislead the secret police of the Tsar into believing that he was a monarchist.

'Dance as long as you wish,' said the middle-aged man. 'That's no proof. The other day I attended *The Dance of Death* by Strindberg. That's what you are—death. You're dead, though not buried. They have some problems with your soul. Your body hasn't rotted yet. It hasn't been burnt either. Your soul is attached to your body by ligaments or telepathy.'

Roger continued to dance: he hankered after a proof of his own immortality.

'Stop this show or I'll smash your face in,' said a young, long-haired man. 'Do you know what my mother said after her trip to West Germany last year? They robbed us of our lives, she said. *You* robbed us of our lives.'

'How do people usually profane corpses?' asked a bespectacled man.

'One may kiss a corpse,' answered a bearded man. 'One may also violate it. The word "violate" seems hardly appropriate, since corpses offer no resistance to their assailants. One may chop off the corpse's head or cut out its tongue.'

Roger folded his tongue in two and hid it in his gullet.

'And what about the penis?' asked the middle-aged man.

'He despised love and eroticism,' said the bespectacled man.

'Come here, Natasha!' shouted the young man. 'He'll get an eyeful of our love!'

'I'm Annabel, not Natasha,' said Roger's wife as she stalked into the room, a Chinese fan fluttering like a butterfly before her face. 'It's stuffy in here. Fancy how stuffy it is within these walls in summertime. And I have to *live* with him, don't you understand? You're just tourists or intruders. I'm his wife, until further notice. Of course he is ten times my age. I don't mind. Besides, age hardly matters under the circumstances. His mortal remains are ageless and I'll always be under thirty-five.'

The bearded man knocked his pipe out against a sarcophagus, kissed Annabel's hand and put his arm around her hips.

'My husband is very jealous. Ever since he saw Josef Stalin rape his first legal wife under his very nose—'

'What did he say to the rascal?' asked the middle-aged man.

'He was paralysed,' said Annabel and three clouds of smoke soared up to the vaulted roof. 'But he could see.'

'Could he?' The bespectacled man unbuttoned Annabel's blouse.

The soldier abandoned his post at the entrance, marched into the room and fired several shots. The bearded man knelt down, dropping his pipe.

'I'm sorry, but I must be off. I've got some urgent business to attend to. If you'll excuse me—' said the bespectacled man.

'You know the way out, don't you? I'd rather stay with my husband. I hope you'll understand—'

The bespectacled man bowed out. Annabel put her hand on Roger's forehead. He was not running a temperature.

3

Is it my room? Is there anybody in this room? A series of questions flash through my mind without being answered or destroyed. I see my mind in front of me, near the opposite wall. And I'm reading my mind. I'm a mind reader. And I'm human, otherwise I wouldn't have been filled with words and questions. I question myself on the subject of my existence. I don't know whether I can run or even stand on my own; yet I can lie for ever. I've no wish to leave my sheets, my shroud, my tomb. I've worked so hard in my lifetime that I'm entitled to a little rest, to the holiday on a seashore. Black Sea. Am I dead? Why do I think I'm dead? They've planted this conviction in my mind. To get me out of the way. The dead aren't supposed to meddle in the affairs of the living except in the disguise of ghosts. And I hate ghosts as I hate spineless, indolent, lethargic, sluggish individuals who shouldn't be trusted either during periods of social upheaval or even during periods of stagnation. Had I been a ghost I would have committed suicide on the very first day, upon awakening. They sleep in the daytime, don't they? Am I a werewolf? Why do they hate me, all of them? Even my wife seems to hate me. They call me 'monster'. A werewolf? I may have been turned into a werewolf upon my death as a human being. Have I ever been human? What do they call a human being? A human being is an organic substance whose difference from animals or inorganic substances lies in his foreknowledge of death. And I know I've died already. At least they treat me like a dead person. And often like a werewolf. Dogs bite me in the calves, men and women jab at me with pitchforks. So I exist, otherwise they wouldn't hunt me down. You don't wound a void, do you? But you don't wound a dead man either, unless he is a vampire. They drive a stake through the vampire's heart instead of pulling out his teeth. My heart is beating like a power hammer. I'm forging the future. The philosophy upon which I make my stand is true and thus justifies any order I may issue. Have I of late issued many orders? How many people have been executed? I saw only one body on the floor of my room—the eloquent proof of my paralysis. What do they say about this period of my life in my biographies? Why doesn't he let me study my life? I can't lie in here for ever, doing nothing. Thinking, thinking. He brought in a number of books, but there's none of any practical value among them. Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. And Samuel Beckett. *Unnameable*. This writer doesn't seem to pay much attention to reality, viewed in the light of its revolutionary development. His work is imbued with the spirit of pessimism, decadence and bourgeois-aristocratic aestheticism. I only liked the ending, 'You must go on, I'll go on.' I'll go on, whatever my biological state and their political stance. Workers will defend me. I'll appeal to the youth and

they'll form fighting squads everywhere. If only I could stand up! Help! Help! Am I allowed to go to the toilet? I must go to the toilet at once! And I haven't eaten anything today. Have I gone on a hunger strike? Why? Because they refuse to divulge my name? Or because they throttled the Revolution? Whatever the cause of my hunger strike, I won't eat today! Nor will I eat tomorrow! Just a few pastries and a bar of Swiss chocolate. Milk chocolate with nuts, with almonds. I'll store away enough food to last me until the next Revolution, whenever it takes place. What name will they shout in the streets? What name will be written on their placards? I'll adopt a pseudonym. This strategic move will enable me to travel freely around my country, thwarting the vigilance of the tsarist police. I was born in Russia, otherwise I wouldn't mention the Tsar so often. I'm no monarchist, am I? What name shall I choose? Roger? They've already got this name in their files. Malone? It's not a Russian name, is it? Volodya, Volodya. She called me Volodya. She must have known my parents. She lived in the neighbourhood, didn't she? Did she lie? Was she sent by the secret police, by Dzerzhinsky himself? I'll subject her to interrogation and torture—if she persists in denying her links with my past. I'll have her tortured and maimed, whether she remains adamant or not. She'll tell us even *more* than she knows. Meanwhile our squads will have completed their military training. Guard! Guard!

The guard entered the room and mechanically pointed his rifle at the man lying before him. 'What are you doing? Traitor! Don't you recognise me? I'm Volodya, Volodya!' The guard lowered the rifle and clicked his heels. 'Have you seen the old lady in this room? Or outside, on Red Square? The old lady who plays the piano? She played for me once.' The guard was staring into space. 'Can you shoot people? You need neither memory nor powers of observation to shoot people around you. Just press the trigger—' Once more the guard pointed his rifle at the man lying before him. 'Cretin! I mean—other people! I'll give the orders. Got it? And you'll fire!' The guard did an about-face and began to march towards the door. 'By the way, if you happen to run into the piano teacher I told you about, don't shoot her. Don't! I'd like to question her first.'

Volodya turned over on his back and resumed his meditation. He was somewhere; the place where he had spent several nights was bound by walls and had an entrance and even an exit, the latter being far more important than the former.

Indeed, given a means of exit, revolutionaries and other freedom-loving individuals can escape from prisons in which they had been put by kings, emperors and the flunkys of capitalism. After a spectacular departure from their damp and musty cells, freedom-loving individuals enjoy the fresh air and the company of their friends and relatives; revolutionaries

plunge into subversive activities and meet their accomplices underground—in a basement that may turn out to be as damp and musty as a prison cell. Yet they never permit themselves to waste invaluable time in meadows and woods: they are under a sacred obligation to save humanity by wrenching labourers from the capitalist clutches into which they have inadvertently fallen. Without revolutionaries this noble task cannot be achieved with due precision and completeness.

Volodya had never seen the exit but he knew it was close by, otherwise the revolution would have been utterly impossible. 'And the revolution is always possible,' he told himself. 'The revolution is inevitable.' He rolled towards the edge of his sarcophagus and tumbled out, hurting his elbow. For a while he remained on the floor, unable to move, to shout for help. Then he scrambled up and set out on his journey along the walls and the ceiling.

At first he rode a bicycle, which reminded him of Paris and the Bibliothèque Nationale where he had worked in 1908, during his longest period of exile from Russia.

I rose at 8 a.m., cycled from the outskirts of the city to that library, returned at 2 a.m. and continued my work at home. One day, on the way from Juvisy, near Paris, where I had gone to witness an aviation display, an automobile ran into my bicycle. I just managed to jump off in time. The bicycle was wrecked. Pity. It was my only bicycle. From then onward I would go to the library on foot. I had no umbrella. Whenever it rained I sought shelter in a jeweller's shop, in a boutique. I couldn't buy anything. I soon got blisters on my feet because my shoes were too tight. I couldn't afford a new pair of shoes. I ended up going to the library in my slippers that were full of holes. My socks were always drenched and I was always soaked to the skin. For the sake of the Revolution. There are no holes in the ceiling. At least it doesn't rain in my room. At last I'm sheltered from the rain. And from the wind. I'd rather find a hole somewhere. To squeeze through.

His mind rambled on as he cycled around the ceiling, up and down the walls. An automobile ran into his bicycle and he abandoned it in a corner. Suddenly a new perspective opened up before him—a long corridor at the end of which he saw a dot of light. He found himself gliding along this corridor; the more he approached the light, the larger and brighter it grew. Volodya realised that the light he saw before him signalled much more than a mere exit from his room so that he was disappointed when he finally reached an ordinary door by which there stood two guards with rifles at the ready. Upon seeing Volodya in the doorway, they levelled their rifles at his heart.

'No point in shooting,' said one of them. 'He's dead.'

'Is it him?' asked the other.

'He's changed a lot. But that's him all right. Look at his eyes. And his mouth. Still open, talking all the time. As he always did.'

'I can't hear anything.'

'Because he's dead. But he goes on speaking.'

'To who?'

'To us, to them.' He indicated with his rifle a few passers-by crossing Red Square in the direction of the Moscva River.

'Why can't he keep his mouth shut? What if I shoot him?'

'Leave the dead alone. Let them rot away in peace.'

'Where's *my* guard?' asked Volodya. He had already put this question to them a dozen times.

'He's not allowed to go out, is he? To stretch his legs and—'

'It's an entrance. Nobody's allowed to go out through the entrance.'

'He'll have to look for the exit. What if I shoot him?'

Volodya retraced his steps and realised that his room was no longer empty. A man was crawling on his hands and knees beside the sarcophagus. From time to time he sprawled out on the floor and fumbled under the sarcophagus.

'What are you doing in my room?'

The man crawled out from under the sarcophagus, looked up and heaved a sigh of relief. 'You're back, you're back,' he cried.

'What were you doing under my bed?'

'Looking for you! I thought you'd gone into hiding.'

'Who would I hide from?'

'From them, from them—' The man drew a gigantic semi-circle with his index finger. 'I thought you might be ill. I'm Kostya. Just call me if you need something. I'll come anyway, I'll know. You can trust me. The dead are often taken ill. When they're not looked after. But I'll look after you. I feared they'd sold you to the Americans. We couldn't have paid the ransom.'

'To the Americans?'

'Just have a rest, try to sleep. You must be tired after your walk. Don't walk on Red Square without sunglasses. They might kill you. Did you have your passport forged?'

'I lost my passport.'

'It's better this way. Say you're Comrade Ivanov if they ask questions and frisk you. If they don't, just go by or pass through them. But don't go too far, never go too far.'

Volodya felt relieved somehow. The intruder was prepared to protect him from his enemies and even offered to cure him of his diseases, including the paralysis from which he had suffered since 1922. And the intruder sounded sure of himself as if backed up by a group of intelligent, well-armed workers.

'Are your comrades far away?' In his turn Volodya squatted down and glanced under the sarcophagus and the rocking chair. 'Let them at once, of their own accord, arm themselves with whatever they can: revolvers, knives, rags steeped in kerosene to cause fires—'

They were both on their knees now. Kostya spread his fingers out and stroked Volodya's forehead.

'They took your brain away and put it in their laboratory, in a liquid. Barbarians. I wonder how you managed to survive. They removed your heart as well. You don't feel Time any more, you don't count any more. Your heart doesn't count seconds, your brain doesn't encompass history. Years and years, many years. Rags steeped in kerosene. They have atomic bombs and rockets. The Americans also have a space shuttle. You wrote about rags in October 1905, in a letter to the Military Committee of St Petersburg. Rags and kerosene were good in 1905. How shall we kill them in 1992? How shall we crush their rebellion? How shall we outwit their rockets?'

'Let me think,' said Volodya, rising up. He was reluctant to betray his bewilderment.

'You can't think, can you? Poor man. Barbarians, butchers.' Kostya menaced the ceiling with his fist and turned his glowing eyes towards Volodya. 'Your spirit is alive. I rely on your spirit.'

'As a matter of fact my soul is alive too. I captured it in the nick of time, near the door. I did it on my own. I still can run and grab what I need.'

'Poor man,' said Kostya as he stroked Volodya's cheeks and chin. 'I rely on your spirit, on your indomitable spirit. On your immortal spirit. We'll find it. It's not in their hands. It's in the air somewhere, in the air. I'll come tomorrow. Bye-bye now.'

Kostya kissed Volodya's hand, mounted the bicycle and slipped away into the deceitful, dusty light of the corridor. As soon as the noise died down Volodya undertook to measure the period of time that had elapsed between 1905 and 1992. At first he did it with his fingers, counting the number of uprisings and counterrevolutions which might have taken place in the course of eighty-seven years. He bent his fingers with howls of horror but always straightened them out. He then sought the help of his feet and covered the distance between the bed and the piano as he imagined the twentieth century in spatial terms. 'Here's Trotsky and his betrayals,' he said in front of the rocking chair. 'Here's Stalin and his rudeness. What errors did he

commit after my death?' A few metres of darkness lay between the piano and the Grecian vase by which he had died in 1924. What had happened within this patch of darkness?

'Do you listen to the radio at all?' asked the visitor as he entered the room with a torch in his hand. 'We broadcast a lot of programmes on Stalin and other communist leaders who reigned in Russia after your premature death. By the way, what did you die of? History books and encyclopaedias are silent on this point. And we don't speak with the Almighty day in day out, contrary to accepted ideas. Do you remember being poisoned or strangled? Let me see your neck and your stomach. Well, never mind! It's your life I care about—the immortal life of your soul.'

'Why did they steal my brain?'

'Who told you about this? Kostya, I suppose. There are many informers in the neighbourhood—throughout the country, I'm afraid. In spite of perestroika. I don't like the air of your country, of *our* country. I was born there too, in St Petersburg. It's high time I introduced myself, after all these years. Andrey Petrovich. My surname is of no importance whatsoever. The air is poisoned. In a sense, you and your stooges killed the air of this country. And the air should be *fresh*. A vital spirit bringing life to men and stones as it passes through them. The air receives into itself the influences of celestial bodies and transmits their messages to humans. And vice versa. We also send our messages to the universe through the air that serves as a telephone, an answerphone and what not. The Hebrew doctors regard it as a *Medium* or glue joining things together. I've travelled a lot since I saw you last at the mausoleum. Chiefly in Russia, in the Russia of Yeltsin. How long will it take to purify the air in that country? You can efface an offensive mural—'

'Where's my brain?'

'In some laboratory or other. What you preserve in your head is a kind of reflection. You won't understand all the technicalities. I don't understand them myself, frankly speaking. As I told you, we don't consult God every hour. Don't make such a fuss about your brain. What you need is "peace of mind". Why don't you lose your mind in the streets of Moscow? A Buddhist monk comes to his master and says, "Would you be so kind as to pacify my mind? It's become quite unruly of late." "Bring your mind here before me," says the master. "I cannot find it," says the monk. "There! I've pacified your mind," says the master.'

'I *must* find it! I *can* find it! I saw it yesterday!'

'Yesterday you were asleep. And the day before yesterday. Actually you've slept for three weeks. You may have been in a deep coma, for all I know. Stop squeezing your head! It's pretty fragile...after all these years...'

'If we export his skull in a wooden box or a steel container, we shouldn't forget the inscription "Fragile". Loaders and stevedores are so remiss nowadays,' said the young man standing near the piano.

'I asked you not to come today. My rebellious assistant, Felix. Please go, unless you treat us to a Chopin nocturne.' Andrey Petrovich rose from the sofa and opened the lid of the piano.

'I've got an idea.' Felix closed the piano with a bang. 'We might sell him part by part: head, legs, arms, fingers—'

'Really? And what about his soul?'

'If Doctor Grünewald manages to isolate it from the rest—'

'I mean, what about his *soul*?'

'We'll get much more than the 27,000,000 dollars that the Americans are willing to pay for the whole of his carcass. Every museum in the United States and Western Europe will have *something* from the most precious communist relic: his liver or his lungs or his ears or his beard—'

'Why not his navel or his beauty spots? Let's look after his *soul*, Felix. We still have time...until his burial. I was teaching him the ways and methods of Zen Buddhism—'

'We can't save it anyway! We've tried everything: Hinduism, eroticism. Annabel's bosom and legs are lost on him.'

'Your buxom protégé—'

'He is so insensitive,' said Annabel, taking off her mink-coat. 'Always thinking about revolutions and resolutions—' She moved towards Volodya—slowly, dragging her feet and wiggling her hips. On her way she stripped her clothes off and was now flinging them at his profile: he had shyly turned his head away. She knelt down by his feet, stretched herself face downwards over his lap and let her head hang down on the other side. 'He doesn't feel anything. He won't spank me. See for yourself!'

'Perhaps he doesn't love you,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'If only he could fall in love...an understudy of Marguerite. *Salut! Demeure chaste et pure*. What a beautiful aria! I'm rather keen on French operas.'

Leaning sideways, Volodya reached the bottom drawer of his mahogany desk, pulled it out, picked up a whip and raised it high in the air. He cracked the whip and lashed it criss-cross over Annabel's back. She sprang up and ran backwards a stretch, unable to flee her executioner in earnest. A pool of blood appeared near the pedals of the piano. The blood was streaming down the walls as the metronomical crack of the whip echoed over Red Square and

much further off—all over Moscow, as far as the distant suburbs. Felix flew to the rescue of his ward, but Andrey Petrovich put out his hand.

'Whenever he really gets into his stride—Let it be! She is only an automaton with a large quantity of tomato juice in her veins. The air, the air. I'm worried about the air.' A squeamish grimace distorted his features. 'Violence, cruelty—they impregnate the air and make it unfit for the soul. The air is saturated with our intentions and emotions...and the crimes of the past generations. I can't travel through Russia. I stifle in its steppes and woods. I suffocate on Red Square—on all the black squares of Moscow and St Petersburg. The air enters into the bodies of men and other animals through their pores and induces dreams and divinations. What dreams does one have now in Russia? What future is foretold there? Sleepers toss and turn in their beds, their mouths twisting, their eyes blinking. They see their past, their future.'

'I seem to get your point,' said Felix. 'It's a well-known phenomenon of which I had some experience in my youth. It boils down to this: a man passing by a place where someone was slain is moved with fear. Well, my cousin Boris—'

'60 million, 70 million people have been butchered in Russia since the Revolution!' shouted Andrey Petrovich. 'The air has become solid, impassable. People are imprisoned in the air. They've been turned into statues. People can't help looking back, into the past.'

'In other words Soviet leaders have succeeded in creating an invisible Gulag Archipelago, a translucent Lubyanka. People find themselves in a prison without being imprisoned. But, you know, Andrey Petrovich, life itself is—'

Volodya continued to paint with his whip an expressionist picture on the body of Annabel. She had no more blood to spill and a man wrapped up in a black garment—not unlike the outfit worn by Bunraku's puppeteers—poured a litre bottle of Bloody Mary into her veins and arteries. She screamed anew; her blood squirted onto Volodya's face and scalp. Maddened by the smell and taste of the Bloody Mary, Volodya accelerated the tempo of his execution; he also accentuated its rhythm. A few symphonies blared in his head. 'Shostakovich,' said Andrey Petrovich. Annabel screamed and agonised. Presently she began to disintegrate; her members disentangled themselves from the tissues of her body and writhed on their own in various parts of the room. Her fingers and teeth and bones were scattered over the floor like the pieces of an anatomic puzzle. Volodya stamped on them with frenzy and persistence; under his feet, the remnants of her body were breaking apart—further and further. It was as if he wished to demonstrate the ever-divisible structure of the atom.

Felix contemplated the destruction of his automaton with scientific scrupulousness and even jotted down a few remarks in his notebook the pages of which were covered with diagrams and formulas. 'I recently read his book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* where he advances the proposition that "the electron is as *inexhaustible* as the atom". A rather modern approach, I daresay. What's your opinion, Andrey Petrovich?'

'In the same book he maintains that things exist independently of our consciousness, independently of our perceptions, outside of us. This sounds pretty old-fashioned, if one takes into consideration the Quantum and the Bootstrap Theories. Nothing exists outside of us. Stars are our red and white corpuscles...even in the vale of tears...let alone in Paradise.'

'Paradise? Did you say Paradise?' Volodya dropped the whip, wiped his eyes and nose with the palm of his hand and sat down, his shoulders drooping, his arms falling between his outspread legs. 'Electricity. Communism is the Soviet Regime plus the electrification of the whole country. By now they must have electricity in every household. And tractors in the fields.' He gaped in wonder at the images which, though created through his own visionary powers within the province of his mind, were now projected on a huge cinema screen hung on the opposite wall.

'Tractors, bulbs. What's the film you're showing?' Andrey Petrovich rose from his chair.

'I found it in our archives,' said Felix. 'Songs and smiles—'

'A Stalinist propaganda film, no doubt. Mendacious depictions of rural plenty. Enough of the Communist Paradise! Have done!' Andrey Petrovich sat down. The screen darkened and something crackled in the air. 'How is your head, Vladimir Ilich? All right?'

'All right,' answered Volodya.

'Awfully sorry, we've just extinguished a part of your brain. In a minute we'll replace it with a new part—equal in quantity but far superior in quality. You'll be fully satisfied.'

'So shall I,' said Felix.

'I'm waiting,' said Andrey Petrovich.

The air crackled once more and the screen came aglitter. A few columns glistened in the sun, a river of floating pearls crossed the plain studded with diamonds, streams of ruby-coloured liquid ran down from the rocky mountains dripping with honey—

'It's wine, not blood,' said Andrey Petrovich, pointing to the ruby-coloured stream. The air crackled and the screen went dark once again. 'Where's the river flowing with milk? You promised—'

'I thought we'd agreed on the mountains dripping with honey,' answered Felix.

'They're not mutually exclusive, are they? They're part and parcel of the same paradisiacal landscape. And what about the vines having ten thousand branches?'

'In a film...I mean on a screen...'

'I can *recite* the passage, but his brain would assimilate your images more readily and profoundly. Images flow into the brain, while words get stuck in the air.'

'Images, Tommaso Campanella,' whispered Volodya. 'Scientific knowledge translated into pictures...painted on both sides of concentric walls...quotations from my books reproduced on a globe beneath the cupola of the central temple...circular city...socialist realism...pictures are more *real* than words...city of the sun...country of the sun...'

Andrey Petrovich put on his glasses and opened his notebook. 'The days will come in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches and on each branch ten thousand twigs, and on each twig ten thousand shoots, and on each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty metretres of wine. And when any one of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out: "I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me."'

'He doesn't like wine,' said Felix. 'He prefers vodka.'

Meanwhile the air became a playground for sound effects ranging from human screams to military tunes. Then a regular rhythm of footsteps came to the fore and soon the piano teacher appeared in the doorway. The right hand of the soldier was firmly pressed against her mouth.

'Remove your hand and open her mouth—she knew my parents.' The soldier carried out the order. 'You knew my parents. Who am I?' The soldier poked the lady in the back with his rifle and she came staggering towards Vladimir Ilich. 'Who am I?' The soldier poked the lady in the nape; she stumbled and bumped into Vladimir Ilich. 'Don't touch me! How dare you! Who gave you permission to touch me? Answer my question! You knew my parents, didn't you? You admitted the fact a few hours ago. Or a few months ago. We didn't torture you, whatever our enemies might accuse us of. You acknowledged your link with my parents by yourself, on your own initiative. And I believed you. Why? Because I was born somewhere. This assumption stems from the fact that I exist. So I was born and I had parents—a pair of humans. I'm not the offspring of some crocodile, am I? Do I look like a crocodile? I don't. I look like a human being. So I had parents who were human beings. And you may have known them on account of your age. How old are you? A hundred years old? Two hundred? So you must have known my parents. What's more, you resemble my mother. Are you my mother?'

'No. I'm Anastassia—'

'I'm interested in my parents' name, not yours. What's the name of my father?'

'Ilya Nicholaevich Ulyanov.'

'Your father was a schoolteacher,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'One day, upon reading Plato's *Protagoras*, he reached the conclusion that virtue couldn't be taught. So he taught you everything except virtue, justice and a sense of shame. Your brother was also quite uneducated in this respect.'

'Volodya had a few years to spare between two revolutions, so he thought he'd make a virtue of necessity by writing books,' cut in Felix.

'The reports we get from the vale of tears stress the necessity of teaching virtue at schools and even at kindergartens,' went on Andrey Petrovich. 'And your father has come round to our point of view at last.'

'My father was Ulyanov. Who am I? Just another Ulyanov?'

'They're going to open the mausoleum to the public,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'Opening time, as they say in England. You're supposed to lie down in your sarcophagus and shut your eyes.'

'Why do so many people come to look at me? I must be famous, very famous.'

'Of course you're famous,' laughed Andrey Petrovich. 'You're Lenin, the founder of Bolshevism and of the first socialist state in the world. You were born on April 22, 1870, in Simbirsk, now called Ulyanovsk. On the Volga which is the longest European river. I'd like to go on a voyage down the Volga, as far as Astrakhan. It's still beautiful, isn't it? Old Russian towns, cupolas...'

Ilya Nicholaevich took a sip of lemon tea, set the cup down on the oilcloth, cleared his throat and turned towards Lenin. 'Son, I'd like to thank you for your unexpected visit. You must have a very busy schedule, but you've found time to visit your ageing mother and father. Your mother, Maria Alexandrovna, is sitting opposite you.' Lenin's mother stood up, made a curtsy and sat down. 'It's a great pleasure to see you at home again, in our small family circle,' continued Ilya Nicholaevich. 'Alas, our family circle has shrunk considerably over the last few decades. It's no longer a circle, only three dots—your mother, you and your humble servant. In the nineteenth century we had two boys and three girls—apart from you.'

'I had a brother,' said Lenin.

'Two brothers,' said Ilya Nicholaevich.

'He was hanged.'

'Your brother Alexander? Yes, he was hanged in the Schlüsselburg Fortress. He had been arrested in St Petersburg for complicity in the plot against the life of Alexander III. What a terrible thing to do! Dante must have relegated him to the very bottom of Hell along with Judas Iscariot, Brutus, Hitler, Cassius, Stalin, Beria. Dante is an influential person in the Hereafter.'

'Do you meet him at all?' asked Maria Alexandrovna. 'How is he down there? Does he still suffer from vertigo?'

'Maria!' said Ilya Nicholaevich reproachfully. 'We rehearsed this breakfast last week. Volodya is alive. His body has been embalmed and—'

'Did he become a pharaoh? Late in life?'

'A pharaoh?' Lenin dropped his cup, spilling the lemon tea all over the oilcloth.

'I always knew you would be a great man, my son. I'm very proud of you.' Maria Alexandrovna stood up and made another curtsy.

'Sit down, Maria!' Ilya Nicholaevich knocked his empty cup over. 'Volodya, you drove your mother out of her wits. In your lifetime you behaved very badly.'

'Did I?'

'A pharaoh...' whispered Maria Alexandrovna.

'The Bolsheviks have preserved our son's body from decay to keep his substance in existence. "*Nihil enim, si non corpus*," said Tertullian. And they need him real, tangible, alive—'

'During the vacations of 1885 my brother brought with him a copy of Marx's *Das Kapital*. I read the book. Have you got it? Where's my room? I put it under my pillow.'

'We burnt it,' said Ilya Nicholaevich. 'Calm down, Volodya. May I call you Volodya? I used to call you Volodya. In the nineteenth century. Are you still my son?'

'Was I born in this house?'

'You'd better visit it *now*. They're sure to blow it up one of these days. Where shall we live, Volodya? There's an old people's home in the neighbourhood—'

'Where did they hide the dynamite?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'They intend to blow the house up in the near future. I need it, the dynamite.'

'Don't play with matches, Volodya. You're an adult, a responsible human being. What are you up to? Let's talk about your future, son.'

'History has now confronted us with an immediate task which is more revolutionary—'

'Forget the word revolution! You've forgotten so many words already. Don't bully our history! "If a small man has courage but neglects Right, he becomes a thief," said Confucius. Don't rob our history of its past and present.'

'So many people were robbed,' said Maria Alexandrovna as she sat down at last. 'So many lives. Where did you put all those lives, Volodya? On some Treasure Island of yours? Do resurrect those people! They deserve it. They didn't deserve what you had done to them.'

'By the way, did you bury those people? As your father, I'm entitled to an explanation. Their whereabouts in the Hereafter and—'

'The fulfilment of this task, the destruction of the most powerful bulwark not only of European but also of Asiatic reaction would place the Russian proletariat in the vanguard of the international revolutionary proletariat.'

'Stalin didn't dare to venture outdoors,' said Ilya Nicholaevich. 'They showed him how his subjects fared in his office, on a cinema screen. In his office people ate and danced. Have they at least shown you some recent Soviet movies?'

'I like cinema. It's the most important of the arts because the masses understand it better than music and philosophy. And the masses count more than individuals. Masses are easier to count. The masses are always one. Individuals are many, even if you execute them by thousands, by millions.'

'Do resurrect them, Volodya!' shouted Maria Alexandrovna. 'You're all-powerful, aren't you? So resurrect those people and we'll count them afterwards, one by one. The living are

easier to count than the dead who have been pulverised by their tombs. The earth is one, Hells are many.'

'I think you got me wrong, my son. I'm not trying to win you over to my point of view for any *practical* reason. You're not likely to dwell in Paradise, even after the next world-conflagration, even when all your crimes and their vestiges will have been burnt in the furnace of the Almighty. Paradise is an impregnable fortress. As Tertullian put it, "The sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life's blood." Only Christian martyrs are permitted to stay up there. I want you to improve your ways for the sake of progress. Do have some tea while the samovar is piping-hot! Sugar? Help yourself to the biscuits! Do you like them? I don't know what kind of food you get in the mausoleum—'

'Do they feed you well, Volodya?' asked Maria Alexandrovna. 'Don't drink too much vodka!'

'And your cherry tart? Maria, you forgot your cherry tart!'

'My cherry tart? Did Fyokla bake a cherry tart?'

'Fyokla left us a long time ago. It's you who baked a cherry tart this morning, remember? Your son Volodya—Vladimir Ilich Lenin—adores cherry tarts.'

'I'll fetch it,' said Maria Alexandrovna without budging from her chair.

'I'll fetch it, if you wish,' said Ilya Nicholaevich.

'Progress...for the sake of progress...Social progress...' Lenin sprang to his feet and put out his arm. 'History's like a train which goes from point A to point B. Sometimes the train stops and even backs away from point B to point A. Our task is to speed up the movement of the locomotive and cut off any leg that pushes on the brake pedal. We'll shoot anyone whose legs so much as approach the brake pedal and whose arms stretch out to grasp the gear lever and the communication cord. We ought to arrive at point B and not at point C or D. There's only one point of happiness in human history and those who constantly deviate to this side or that from the course I'm bent on keeping, whatever happens—'

'Progress.' Ilya Nicholaevich swallowed a biscuit. 'I was talking about your personal, inner progress...a kind of pilgrim's progress which elevates the soul, preparing it for contemplation and—'

'Action!' Enthusiastically Lenin started to roll a lump of sugar on the oilcloth. 'To delay action means death.'

'You're dead already, Volodya. Take your time now. You're so jumpy and jerky. Have you got a handkerchief? You're perspiring profusely! I've got no handkerchief either. Maria, why didn't you give us napkins? It's bad for your health, my son. Sit down and leave the sugar

alone. In the afternoon you can play with your lead soldiers, if you wish—we haven't thrown them away. This house used to be a museum, you know. The communists still don't want us to dispose of your things which are awfully cumbersome, dirty and foul-smelling. We're even forbidden to dust them, for the sake of your invaluable fingerprints.'

'My lead soldiers? I'd like to see them now.'

'Well, I hope you won't order them to march on the Kremlin, on Washington.' Ilya Nicholaevich effaced his smile as he wiped the corners of his mouth with a bunch of daffodils.

'I wandered lonely as a cloud—' murmured Lenin.

'Why do you see Creation in terms of wars and revolutions? The sum of human sufferings is immutable. No mathematics will ever help humanity out of its misery. You'll have only lead soldiers at your disposal, nothing else.'

'I'd like to play with my lead soldiers now.'

'Don't use them,' said Maria Alexandrovna with a sob. 'They're tiny and dead. You killed them too. You even killed your soldiers.'

'Let's have a peaceful discussion about history, psychology, religion and the arts,' said Ilya Nicholaevich, putting his elbows on the table. 'I find it difficult to put up with revolutionary-minded individuals because, whatever their creeds and means of self-expression, they strive to forget the past and remember only the future as if nobody had ever lived and breathed before their births. They reduce the universe to the size of their ideas which are often no bigger than a lump of sugar.' Ilya Nicholaevich glanced at Lenin who was now fiddling with his cup and saucer. 'Deprived of former days, of their fresh-as-a-daisy treasury, the present engenders agoraphobia. Confined at first to Time, the agoraphobic disease spreads around and finally encroaches on Space. The frontiers of your country have been closed since the revolution—under the pretext of keeping your enemies at bay.'

Maria Alexandrovna got up and minced out, humming an old Russian song.

'Maria! Stay with us. You haven't seen your son since—'

'Quick, quick! We should get rid of the lead soldiers! Before it's too late! Red Guards, the Red Army. Prague, Budapest, Afghanistan—' Maria Alexandrovna reached the staircase, tripped over the hem of her skirt and hit her forearm against the banister.

'Maria, please!' Ilya Nicholaevich strode after his wife and they both disappeared up the stairs. Five minutes later, Ilya Nicholaevich returned to the room.

'There! Keep it as a souvenir. Just one. No harm done!'

Lenin seized the soldier that his father was handing to him and hid it in his pocket without so much as a cursory check. 'Can you get me more of this stuff? Father, you ought to help me. They treat me as an invalid. I'm not allowed to leave the premises. Even to go to the toilet. There are three chamber pots under my bed.'

'Please don't say "toilet". It's so vulgar. Anyway, how did you get here? Simbirsk is far from Red Square.'

'Two armed men guard the exit round the clock. I try to sneak out every afternoon, but they fire in the air. I'm forbidden to fly away, father.'

'Don't you feel comfortable in your mausoleum? I'm told they lavish caviar and sleeping pills on you. Why can't you sleep? Does remorse gnaw away at your entrails? Remorse is a vulture, a stray dog biting off the unsavoury bits of one's heart.'

Lenin took the lead soldier out of his pocket and perched it on top of the samovar. 'Be vigilant! Guard the defences of our country and our Red Army like the apple of your eye, and remember that we've no right to permit any laxity—even for one moment. The country mustn't be taken unawares. We've passed through one period of war and we don't know when a second will come. When it does come we'll be prepared for all contingencies.' Lenin knocked the samovar as he poured himself another cup of tea, and the soldier fell down on the oilcloth.

'Enemies are the aftermath of agoraphobia, not the other way round.' Ilya Nicholaevich picked the soldier up and absent-mindedly wiped it with a lapel of his tailcoat.

'Word-spinning. Endless, nauseating, intellectual word-spinning. You must be tired of talking, father. And no decision has been taken and carried out. Forward!—that's what I like. That's life. Forward! Time never goes backward except in a novel by H. G. Wells whom I met in Moscow many years ago. Feudalism, capitalism, communism—the right and only sequence of social stages embedded in human history. And as Time can neither stop nor go backward, a capitalist country must and will adopt a communist regime, either through revolution or parliamentary pressure: I'll just have a million Red Guards posted all over the capital and the delegates will raise their hands at the right moment. Once the dictatorship of the proletariat is proclaimed and inscribed in the constitution, the country will never fall back on capitalist economics and ideas, for Time doesn't go backward.'

'In modern physics, too, Time may and does go backward. It's pretty hard to explain. I'll show you some diagrams before dinner. Well, the relativistic theory of particle interactions—Do you follow me? All space-time diagrams are usually read in two opposite directions in regard to Space *and* Time. Every process happens to be counterbalanced by an equivalent

process in which the direction of Time is reversed and particles are replaced by antiparticles. Is that clear?"

'You're just a schoolteacher, father. You've always been a schoolteacher.'

'Oh, I don't teach any more. I learn instead. I read a lot, I talk to our neighbours, I play chess in the city park. At home I listen to records and compact discs. Shall we listen to *Moses and Aaron*? Schoenberg was one of the most daring innovators in music. Yet he refused to be called a "revolutionary" and wouldn't compel his pupils to compose *their* music in *his* style, unlike most ideologists. "A great many works can still be written in C major," he used to say. Why don't you live your new incarnation in C major, Volodya? Or in C minor? A life of sadness and remorse doesn't seem out of place—as a consequence of what you've done in your previous existence.'

All of a sudden the windows flew open and the curtain billowed out, sending the dust and the past into a twirl. The cups and teaspoons joined in the Chaplinesque dance, jingling and tinkling, as the music of church bells filled up the room.

'Listen to this!' said Ilya Nicholaevich in ecstatic tones. 'The C major of human life.'

'Don't substitute a refined idealism for the Marxist philosophy of materialism. You, father, belong to the group of so-called "God-seekers" or "God-builders" who urge that a new religion is required. You attempt to befuddle the minds of the workers with religious dope and modern music.'

'The Golden Calf. Beware of the Golden Calf!' cried Ilya Nicholaevich. 'Listen to these bells! I wonder where the sound comes from. The cathedral was demolished in 1932. All the churches of our city were pulled down or blown up because the local Bolsheviks resented the idea of having "another" God in the area where your cradle had once stood. They thought the "impurity" of Christianity might contaminate, in retrospect, your immaculate childhood. The Bolsheviks respect their own past. And they devastate the past, the present and the future of other people who have no alternative but to become invisible—in order to survive. Russia has become invisible over the seventy-five years of your comrades' rule and now I don't see anything unless I close my eyes. I've knocked about a bit. I've roamed around Russia with my eyes closed. My Russia, my private, unique, indestructible Russia. Listen to these invisible bells! Where are they swaying and swinging? Who's pulling the rope? They dissolved in the clouds as their enemies approached—'

'The soldier, the soldier, I've lost one soldier!' cried Maria Alexandrovna from above and a patter of her footsteps drowned out the bells and her husband's monologue. Soon the patter died away. 'Here you are! I've found you, I've caught you!'

'I'm sorry I got carried away,' said Ilya Nicholaevich, glancing towards the door. 'Don't tell your mother. She is worried about my physical condition. My heart. I've always had a weak heart.' Ilya Nicholaevich put a lump of sugar into his mouth, picked up his cup and began to suck the tea through the lump of sugar that he was clenching between his teeth.

'It's not him!' cried Maria Alexandrovna. 'It's another soldier!' The patter of her footsteps resumed overhead and soon she appeared in the doorway, wearing a dressing gown. 'Where are you hiding him? Murderer! Murderer!' She rushed towards Lenin and grabbed him by the throat with such dexterity and determination that he had no time to call either his bodyguards or Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky.

'We were in the middle of a most exciting talk, weren't we?' said Ilya Nicholaevich. 'A literary discussion, no less. I asked our son if he had read James Joyce. You know, Maria, that Irish writer. I read to you from *Ulysses*, the other day.'

'Murderer!' cried Maria Alexandrovna.

With the aid of a knife Lenin undid the knot of his mother's fingers and she fell supine onto the floor, bleeding and coughing. 'Have you got a knife-sharpener?' he asked, casting a glance at his father.

'Joyce is another great innovator of our epoch. His works are teeming with the echoes of the past,' said Ilya Nicholaevich, lowering his cup onto the oilcloth and rising from the table. He reached the body of his wife, bent over it and pressed his fingers on her wound. 'How are you, Maria? Just another death? After all the deaths we have gone through over these years?'

'Murderer! My son is a murderer!'

'His knife is forever getting closer to our bodies but never touches them. We're invulnerable, Maria. Only the dead are in a position to escape from his murderous fury. Let's go to the steam bath and wash our blood away.'

Maria Alexandrovna got up and they both proceeded out of the room, followed by the inquisitive gaze of their son.

Immortals, are they? And still complaining about their heart diseases. Always whining. Am I really their son, a particle of theirs propelled into the cosmos? Perhaps. Anything can happen in our godforsaken life! And you're not even allowed to kill those people. What does it matter who they are? Their views and actions are harmful and consequently they hinder our march to happiness—to international happiness. And impediments must be extirpated at all costs. Dostoevsky said that worldwide happiness might be spoiled by the tear of a child. A fly in the ointment. We'll take out the fly and keep the ointment. Or we'll leave the fly in the ointment and make everybody pretend that there's no such thing as flies. The child sheds a

tear and laughs a few minutes later. And should his blood be shed, our doctors will heal his wounds. We'll provide free medical care for the whole population of our country and build as many hospitals as necessary to cure our children. And should our children die in our hospitals, we'll give birth to other children and build other hospitals and madhouses. Contempt for death must become widespread among the masses and thus ensure victory. My victory. Vast masses of the working people are convinced of the justice of their cause and their conviction generates and multiplies mass heroism and mass slaughter and mass starvation. Only the masses count, whether they're alive or not. And corpses shouldn't count. They shouldn't even be counted. Just pile them up! Up to the sky! We'll defy the Almighty and create a monument to Communism. Where are my parents? In a steam bath? Still bleeding to death? I'll have plenty of time to visit the house on my own. They'll die again if they're naughty and disobedient. Death is better than an unworthy life. Where's my room? I'm lying in my cradle upstairs. Even in my childhood I was immortal. I must be careful not to awake myself because I slept badly last night. Not a wink of sleep for two months, for a hundred years. We all know what a strain this war is imposing upon us and how it's wearing us down.

Lenin closed his eyes and opened them again. His parents were out and he rose from his chair, dropping the toilet roll and knocking the samovar down with his elbow. The windows banged shut, but the church bells could still be heard in the distance. His index finger pressed against his mouth, Lenin tiptoed out of the room and jerked up the stairs. A door loomed ahead of him; the door proved to be locked and the key was not sticking out of it, spirited away by a spy or a conspirator. 'They locked me out,' he thought and lifted his leg, determined to thwart the Machiavellian plans of his rivals. After a dozen futile attempts he realised with consternation that he was unable to pass through the walls and enter his own room without the key. 'Perhaps it's not my room after all,' he thought encouragingly and went further along the corridor that abounded in doors, chairs and excerpts from his works. The latter hung on the walls, framed and shielded by glass; under each of them stood a chair that enabled visitors to meditate in peace upon the sense of the printed words.

A number of signboards appeared as he moved further on, pushing every door and searching for the keys. 'Don't tread on the floor. Cherish the history of your native land.' 'Don't exhale the air from your lungs. The air of Lenin's museum should be preserved from your microbes.' One of the doors had been left ajar and he stole into the room without knocking. Piled up on the desk, a score of manuscripts obstructed the light so that the atmosphere of the room seemed propitious for a massive intrusion of ghosts. But there were none and unexpectedly Lenin experienced a feeling of solitude. There were no chairs in the

room; there were no quotations on the walls, on the ceiling. A butterfly fluttered in through the door and settled on his shoe. He lifted his leg again and the butterfly disappeared among the manuscripts.

He went out of the room and continued his cautious stroll around the house. A tattered snapshot where his sister Anna smiled and saluted somebody was pinned to an armchair. He tore the snapshot off and put it *under* the armchair. By a huge staircase there was a signboard reading: 'Lenin severely chided those who undertook everything and finished nothing. He detested "Oblomovshchina", i.e., idle dreaming as indulged in by the hero of Goncharov's famous novel. He said, "Oblomov still lives, and it will be necessary to give him a good washing and cleaning, a good rubbing and drubbing to make a man of him. Oblomov must go to a steam bath."' Under the inscription there was a puppet rotating on a pivot. The puppet's arms shot out in every direction, its mouth wide-open. 'Electricity,' thought Lenin. 'It's not mechanical, is it? Nobody winds it up.' And he looked around to make sure he was not mistaken.

He spotted a door further down the staircase; the door was unlocked. A cradle stood in the middle of the room. Lenin took off his clothes and shoes, climbed into the cradle and his body began to shrink. He was astonished at first; as time went by he became more tolerant and less curious. His body fitted into the cradle. He found it natural and *gemütlich*; and decided he liked it there. At least he did not shout for help. He felt no pain and his thoughts settled down at last as if he had taken a sleeping pill. His nostalgia was assuaged somehow and he stretched out his arm—not to indicate the right way to future generations but to touch the rattle that his nanny was shaking before him. 'Murderer,' she said and the rattle dropped down onto the swaddling clothes.

'It's time, it's time. Wake up! We're in a hurry. It's snowing. Take your boots. Where are your boots?'

Lenin opened his eyes and saw a bearded man who had already paid him a visit last year to ask for a loan. Lenin could remember neither the amount of the loan nor the reason advanced by the man, but the face leaning over him gave rise to unpleasant emotions.

'I've no money in my purse,' he grumbled, pulling the blanket over his forehead. 'When did you grow your beard? Who are you hiding from? Clear out!'

'I can't hear you,' said the man, pulling the blanket off. Lenin grasped the man's beard.

'It's your beard then. You didn't glue it on, did you?'

'It's my beard,' acquiesced the man. 'I wanted to come on the following day, but I couldn't. I was very ill. Now I'm all right. I'm Kostya. Don't you remember me?'

'What kind of disease did you have?' Instinctively Lenin moved away from Kostya.

'Don't be afraid. I'm all right now, no microbes.'

'I'm not afraid,' said Lenin. But he did not move closer to the mouth that shut and opened right above the pillow. 'Why did you come anyway? I've no money. You were a delegate of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, weren't you?'

'In December 1920,' said Kostya, touching the pillow with his beard.

'And I attended the conference of non-Party peasants which was held during the Congress.'

'I saw you all right.'

'I satisfied the desire of the non-Party peasants that the surplus grain appropriation system should be abolished. What do you want *today*? A tractor, a cow?'

'I'd like a cow,' said Kostya gloomily, 'but I came here—' He backed away from the pillow. 'Look, look—' His eyes and beard dropped below the edge of the bed and, out of curiosity, Lenin turned on his right side and shifted his gaze towards the crouching figure. 'Look what I brought—'

Four enormous fingernails were scattered fanwise around the man's knees. There was also a cap emblazoned with three signs.

'What are these signs?' asked Lenin.

'The sign of the Moon, the sign of Venus and the sign of Saturn.'

'And the nails? Where do they come from? Are they yours?'

'No. I took them from the coffin of a state criminal. They executed him in 1969. I dug up the coffin and cut the nails. They're still growing.' Kostya picked up a black-handled sword and brandished it near Lenin's feet. 'It's a magical sword,' he said. 'And the fork is also magical.'

'Where's the fork?'

'Behind my back. And this copper vase contains the blood of another state criminal. I cut his belly myself, in a madhouse. He was going to die anyway.' Kostya opened a cardboard box and took out the head of a cat. 'This black cat was nourished on human flesh for five days and five hours. Another state criminal. I never use communists, never. Word of honour. Not even their nails or hair.' Kostya opened a metallic case and took out an elongated object wrapped up in a newspaper. 'I never use *Pravda*. Just a chess weekly, *Stale Mate*, printed in Tula.' He unwrapped the object and held it up.

'What is it? A bird, a red bird?' asked Lenin.

'It's a bat drowned in a state criminal's blood. I collected the blood in a basin, caught the bat and drowned it. The bat was still alive when I drowned it. Very important. Dead bats are powerless—they've no magnetism. I hope I didn't lose the skull. Where's the skull?' Kostya scrambled up and looked around, sniffing the air. 'Where's the skull? Did you take it?'

'What should I need a skull for?' asked Lenin as he lifted his head and shoulders, propping himself up on his forearms. He also sniffed the air and glanced around the room.

'It was in a box...in a small box...a hatbox. Have you seen a hatbox?'

'I haven't.'

'It was in the barrow, I'm sure. Among other things. I put it beside the black cat.'

'And what's there? On the piano?'

'The horns of a goat. The skull is more important than the horns because there was a brain in it once. It's no problem to get a new skull on Red Square, but a parricidal—Do you know any father or mother killers? Did *you* kill your father or mother? Or a near relative? Forget it. We shouldn't use *your* skull. We need the skull of a parricidal—'

'Of course we shouldn't.'

'A near relative will do, a cousin. Do you have a cousin or a sister?'

'What's all this about?' Lenin sat up, slipped his pyjamas on, rose to his feet, took a step towards the sword and tripped up over two candles. He swore and stamped on the black, wooden, crescent-shaped sticks into which the candles had been inserted.

'Careful! I made them out of human fat.'

'What?'

'The candles of course. Well, I'll try to manage without the skull.'

'Are you sure it'll work? What are you planning to do?'

'I'm very proud of this smell. Enjoy it!' Kostya produced a censer out of a small suitcase and brought it up to Lenin's nose. 'Can you guess the ingredients?'

Lenin took a deep sniff and shook his head doubtfully. 'I can't. There's no smoke.'

'Because there's no fire,' Kostya said with a laugh. 'Incense, camphor, aloes, ambergris and storax, mixed together with the blood of a goat, a bat and a mole.'

'What do moles look like?'

'And I fasted for fifteen days. I had only one meal after sunset, an unsalted meal. Black bread and blood seasoned with unsalted spices, black beans, milky and narcotic herbs. And I steeped black poppies and hemp-seed in my wine.'

Lenin lifted his leg to find out if he could walk.

'If you can't walk I'll put you in the barrow. I carried you once. You weighed about sixty-five kilos. Of course I was younger and sounder in body and mind. I've been very ill of late.'

'When did you carry me, where? At my funeral?'

'I yelled at the top of my voice, "Up with him!" and I clutched one of your legs.'

'I wasn't dead, was I?'

'Alive. Too much alive, your enemies thought. Your legs were moving. I bent down and clutched one of them. You tried to wriggle out of my hands but I held you tight. You lost your balance and flung your arms around my neck.'

'Did I strangle you?'

'You had no time. Some comrades near me grasped you and we set you down on our shoulders. You cried, "Go easy, boys! What are you up to?" but we carried you shoulder high, all the same. People stepped aside to make way for us. There was a crowd on the platform. We lowered you to the floor, in the middle of the crowd. We loved your spirit, your eyes, the flames in your eyes. Now they're extinguished. Death extinguished them. But I'll light a fire in your eyes. I'll find your spirit and enslave it for our common purpose. We'll talk later. We're in a hurry now.'

Lenin removed his pyjamas and set out in search of his trousers and fur coat. He knew there was a built-in panel on a wall, near a corner; this panel could be activated by an invisible button. His clothes, together with some foreign currency, were hidden in a safe installed behind the panel. 'Shall we need foreign currency? French francs, Swiss francs? Are we going abroad?'

'Take foreign currency with you. We won't go abroad.' Kostya left the room and returned with a barrow that reeked of rotten tomatoes and cowpat. He began to load the barrow with the instruments and concoctions he had distributed around the floor at the outset of his visit. In the meantime Lenin was applying his ear to various parts of the walls; a shiver ran down his spine, turning somewhere near his coccyx into a twinge of shame. He covered himself with a fig leaf, slipped his pyjamas on and wrapped himself up in the blanket.

'It's wintertime, isn't it?' he asked.

'Nobody will see our footprints because of the snowstorm. There'll be a snowstorm this afternoon.'

'I can't find my clothes.'

'Take another blanket, two blankets. And I've a spare sheepskin coat outside. A guard keeps an eye on it.'

'A guard? Are the guards in the know?'

'I gave fifty dollars to one of them. And we put the other out of action for at least twenty hours. We won't need more.'

Lenin picked up another blanket which lay in a heap beside a chamber pot and said, 'Let's go.'

'Did you take foreign currency?'

For a while Lenin stared at the wall; his eyes sent out beams of light that probed the inner space of the walls and found nothing of interest. 'They must have bought a few computers,' he said.

'We'll have to pop into the hotel Rossia on our way to the cemetery. There's a bank there, for foreigners. Wind this kerchief round your head. Somebody may recognise you. I'll try to pass you off as a peasant woman.'

Lenin took the kerchief; the blanket slipped from his hand and landed in a heap near the chamber pot. Kostya was pushing the barrow out of the room.

'Wait a minute!' shouted Lenin.

'We're in a hurry,' said Kostya. He was already in the corridor.

Lenin bent forward, put the blanket and the kerchief on his back and trotted out. He could hardly see the route he had ventured upon: he walked with a hunched back, looking only at the floorboards beneath his feet; and he did not straighten up for fear of losing his balance. He trotted on until he bumped into a military uniform that reeked of rotten eggs and was as hard as the ice on the Neva. Lenin lost his balance and collapsed on the guard's boots.

'Watch out,' said the guard. 'I'm not dead.'

'We're in a hurry,' said Kostya.

'He's barefoot,' said the guard.

'Where are your boots?' asked Kostya. 'Lend him your boots.'

Lenin glanced imploringly at the mausoleum.

'Twenty dollars,' said the guard. 'I wear only imported boots.'

'I'll give you the money after the mission.'

'You pay now. Or else no boots.'

'Wait for me here,' said Kostya to Lenin. 'You can lie down in the barrow, if you want. Take out a few things. Don't stand barefoot in the snow. I'm responsible for your health.'

'I'll look after him,' said the guard. 'Be quick about it!'

Kostya walked away, sinking in the snow. The guard looked at Lenin, who was still writhing around at his feet, and helped him up. 'You'd better sit down again,' he said as soon as Lenin regained his erect posture. 'You might wear yourself out.'

'I'm cold,' answered Lenin, rubbing his hips and dancing *la carmagnole*.

'I'll tell my children and my grandchildren, "I touched Lenin." They'll probably ask me why I didn't finish you off. Should I finish you off?' The guard aimed his rifle at Lenin's forehead. 'They'll pay me more than twenty dollars. I might get two thousand pounds for your body. An English pound's worth more than an American dollar.'

'Don't kill me,' said Lenin, glancing around.

'I'll also sell your blankets and kerchief. Capitalists collect souvenirs. And I'll get really good price for your pyjamas.' The guard unbuttoned Lenin's pyjamas, gazed at his skin for a while and buttoned the pyjamas up again. 'Have you got a pair of trousers and a shirt? Not a T-shirt, a regular one?'

'I'll give you three thousand pounds,' said Lenin. 'Don't kill me.'

'Why is your mouth open? Hungry, thirsty? Too bad if you are, because I've nothing here. We're not allowed to eat and drink on duty. We're not allowed to smoke, on duty. Dying for a smoke?'

'I'm not thirsty,' said Lenin.

'I saw you once on TV, a long time ago. You were making a speech. "I don't know whether words can be found to express the magnetism, the power with which Lenin gripped all his hearers. What he said thrilled and inspired us. Fear fled and weariness melted away. It wasn't Lenin alone who talked—all the 40,000 workers, sitting, standing or clinging to whatever they could climb onto, expressed their innermost thoughts and hopes through his mouth. Everything that the workers harboured in their minds and hearts found expression in

Lenin's one voice. Everything that each of us thought, felt but was unable to express fully and distinctly to his comrades, suddenly took shape and was given utterance to. It seemed as if this whole gigantic mass wanted to shout at the top of its voice." Not bad, eh? Our schoolteacher got us to learn it by heart. Still remember it. Too bad it was a silent movie.'

The guard propped his rifle against the mausoleum, pinched Lenin's lips with both hands, parted them, peered deep into Lenin's mouth, closed it and wiped his fingers on the uniform. 'Not so big, is it? Your mouth.'

'My feet are cold. The other guard. Where's the other guard?'

'Are you talking or what? Lost your voice? You drink too much, that's your problem.'

Lenin glanced around him again, walked a little way off, returned and began to fumble in the barrow.

'What are you looking for? Your boots?'

'The boots of the guard. He must have a pair of boots. Where did you hide his body?'

'Speak louder!'

'Can you hear me at all?'

'I can't hear you.'

Lenin pointed to the boots of the guard and lifted two fingers; the guard shook his head. Lenin prodded the guard in the stomach, lifted two fingers and showed them to the guard at close range.

'How many boots do you need? One or two? Well, I'll give you two when your pal shows up with the money.'

Lenin put his hands on the guard's rifle.

'You can't have my rifle!' shouted the guard, his eyes bulging and rolling. He shoved Lenin away and fired into the air. Lenin staggered off and almost toppled over into a bush, but regained his balance and posted himself by the door—just opposite the guard.

'Do you want to stand in for the second guard? Do you think somebody's going to steal you?' Lenin shook his head. 'What *do* you want?'

Lenin raised his heel and wrote with his toe on the virginal snow, 'Where's the second guard? I want his boots.'

'No,' said the guard. 'You'll get *my* boots when your pal brings the money. I need those twenty dollars.'

Lenin lowered his head and walked through the doorway and along the corridor—towards his room. He thought he was heading for his room, but after a while the smell of rotten eggs returned.

'You won't find your way without my help. I'll take you to your room for ten dollars.'

Lenin emptied the barrow and lay down in it. He was all huddled up and the snow covered him in patches. 'On your feet!' shouted the guard. Lenin lay motionless in the barrow as if he was dead. The guard approached the barrow and patted him on the nose; he sneezed and woke up.

'I'm dead,' he said. 'Why should I move? I don't have to.' He closed his eyes and the guard patted him on the cheek, on the chin.

For the sake of the Revolution? What will humanity do without me? People will fall in love and torture their neighbour and their next of kin. People will hate each other and kill each other and I'll be lying dead in the barrow. Why bother? Can I change anything? And if I can, why bother? I've changed everything already. And now I'm sleeping in the barrow. I've been buried in the barrow and the snow covers me from head to foot as if nothing had happened. What happened? The Russian Revolution? I told them, 'Either full steam ahead or perish once and for all. This is how history has put the question.' And we answered it. So history put forward another question, but I was no longer alive to answer that one. And if I answer it now, what will happen around me? Nothing at all. 'Full steam ahead,' I said. And we perished. Or I perished, I died. What was all the fuss about? And history continues to put questions.

Lenin was tipped off the barrow and the guard sat down on the edge of it. Slowly he began to remove his boots.

'How are you?' asked Kostya, hauling Lenin's body up. 'You'll have a nice pair of boots. I robbed a foreigner in the Russia. Foreigners should be robbed—they've got too much money. And we've got no money. Share and share alike.'

'Why doesn't he understand me?' asked Lenin, nodding towards the guard.

'What did you talk to him about? Philosophy?'

'He can't *hear* me.'

'I can.'

'Something is wrong with his ears,' said Lenin, eyeing the guard from head to foot as if auditory organs were located all along the human body.

'Ah!' shouted Kostya.

'What's the matter?' asked the guard.

'He can hear *me*,' said Kostya.

'Why does he pretend not to hear *me*?'

'Does he pretend?'

'What's the matter?' asked the guard.

'He's an imperialist spy,' said Lenin. 'He pretends he can't hear what I say to make me talk freely. He wants me to be off my guard.'

'Who? The guard?'

'Are you talking about the second guard?' asked the guard.

Lenin wrapped himself up in the blankets, leaving the kerchief on the snow. The guard shielded the kerchief from Kostya with his back, picked it up, crumpled it into a ball and hid the ball inside his uniform.

'Are you ready?' asked Kostya.

'Is it far from here?'

'The cemetery? Quite far. I had to choose a solitary spot. Either a cemetery haunted by evil spirits or a dreaded ruin in the country. There are many ruins in the country but they aren't dreaded. They're inhabited so they're not solitary. I found a cemetery haunted by evil spirits.'

'I can't go too far, on foot.'

'We'll fly then.' Kostya roared with laughter.

'Why are you going to the cemetery?' asked the guard, handing the boots to Kostya. 'Do you want to bury him? Don't do it. He's worth a lot of money.'

'I won't bury him, I promise.'

Lenin sat down on the snow and pushed his feet effortlessly into the boots. 'They're too big,' he said.

'We'll stuff something into them,' said Kostya. 'Cotton wool or somebody's socks—'

'Let's go,' said Lenin.

They crossed Red Square and went down to Tverskaya Street.

'I think that man over there recognised you. Where's your kerchief? Did you lose it? Did you sell it to the guard? You didn't have to. I robbed a Japanese. Walk behind my back so nobody can see you.'

Lenin followed Kostya's advice and they trudged on for another half an hour. A middle-aged woman kicked Lenin in the calves. As he turned around to box her ears she ran away, shrieking with horror.

They still respect me. I'm alive, am I not? I should have deported her to set an example. It's a pity only cars have number plates. I could have written down her number in my notebook.

'Look what they do nowadays,' said Kostya, pointing to the inscription that flashed over a huge Stalinist hotel. The inscription read: 'There's nothing dearer than profit except honesty.'

'The New Economic Policy?' asked Lenin.

'Yeltsin sold Russia to the Americans,' said Kostya. 'He forgot our ideals. But he has no rivals. You're the only man who can stand up to him. He sits in the Kremlin now.'

'Are we going to the Kremlin? My feet are blistered.'

'To the cemetery. We need your spirit. You won't go to the Kremlin with someone else's boots on. We'll dress you in your own clothes and we'll carry you again, shoulder-high, and we'll mount the rostrum—'

'Why not carry me now?'

Kostya lowered the barrow onto the snow. 'You haven't put on weight in the Hereafter, have you? Take off your boots! They're heavy.'

Lenin pulled the boots off. Kostya flung them into the barrow and squatted down.

'Climb up on my shoulders. Are you comfortable up there?'

'I suffer from vertigo like my brother Alexander. Don't walk too fast, please.'

'We're in a hurry,' said Kostya. 'You can hold on to my head.'

'Please don't bounce up and down.'

'Okay. It's my son. He's too tired to walk.'

'Move along!' cried a policeman. 'There's nothing to stare at! The man's just carrying his son on his shoulders because his son can't walk. What's the matter with your son anyway? Is he paralysed? Are his feet frostbitten?'

'My son always runs about barefoot. Good for his health.'

'Even in wintertime?'

Like a boat carried by a slow current, they continued to drift towards the cemetery. Crowds assembled and broke up again as policemen brandished their guns and shouted at the top of their voices. Snow was falling on Moscow with serene regularity.

'I was very young,' said Kostya. 'I went to Sestroretsk to meet my brother-in-law. He told me you were coming. You astonished me and I believed in you. I believed in what you said. A few years later my father was killed and my family deported, but you said the Bolsheviks were right. And I knew you were right. I believed in you. Faith doesn't need arguments, my father used to say. He believed in God. He said you were the Antichrist and he saw the devil's seal on the collective farm gates. My mother said you'd invented a machine to burn up the old people because they ate and didn't work.'

'My enemies said I was eating people, old and young.'

'Were you?'

Lenin gave no answer to this question. He was seasick, as it were, and had no desire to speak about food.

Kostya was still dwelling on his past. He recounted how his grandmother had set fire to their own house to deprive the Bolsheviks of their spoils. 'The requisition team broke into our neighbours' hut. They tore up cushions, ripped up floorboards, drilled a few holes in the walls and in the ceiling. They didn't find the grain.'

'Let's talk about the future! Do you think they'll hear me, in the Kremlin?'

'Say something loudly,' suggested Kostya.

'What should I say?' Lenin darted a look in the supposed direction of the Kremlin and almost slid off Kostya's shoulders.

'Anything. When that woman gets close enough.'

Lenin let out a long scream as the woman in a kerchief walked past; she did not turn a hair. Lenin screamed a second time.

'I can hear you,' said Kostya.

'Freedom of speech!' shouted Lenin. 'I'm entitled to communicate with human beings whenever I feel like it and without any restriction. And I'm entitled to say what I think.'

'The woman must be hard of hearing,' said Kostya.

'And what about the guards? I'm cut off from the living.'

'You're dead,' said Kostya.

'You're dead too, aren't you?'

'I am,' said Kostya.

'I can speak to the dead but the living are beyond my reach.'

'We're not far away,' said Kostya soothingly. 'Another kilometre—'

The cemetery was calm. Impervious to the high ideals of brotherhood, the dead did not stir in their tombs at the approach of Kostya and Lenin.

'They're peaceful today,' said Kostya. 'And there are no evil spirits around except us.' He laughed heartily as he shook Lenin off his shoulders. 'Walk around for a while. I'll make preparations. Don't forget the boots.'

Lenin fished the boots out of the barrow but, instead of pulling them on, he laid them down in the proximity of a tombstone.

'What are you doing?' asked Kostya anxiously. Lenin sat down on the boots and leaned against the tombstone. 'I want you to meditate on your life, on your past.'

I spent my childhood and youth on the Volga, in typical peasant areas. I saw and deplored the poverty and ignorance, the inhuman slavery and brutal exploitation that prevailed

in the rural districts. Tsarism crushed the revolutionary movement of the seventies. After the assassination of Alexander II by the members of the Narodnaya Volya Party in 1881, the autocratic government hastened to nullify even the half-hearted reforms of the sixties.

'Enough of your childhood and youth. Concentrate now on your mature years,' said Kostya.

Arrests, meetings, bickering, the Second International, the first exile. The news from Russia told of the growth of the working-class movement, of successful efforts in building the Marxist party. The Russo-Japanese war. In January 1905, Revolution flared up in Russia. The Third Congress of the Party was opened in London in April 1905. The Congress adopted my stratagem and, sitting in the presidium, I applauded the result of the vote that I had manipulated with the aid of a transformer placed under my seat. The Revolution failed through no fault of mine: I was in Geneva and Stockholm. At the time I had no remote control in my possession. The second period of exile was entirely different. The Revolution had sustained defeat; reaction was rampant and the revolutionaries were being hunted down; the police broke up the Party organisations; the masses showed signs of weariness, and among the fellow-travellers of the Revolution, especially among the intellectuals, there were numerous cases of treachery and desertion. But the period of reaction didn't break my spirit. On the contrary, my struggle against the enemies of the Party became more relentless and implacable.

In the meantime, armed with the sword, Kostya traced a circle in the snow lying between the tombs; he drew a triangle in the circle, sprinkled some blood on it from a watering can and put a chafing-dish at one of its angles. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Lenin looked up. Kostya was waving a white square under his nose. 'What is it? A handkerchief? Are you leaving? How am I supposed to get back to the mausoleum without you? You'll be court-martialled and executed.'

'I've got some human skin here. A traitor. He betrayed our cause, a former friend of mine. Our enemies *are* bad, but when a friend deceives you, disappoints you...I was furious.'

Kostya cut the square into strips and placed them within the circle. 'Do you have a lighter?' he asked.

'I don't smoke,' said Lenin.

'Do you cook?'

'No.'

'So you don't have matches either. How shall we light the candles and the chafing-dish?' Kostya shook his head and spat at the circle. 'Meditate on the Russian Revolution.'

I saw with my prophetic eye that an uprising was inevitable, that it would win. My prophetic brain knew that an uprising in Russia would pave the way for the termination of the imperialist war, that it would rouse the worn-out masses of the West, that it would usher in a Republic of Soviets, that the Republic of Soviets would serve as a bulwark for the revolutionary movement all over the world. My revolutionary foresight was subsequently confirmed with unparalleled fidelity.

'By Adonai Eloim, Adonai Sabaoth, by the Mystery of the Salamander, the Assembly of Sylphs, the Grotto of Gnomes: Come, Come, Come!'

His legs wide-apart, Kostya stood and spoke in front of Lenin. His head was adorned with the horns of the goat; the blood-tinged bat was hanging from his neck.

'*Dies Mies Jeschet Boenedoesef Douvema Enitemaus*,' shouted Kostya driving the magical fork into the black cat's head. 'If you don't come—' He swore and spat again at the circle. 'I command thee by the Key of Solomon and the great name—' The wind rose with a sigh and the voices of the spirits struck up a conversation.

'Do you recognise your voice?' asked Kostya as he ceased swearing and spitting.

'No. Do *you*?'

'I recognise *my* voice. I'm unusually talkative today.'

'Where's *my* voice? Silence!'

There ensued a silence punctuated by someone's sobs.

'Volodya, do you hear me?'

'Who are you?'

'I am thy father's spirit, doom'd for a certain term to walk the night and for the day confin'd to fast in fires—Well, not quite. I'm your own spirit. We're rather fond of the theatre in this realm of the Hereafter and perform comedies and tragedies for ourselves and other ghosts. I often play the ghost of Hamlet's father—both in Shakespeare's masterpiece and in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

'Why don't you fast in fires then? It's daytime.'

'Because you don't smoke. Because you've got no matches. Because I'm not the ghost of Hamlet's father.'

'Who *are* you?'

'I'm Vladimir Ilich Lenin.'

'How many Lenins are there in the world?' shouted Lenin.

'I don't know. They've uttered and printed our name so often for the last eighty years that there might be at least a hundred Lenins in Russia and perhaps fifty Lenins in the rest of Europe. There are two or three Lenins in America—'

'Have you come across other Lenins during your wanderings, your business trips?'

'I don't travel all that much. I'm confined to a rather small area and seldom go abroad. It's hard to get a visa here. But I did run into Lenin once. He was very rude to me. Uncouth individual! "It makes me sick to hear you," he said. "It makes me still more sick to think of collaborating with you," he added. And he went away, banging the doors and the windows.'

'Don't be intolerant of yourself! Such is our common destiny. Campaign after campaign against political stupidity, banality, opportunism and so forth. This has been going on since 1893. Even nowadays Philistines hate us! I'm told that in the Kremlin—'

'He accused me of being too playful and warm-hearted. He suggested I should perform the parts of Richard III and Macbeth instead of fooling about with drunkards and whores. He saw me in *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. By the way, I'm the Old Shepherd tonight. *Winter's Tale*. Do you want a ticket?'

'Could you show me your passport? Have you got passports in *your* region of the Hereafter?'

'I knew you would suspect me of imposture. But I *am* Lenin in spite of my frolics and whims. Lenin is a many-sided ghost. You should respect your fellow creatures and their personalities—I mean the other Lenins. What right have you to stand in judgement of my conduct?'

'I live in the mausoleum. Where do *you* live?'

'In this area, on the outskirts of Moscow. Are you so snobbish as to consider one's address a key point in a philosophical argument? Do you think you're a more authentic representative of Lenins because you live in the mausoleum?'

'My body is officially certified as—'

'It's your body that people from different countries pay homage to—I don't deny it. But your body is in a state of decomposition. Look!' The spirit gave Lenin a nudge in the shoulder, breaking it into six unequal parts. 'Now your shoulder lies scattered on the ground, near a general's tomb. A victim of Stalin's purges, I imagine. Do you need another proof of your mortality?'

'With the aid of sophistry and pseudo-scientific verbosity, you try to obscure, subdue and pacify my excited—'

Kostya picked up the fragments of the shoulder, glued them together with his saliva and fixed them on Lenin's trunk.

'Let's not quarrel in the presence of this yokel,' said the spirit. 'After all, our meeting is clandestine. I see your point and understand your excitement. I'm excited too. It's not for nothing that I am the mastermind of the Russian Revolution. I am the father of the Russian Revolution. And the ghost of Hamlet's father.'

With arms akimbo, Kostya recited dramatically:

*It beckons you to go away with it,
As if it some impartment did desire
To you alone.*

'Horatio, or I do forget myself!' exclaimed the spirit.

'I hope they'll allow me to play Horatio in a few months,' said Kostya. 'And Hamlet in a century. I work very hard, I do. I practise six hours a day before my mirror.'

'I'll put in a good word for you,' said both Lenins in unison. They parted from Kostya, skimming along the snow and the tombs.

'Did they impart to you the secret of your death?' asked Lenin's spirit.

'No.'

'Did they at least show you the video of your funeral? They didn't? It's touching and heartrending. I always cry when I play the video for myself. And I'm not ashamed of my tears. In Homer's epics heroes weep very often, which denotes no weakness on their part, mind you—only a generous temperament and inherent humanity. Eustathius points out that Sophocles doesn't let Ajax weep because he's depicted rather as a madman than a hero.'

'What did the funeral oration sound like?'

The spirit froze in his tracks and recited in mournful tones, 'Death has taken from us the man who founded our steel-hard Party, who built it up year in and year out, led it amidst the blows of Tsarism, trained and steeled it in the fierce struggle against the traitors to the working class and against the half-hearted, the waverers and deserters. Death has taken from us the man under whose militant leadership our Party, enveloped in the smoke of battle, resolutely hoisted the Red Flag of the Revolution—' The spirit interrupted his oration and broke into tears.

'I should ask Gorky to write a play called *Lenin's Funeral*. I like the bit you recited.'

'Why don't you cry then? Don't you pity yourself? Death has taken from us the banner of the oppressed Orient—'

'I pity those who stayed behind. Death took from *them*—'

'No pity for yourself? You were *murdered*! I was murdered!'

'By whom?'

'Have a guess!'

'Anybody could kill me.'

'The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown.'

'This man? What's his name? Yeltsin?'

'Stalin!'

'But Stalin is dead, isn't he? He paid me a visit in the mausoleum. I put him up for a night. We had several talks. He heard me, so he was dead.'

'He was. He still is. As our boss jokes: "Raising of the dead is not in my line of business." What did you talk about? Did he confess his homicide?'

'No.'

'If you happen to meet him again—'

'How did he murder me?'

'He strangled us in bed after raping our dear wife Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya. Don't you remember it? Your body seems to manacle your mind. You're shackled in your reasoning by your bones.'

'Stalin. Now I remember...'

'He was a dreadful hypocrite. Do you know what he said in December 1937? Would you be so kind as to glue this moustache on? Do I look like Stalin? I played his part several times in our local theatre. He said: "You should be free from anything resembling panic, as Lenin was. You should be as wise and as careful in solving complex problems, when all the favourable and unfavourable factors must be analysed, as Lenin was. You should be as truthful and honest as Lenin was." Did you admire my Georgian accent?' The spirit removed the moustache, the military uniform and became the ghost of Hamlet's father.

'I'm fed up with your theatricals,' said Lenin.

'I'm not quite myself,' said the ghost wistfully. 'Don't forget that I've got a performance tonight. Did you ever suffer from stage fright during your speeches? Did it help or hinder you?'

'I'll kill Stalin!' said Lenin.

'Too late. He died of arsenic poisoning. Beria killed him. And Khrushchev wore the crown.'

'And what about a new revolution? We were supposed to discuss the political and economical situation in Russia.'

'Another revolution? Why not? I can play the part of Lenin, if you wish. Any part, actually: Stalin, Beria, Brezhnev, Hitler, Andropov. In former times I always played the villains. Now I'm being re-educated.'

'Excuse my intrusion, but I think you might encourage him. I carried his body all the way from Red Square—' Kostya scraped and bowed; a cloud of vodka-permeated smoke surrounded his face.

'Encourage him? How? This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose!'

'He's Lenin,' said Kostya, piercing the cloud.

'That's right. I'm Lenin too. Are *you* Lenin, by any chance?'

'I'm Kostya.'

'Never mind. You'll become Lenin some day. At least you'll be as fearless in battle and as relentless towards the enemy as Lenin was.'

'I'd like to become Hamlet,' said Kostya.

'Lenin's name, his cause and doctrine, will live for ages, resounding all over the universe,' said Lenin.

'It's just because of the monologue "To be or not to be". My little wife adores it,' said Kostya.

'Oh, Lenin's part also has a few magnificent monologues,' said the spirit. For instance: "We have a right to be proud of the fact and consider ourselves fortunate that we were the first, in one corner of the earth, to overthrow the wild beast of capitalism, which drenched the world with blood, reduced mankind to hunger and savagery, and which will soon and inevitably perish, no matter how ferocious it may be in its death agony." A beautiful modern version of "To be or not to be".'

'I'm cold,' said Lenin.

'Try and get rid of your body!' said the spirit. 'Take this load off your mind! No more toothache, no more piles, no more paralysis.'

'I'm exhausted,' said Lenin, lying down on the tombstone of an admiral. 'I'll sleep for a while.'

'Shall we bury him? It is time for my colleague to shuffle off his mortal coil.'

'The proletariat needs him in the mausoleum,' said Kostya.

'Why?'

'To touch him.'

The spirit looked at his wristwatch. 'I'm afraid I must be off. The performance is scheduled for 7.30 p.m. Wish me good luck, Kostya dearest. I'm playing the part of the Old Shepherd for the first time.'

'Good luck!'

'Have you got a tranquilliser?'

'I finished the box this afternoon.'

'Don't lose him on the way!'

'I won't!' Kostya heaved Lenin up and laid him on his back.

'Watch out! There are many robbers on the streets. Why didn't you call a taxi?'

'It's dangerous,' said Kostya, sinking into a snowdrift. 'He's heavy, you know.'

'I know,' said the spirit. 'Adieu, adieu—'

'I'll remember you,' said Kostya.

6

Sir,

I have forgotten your name, but I know you exist. The very fact of your existence proves that you are no God, for I do not believe in God and strongly advise my partisans to destroy churches and clergymen. The latter are responsible for creating a large quantity of opium which they feed to workmen and peasants so as to deaden their awareness of social injustice and capitalist greediness. The clergy affirm that the poor will be rewarded in the Hereafter whose standards of living no one can scientifically assess for want of reliable data and trustworthy reports. Moreover, I still do not believe in the existence of the Hereafter cluttered with palms and frying pans. I believe in the existence of the mausoleum.

I speak all day long and communicate with those who, in need of advice and encouragement, descend into my tomb and bend over my pillow. I would have continued to participate in the political life of my country, but for the ban you had put on my intercourse with the living. Indeed they cannot hear what I impart to them and even threaten to kill me, mistaking my body for that of a werewolf.

So I am denied freedom of speech as if I had been imprisoned on the orders of some Latin American dictator. I understand why you are afraid of me; I might be afraid of myself, if I were my own adversary. I would run away from myself if my accusations were levelled at my own body and mind. I would have been strangled in my swaddling clothes had I pitched myself against myself.

Stimulating in their simplicity and beauty, the speeches I delivered in stadiums and on television used to lead my countrymen to the final victory of the proletariat over everybody down to God and other occupants of the celestial spheres. From rostrums and armoured cars I talked in the language of barricades, cannons and concentration camps—the only human language the living are sensitive to. I always shunned the haziness of transcendental theories suitable for the Hereafter and not for the material world where spades are spades and bullets are bullets. After hearing my slogans, proletarians neither indulged in daydreaming nor staggered around like sleepwalkers; they stormed and looted palaces, killed whoever they could lay their hands upon and even those who were out of their reach, having escaped abroad, as far as America; they would strike up the Internationale as a Red Flag was hoisted onto the highest spire around which there stood dozens of fans and floodlights.

Now everything has changed. I am deprived of what every living and dead soul is entitled to: freedom of speech. The dead can hear my monologues but they are more

interested in Shakespeare, his dreams and dramas, than in the real world where Mr Yeltsin and his cronies squander my heritage and pull down my statues. Lying in the dust, I now point to heaven instead of showing the way to the radiant communist future.

I am not even allowed to appear in old films and documentaries, which would have offered me an opportunity to repeat the words I uttered in my lifetime: my words are eternal and apply to any epoch, past or present. (For the attention of cosmonauts: my words are pertinent and relevant throughout the solar system.)

I demand that you restore the vital link between myself and the working class destined to bring about considerable modifications in the Soviet Union, in Europe, in Africa, in Australia, in New Zealand. The words I utter in the heat of the moment are to be heard not only underground but also on Jupiter and in the United States of America. CNN must be coerced into devoting two hours a day to my articles and books.

In 1986 I heard on the radio about the European Security Conference which, according to the speaker, had taken place in Helsinki back in 1975. The speaker chose to elaborate on the aftermath of the Conference rather than on its goals and ideological set-up. I assumed, however, that the event was a Communist Party Congress in disguise: by now our secret agents must have infiltrated every social organisation, turning their meetings into our meetings. Apparently, in the wake of the resolutions adopted by the Conference, the human rights movement created special monitoring groups inside the Soviet Union to report on violations of those resolutions. Freedom of speech was among the claims they had put in. I demand that one of the Watch Groups be granted permission to visit the mausoleum in the daytime to examine my plight, paying particular attention to the physical impossibility of getting my ideas over to the living workmen.

'Have you finished your epistle?' asked Andrey Petrovich as he settled himself beside Lenin at the writing desk. 'Your style has greatly improved over the last three weeks.' Andrey Petrovich glanced at the sheet of paper that was pinned near a penholder and lazily shifted his gaze to the wastepaper basket from which protruded a half-torn notebook. 'You remind me of Gustave Flaubert. His ambition was to achieve a style as rhythmical as verse and as precise as the language of science.'

'It's outrageous,' said Lenin.

'I saw your candle burn far into the night. You're still a hard-working individual but, instead of bombarding us with your ideas in their crudest form, as you used to do during your lifetime, you now polish your literary style, replacing quantity by quality. You spent three

weeks on this epistle of yours. Why don't you revamp all your books? Influenced by the elegance of your new style, their content might—'

'It's outrageous,' repeated Lenin.

'Speaking about the Watch Groups you mentioned in your epistle—'

'I want them to come here with a tape recorder.'

'The last of the Helsinki Watch Groups disbanded in 1982. Nearly all its members were arrested, exiled or locked up in mental hospitals. Didn't you hear it on the radio? As far as I remember, I gave this information at the end of the programme. You must have fallen asleep. At the time you were a little bit groggy and couldn't follow my arguments through. You sneezed, snorted and borrowed my handkerchief every two minutes. Stalin had put you in a deep-freezer for almost three decades. It's a wonder you didn't die once again.'

'A deep-freezer?'

'He announced to his subordinates that your body would be better preserved in low temperature, and Trotsky laid an enormous cube of ice on your breast as a mark of his approval. Actually Stalin feared you might intervene in the affairs of the state. He hoped to slow down your brain activity. For three decades your thoughts looked like icicles. Then Stalin was poisoned by Beria and, after killing Beria and removing Malenkov from his post, Khrushchev came to power. In February 1956, during the Twentieth Party Congress, he delivered his memorable secret speech about the excesses of Stalin's one-man rule and even touched upon your hibernation. "The mausoleum is no iceberg," he shouted, brandishing a thermometer. The period of "Thaw" set in.'

'I'm still cold.'

'You walk around barefoot. Recently you caught pneumonia, in spite of Yeltsin.'

'In spite of Yeltsin?'

'Compared with the period of "Thaw", it's summertime in Russia now.'

'There has been a heavy fall of snow,' said Lenin grimly. He cast a glance at the pair of boots that slightly oscillated near his bed as if warming up before an exhausting walk. 'Kostya is nice,' he told himself.

'In Brezhnev's time they lowered the temperature again—just a few degrees. You were put in an ordinary refrigerator.'

'I had a nightmare once. I found myself inside a gigantic refrigerator. The door was locked and, for all my knocking and screaming, I couldn't get out. But there was a lot of food on the shelves: yoghurt, blood pudding—'

'It was a sweet dream after all. Yoghurt, blood pudding. Do you hear the footsteps? I was expecting this visitor. You'll be delighted to meet him and have a talk about—'

Andrey Petrovich let out a muffled exclamation as another Lenin stalked into the room and came up to him. 'What are you driving at?' the second Lenin vociferated, beating Andrey Petrovich on the head with a hammer. 'Do you mean that we've got neither sausages nor refrigerators? Is *that* what you mean? Are you implying that our shops are empty and dirty? They *are*! Maybe our apparatus is pretty bad, but the first steam engine invented was bad too. They aren't even sure whether it worked or not. I know it did *not*. The locomotive remained at the station. For years! The locomotive is still there. Motionless! But the smoke is curling up. Do you hear? The smoke is curling up! The point is that now we've got steam engines and the smoke. And there's no smoke without fire! And there are no locomotives without trains! And trains carry *something*! *Somewhere*! Either consumer goods or consumers! However bad our state apparatus is—still it's been created. A most important historical invention has been made. The steam engine of history! A proletarian type of state has been created. Therefore let the whole of Europe, let thousands of bourgeois newspapers, circulate news about the horrors and poverty and sufferings that the workers endure in our country. Still, throughout the solar system, all workers are attracted to the Soviet state.'

'My assistant must have rigged up this puppet to cure you from your identity crisis by demonstrating how repulsive Lenin was. In his lifetime Felix underwent two alcohol-abuse treatments and now borrows his methods—They throw up, you see. Stop hammering me on the skull. I've got a splitting headache. Do you realise how repulsive you are?' Once more Andrey Petrovich turned to the 'real' Lenin.

'I thought it was Kostya in disguise,' said Lenin.

'Who? As a matter of fact I invited Thomas More to keep us company this afternoon. I thought you might be interested to exchange your views with another utopian. Nice man, isn't he? Not all political idealists were as nasty as you and Mao Tse-tung. In a sense, Jesus Christ was also a utopian.'

Andrey Petrovich made the sign of the Cross, whereupon two women entered the room and began to dance around the real Lenin, ruffling his hair and pinching his nose. Lenin snatched a knife from under the inkstand and tried to stab one of the women in the shoulder. The second Lenin extracted a similar knife from his boot and tried to stab the other woman in the shoulder.

'There's been a great improvement in your behaviour since my last visit to your terrestrial abode. You used to stab your female opponents in their breasts.'

'Why do you hate women?' asked Beria, extracting three bullets from his lungs.

'My husband vowed to manage everything on his own, even down to procreation,' said Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya. 'He was determined to take care of the future *completely*, providing it with form and content.'

'How?' asked Lenin. 'How did he intend to proceed?'

'All he had to do was sacrifice an infinitesimal part of his body—in the manner of amoebas—for the sake of his offspring and successor. He could count on his own genes to create an infallible, unflinching communist able to endure Russian curses and natural catastrophes. After long reflection he decided to sacrifice two infinitesimal parts of his feet to beget twin boys who, by dividing themselves into a myriad infinitesimal parts, would replenish the earth, leaving no room for imperialists, kulaks and other enemies of the future. Enemies of the future shouldn't live in the future. Neither should they live in the present.'

'Do you know these women?' asked Beria suavely. 'Are they his former supporters? Have you ever caught them at it? I don't recall what Rosa Luxemburg looked like in her youth. Perhaps Clara Zetkin—'

'They're lesbians,' said Stalin. 'Fourier implored me to provide him with an outlet for his erotic passion. I wonder why they made advances to our guinea pig. Has he turned into a woman in his sarcophagus? Is it another Doctors' Plot or just the concupiscence of a heterosexual tomb-keeper who needed a doll to kill time?'

'You're forbidden to come here,' said Andrey Petrovich angrily.

'I'm on holiday.'

'Have you got a visa? And he is not *your* guinea pig, you rascal. You should treat your superiors with respect. But for him, you would never have become a historic figure of some stature.'

'Hitler is also unthinkable without Lenin,' said Felix. 'He made an issue of traditional and nationalistic values in the country where the threat of a communist takeover was no joking matter. He promised his electorate to rid the world of communism. The English and the French turned a blind eye to his fiddling with the map of Eastern Europe only because they hoped he would combat and vanquish Stalin—their staunch and foremost enemy.'

'Churchill and de Gaulle begrudged me the popularity I enjoyed among intellectuals,' agreed Stalin. He continued to talk and presently touched upon the Yalta Conference, but no one could hear him any longer in the hubbub created by the several men whose wild gesticulations put an end to the contest between the Lenins and the lesbians.

'Silence,' shouted Felix, firing two shots at the empty sarcophagus. 'The floor belongs to Monsieur Fourier.'

Fourier climbed up onto the piano and proclaimed in a rasping voice, 'To confound the tyranny of men there should exist for a century a third sex—hermaphrodites. This new sex would prove with a beating of rods that men as well as women are made for its pleasure. As a result, men would protest against the tyranny of the hermaphroditic sex and admit that force shouldn't be the sole rule of right.'

'So it's you who turned Lenin into a woman,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'He is a hermaphrodite!' corrected Fourier. 'He combines the active and passive elements inherent in human species: male and female, the *yang* and the *yin*.'

'A week ago I offered Fourier a book on Chinese philosophy,' said Felix with a smile.

'We often forget how important it is to alternate strength and weakness, major and minor tonalities, exterior and interior, form and content, hope and resignation, body and soul, day and night, flogging and caresses, juicy kisses and timid glances. The *yang* returns cyclically to its beginning, the *yin* attains its maximum and gives place to the *yang*. Most people are either male or female—never both! But he who can merge the Mona Lisa with the muscular Hercules—'

'Monsieur Fourier disapproves of our modern civilisation,' said Felix.

'It's natural,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'Utopians usually disapprove of the world they happen to live in.'

'Monsieur Fourier thinks that modern technology—the *yang* in Chinese terms—dominates and devastates nature. By virtue of its passiveness, nature represents the female part in the Cosmic Androgyny.'

'Kabbalists call this Androgyny "Adam Kadmon",' said Marx.

'And what about hurricanes and earthquakes?' asked Andrey Petrovich. 'Are they also passive, introverted?'

'All blessings radiate from Adam's skull whenever the white and red seeds unite into one single ray,' said Marx. 'The white seed is male in its essence, the red seed female.'

'In my youth I dabbled in alchemy and came to appreciate the mixture of Sulphur—the male—with the female during Putrefaction,' said Giordano Bruno, dislodging Fourier from the piano with a goldbrick. 'This mixture is the Androgyny, the Head of the Crow and the converted Elements. Thus two natures become reconciled, form an embryo in the matrix of the Vessel and give birth to a very powerful, incorruptible, invincible King.'

'King or Queen?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'Virgin Mother,' answered Auguste Comte, hysterically kissing the puppet's foot.

'He confuses Lenin with Clothilde de Vaux,' explained Felix, hammering the opening chords of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*. 'He used to visit her grave every fortnight. Now he comes to the mausoleum. And he writes to Lenin every week.'

'What are his letters about?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'He praises Lenin for his sound use of vivifying fluid.'

'What's vivifying fluid? Georgian wine?' asked Stalin.

'In his early youth Lenin diverted his sperm from its course, sending it upward to his brain.' Felix was now performing the *Funeral March* from Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in A flat Major*, Opus 26. 'He had only spiritual children and grandchildren.'

'We don't need sexual games,' exclaimed Auguste Comte. 'Annihilated by ever-growing chastity and purity, sex and its derivatives must have died in the middle of the twentieth century. Lenin's brain, entrusted to the safekeeping of Soviet and German scientists, shows the physical, intellectual and moral efficacy of his vivifying fluid.'

'I'm told his brain was cut into 30,000 slices,' said Andrey Petrovich, touching his own forehead with the edge of the knife that Lenin had concealed under the pillow. 'How many slices, in your opinion, were allocated to morals?'

'Don't touch his shoe with your impure lips!' screamed Restif de la Bretonne, shoving Auguste Comte out of his way. He leaned towards the puppet's feet, wrenched its right shoe off and took a shoe brush and some shoe polish out of his attaché case. After a while the shoe began to sparkle most vividly. Restif de la Bretonne kissed the shoe with devotion and put it in his attaché-case together with the shoe polish and the shoe brush.

In the meantime Felix continued to play the Funeral March. Auguste Comte and Robert Owen hoisted the Cinderella-like puppet onto the piano and knelt down before it in prayer. The puppet stood on the lid with both arms thrust upwards.

'God can be found everywhere, even in this diehard,' said Giordano Bruno, pointing at the puppet with a box of matches. 'In this respect he is not unlike a crocodile.'

'He *is* a crocodile,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'In every respect.'

Giordano Bruno went on undaunted, 'He also radiates the light of God and we mount by means of this light—'

'It behoves anyone who loves God to be satisfied with the past,' cut in Doctor Pangloss. 'He whose feelings are different, whatever the words may be that he has in his mouth—faith, charity, God or neighbour—neither knows God as the supreme reason, nor does he love him.'

'Sticking to your old-fashioned ideas, are you?' Andrey Petrovich put the knife back under the pillow. 'All this nonsense about our living in the best possible world. The past was wonderful and those who lived in it were wonderful...down to Lenin and Macbeth...'

'He doesn't even bother to modify the phrasing,' said Felix.

'Hunger is not the best possible feeling known to humankind,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'All the dogs have been eaten. Dogs, cats, field mice, birds. The trees have been stripped of their bark. Starvation is the worst possible way of dying.'

Doctor Panglos responded in pontifical tones, 'It must be admitted that there is evil in this world which God has made, and that there was the alternative of making a world without evil, or even of creating no world at all.'

'The best possible solution,' said Felix with a nod of agreement. 'No world at all. No suffering, no stuttering, no staggering through the mud of Creation.' Felix was still playing the third movement of Beethoven's *Sonata*.

'I wouldn't call it "mud",' said Andrey Petrovich, looking out of the window. 'A mere snowstorm. Nothing to be seen or heard except the chaos of the wind. We're far cosier here—no doubt about that!'

Felix was now playing and singing the *Winterreise*:

*'Schnee, du weisst von meinem Sehnen,
Sag, wohin doch geht dein Lauf?
Folge nach nur meinen Tränen,
Nimmt dich bald das Bächlein auf.'*

Andrey Petrovich rose from his armchair, doubled up and tottered a few steps, his leather shoes crunching the snow. He collided with the real Lenin, stopped and jerked his head up, his eyes blinking. 'Why did *you* go to the cemetery last month? Did you want to bury yourself?'

'He hankers after his mother's womb,' said Jung.

'But his mother rests in peace somewhere on the outskirts of St Petersburg.' Andrey Petrovich feigned to overlook the underlying symbolism of Jung's remark. 'It's rather far from the mausoleum. He can't go there on foot.'

'Kostya might carry him on his back,' sang Felix.

'All the same, it's too far. You'd starve to death in the course of your winter journey.'

'We've got neither sausages nor cheese!' vociferated the puppet.

'The better part is not always that which tends to avoid evil,' said Doctor Panglos, 'since it may be that the evil is accompanied by a greater good.'

'I hate these puppets,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'They'll repeat their lines in a thousand years, even after the final annihilation of the earth.'

'No bread, no vodka!' yelled the puppet.

'What happened in modern Russia won't be accompanied by a greater good because no good can be as "great" as the crimes perpetrated by Soviet communists.'

'The final annihilation...deserts everywhere...the best possible world...' mumbled Diogenes.

'Humanity achieved the highest moral ends by violating elementary individual moral principles,' said Kant. 'I saluted and supported the French Revolution—even the Terror it brought in its wake—because nothing happens in our history without violent clashes, murders, betrayals and torture. So I postponed my customary walk around Königsberg and even drank a glass of beer when Lenin proclaimed the victory of the socialist revolution in Russia. I still remember the words he uttered on that occasion: 'Long live the world socialist revolution!' For almost seventy years the Russians gave free rein to their passions and desires. Some of them betrayed their relatives, others murdered their intimate friends. Now they repent of what they have done and cleanse themselves of their sins. Individuals fighting for their ideas only to find they've been wrong are far superior to apathetic apes.'

'Which ones?' asked Charles Darwin.

'*Das Man*,' replied Martin Heidegger.

'Is it better to go out and kill a passer-by than to watch a western on TV?' asked Marquis de Lafayette.

'By fulfilling his nature to the utmost, the Russian has become a truly moral creature, outstripping in this respect his European neighbours,' said Kant.

'Do you know how many people died in Russia during the communist era? Are you acquainted with our statistics?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'Human life has no value in itself,' answered Kant. 'People who watch TV and count their money live outside human history, in a sort of no-man's land. History acquires a purpose only through disputes and battles in which various people and nations get involved, often in spite of themselves. Human beings aren't hippopotami and shouldn't spend their lives wallowing in mudbaths of sensual pleasure. What's the goal of our history? Happiness? Surely not!'

Wearing a golden chain, a Catalan beret and a limp watch, Salvador Dali stalked into the mausoleum.

'Where's your crutch?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'Where did you hide four Lenins? I painted *six* Lenins on this piano!' Feverishly Dali snatched the *Gulag Archipelago* from the writing desk and leafed through it several times.

'We put them into four concentration camps, hoping you might applaud the deed,' answered Felix. 'Didn't you say in 1975 that freedom was useless?'

'I said that freedom was a piece of shit. And Lenin said that freedom was *absolutely* useless. And I said that any so-called free country was bound to lose.'

The real Lenin came up to Dali and rummaged for a while in one of his drawers.

'Why did you invite all these people to Lenin's headquarters?' Andrey Petrovich tapped Felix on the fingernails with a ruler.

'I'm sorry,' said Felix as he stopped playing the piano and pressed his nails against his lips. 'I thought they would mock him, writing off the so-called "Soviet experiment" as a total failure. But they seem to idolise him. Brainwashing, Soviet propaganda. *Pravda* used to have a circulation of over—I forget the figure.'

'I don't idolise Lenin,' said Giordano Bruno.

'I can't help respecting him for his energy and courage,' said H. G. Wells. 'I predicted the laziness of the future and condemned the lack of curiosity in generations to come. Lenin was curious and adventurous, which enabled him to carry out a tremendous experiment on a large, almost worldwide scale. For all its shortcomings, this experiment constitutes a landmark in our history—something from which both the dead and the living must draw a lesson. What were European leaders doing in the thirties? They were cowardly enough to allow Hitler to invade Czechoslovakia and to take possession of Austria. Who's responsible for the Second World War? Who's accountable for its victims? Hitler, no doubt. But also Chamberlain and his French counterpart. They are the worst criminals of our century, although nobody has the right to bring them to court. Cowardice and apathy are the vices I despise most. A man lying sprawled on his couch can kill more people than a terrorist whose suitcase is crammed with bombs and Molotov cocktails.'

'Lenin never sprawled on his couch. He didn't even have one,' said Kostya.

'Out!' cried Felix.

'Please show me your invitation card,' said the majordomo, clutching Kostya's neck.

'There are only Eloi left in the world,' continued H. G. Wells with disgust. 'The Morlocks have become the Eloi during the last twenty years. They also pluck fruit from

nearby trees and smile idiotically, whenever asked a question. They seem satisfied with the most primitive enjoyments and wouldn't lift a finger to help anybody except if they have an opportunity to display their generosity on television. They consider themselves happy and prosperous. A chicken splashing in a puddle is also happy.'

At this point the ceiling opened up and a medium-sized armoured car descended into the room. As soon as the noise of the helicopter had died away Lenin patted H. G. Wells on the shoulder and murmured, 'Help me up.' Auguste Comte and Robert Owen were already carrying the puppet towards the armoured car. Shortly afterwards both Lenins stood on it, back to back. They began to speak simultaneously and their voices sounded in unison:

'Future generations will be much happier than our generation has been. There won't be so much cruelty in their lives. And yet I don't envy them. We achieved something of amazing significance for history. The cruelty, which the conditions of our struggle for power made necessary, will be understood and vindicated. Everything will be understood! Everything!'

The armoured car hooted stridently and set off towards the Kremlin. A long procession of working people followed the car with songs and shouts. Searchlights lit up the road that was lined by cordons of peasants.

'You're a master of form. Bravo!' said Andrey Petrovich to Felix.

'And a master of content too, don't you think?' Felix ceremoniously bowed to the audience.

PART TWO

1

(The mausoleum is thronging with visitors. Some of them are dead, others alive, or so it seems at first glance. They walk around Lenin's corpse, their eyes glittering with tears or glistening with hatred. A young lady appears in their midst. She regularly changes her clothes and look. Now she is a Russian mermaid, now an Egyptian priestess.)

'Leave me alone! Leave me alone!'

'We can't leave you alone because you're not alone. Look how many people are waiting behind you.'

'I'm alone, with him, in the whole world. Why do you intrude on our privacy?'

'Who are you talking about? Do you know where you are?'

'She's crazy! Call the police! She's a dangerous maniac. She wants to kill him. She's come to kill him!'

'I love him. What are you doing in our home?'

'She's delirious! Does she have a gun or knife? Let's frisk her.'

'Move on. You can't stand here.'

'I will stand beside him. For ever! Go, go out! All of you! Away with you, away!'

'Where's the guard?'

'You're not allowed to talk!'

'Don't push me!'

'Move on!'

'Don't push me!'

'Stop biting me! She's biting me! She's bitten my arm!'

'She's a woman. What do you expect?'

'She has to defend herself. Self-defence I call it.'

'But she's bitten me clean through the skin! I'm bleeding!'

'You shouldn't have pushed her.'

'Are you drunk or what?'

'Obviously not. If I was I wouldn't be here. I've got better things to do when I'm drunk.'

'Like what?'

'You're not allowed to talk!'

'Don't interrupt me!'

'Look at him, look at him! Isn't he beautiful?'

'A corpse, nothing else. A well-preserved corpse.'

'A badly-preserved relic. He suffered a great deal during the Second World War.'

'He fought too? Was he wounded?'

'They ill-treated him. No medicine, no chemicals. They evacuated him to Siberia. Or further off, I don't know. To Japan. They manhandled him.'

'In Japan they would have treated him with care. They would have cured him. I mean, they would have resurrected him. At least he would have looked much younger. He doesn't look so great, does he?'

'My son bought a Japanese camera and a German tape recorder.'

'How much did he pay for them?'

'You can't buy *him*!'

'The Japanese can. Or the Americans.'

'Do they feed him properly?'

'Who? The Americans?'

'The dead don't eat, thank goodness!'

'And they don't drink either, do they?'

'Yeah, but they've to feed his corpse because they want it to stay in good shape. Otherwise it might just return to dust.'

'You mean, disintegrate, decompose, decay?'

'Or just go down, like a balloon.'

'Infirmity, that decays the wise.'

'Uh-oh! I think she's going to pass out!'

'She's rooted to the spot with admiration. A pillar of salt.'

'Touch her!'

'Don't touch me!'

'You're not allowed to touch *him*!'

'I shall touch him. He will embrace me heartily, warmly. The dead are alive, somewhere. Perhaps they are with us, all the time. Besides, he is not dead. He kisses me tenderly, lovingly, hotly. His death is but a thread. I have cut the thread.'

'And what about *my* death? Could you cut it into pieces? Come and visit me in my house when I breathe my last breath! Once I've crossed the frontier of the Hereafter, take a pair of scissors—'

'Is death another umbilical cord?'

'Did you see any ropes in the mausoleum?'

'I saw a cable. I thought they used it for—'

'For what?'

'Do they give him electroconvulsive therapy?'

'Oh, is he still mad?'

'I'd have thought death cured him of that long ago.'

'Not *him*!'

'Who then?'

'The leopard cannot change its spots.'

'But he's not a leopard, is he?'

'Just a corpse.'

'She must be dead too. That's why they're together. Birds of a feather—'

'*You* are dead, all of you.'

'The mausoleum *is* a tomb. There's a corpse in it and this corpse has died at long last. He was a living corpse before. He used to live in our midst, day and night. Some vampires operate in daytime too! "Bloody Russia"—the cocktail he favoured most!'

'Drunk and disorderly—'

'Now he's dead. His ideology's dead, his country's dead. The Soviet people are dead!'

'Asleep, just asleep. See for yourselves! He smiles in his sleep. Like a child, like my child.'

'History is a nightmare, his nightmare.'

'Or my nightmare.'

'Or his sweet dream.'

'But I never wake up.'

'Neither does he.'

'Wake him up! Slap his face!'

'Why don't you wake up?'

'Do you have an alarm clock?'

'Life can't be so miserable.'

'Life can and must be miserable. We live in a material world. It was the ignorance about the Father which produced Anguish and Terror. Anguish became dense like a fog so that no one could see. Therefore Error became fortified. It elaborated its own Matter in the Void.'

'They live happily in the United States of America. I like their material world and their computers!'

'Love, you've forgotten love. Love reveals your divine origin.'

'And what if you love Lenin?'

'Even if you love Lenin. Look at her! She's dancing.'

'What sort of dance is this?'

'*The Sleeping Beauty*.'

'Don't awake him!'

'She's Pandora.'

'Don't call her names! She's a lady after all.'

'She's a necrophiliac. She comes to the mausoleum every other night and keeps him company till the cock crows at dawn. What can they do together? Do they play dice? Do they discuss the outcome of the Gulf War?'

'I saw her fly over Red Square.'

'On a broomstick?'

'No, on a lipstick! "I'm the most beautiful of them all," she shouted.'

'She must be employed as a whore. She must be on the staff.'

'Where?'

'At an Intourist hotel. For foreigners, twenty dollars an hour.'

'Do they need men? Some foreigners are homosexuals.'

'All foreigners are homosexuals!'

'What do they need women for?'

'Is Lenin a foreigner? Apparently he was parachuted into Russia before the Second World War, in 1936. He's a German spy.'

'And she's a German whore.'

'And he's Jewish.'

'She's Jewish too.'

'Who are *we* then? Where do *we* come from?'

'From the Moon. There was a female astronaut on the Moon.'

'When?'

'In the sixties. She was Armstrong's wife.'

'How old are we then?'

'What did she look like? Was she *human*?'

'Armstrong was human. He was born on earth and not in a space capsule.'

'He might have fallen in love with an ET, for all I know!'

'We must be Jewish too. There's a world conspiracy.'

'I'm Russian.'

'Your parents lied to you. And you lied about your origin to your schoolmates and teachers, to peasants and workers, to Party members and ordinary pedestrians, to dogs and stars—'

'I come from working-class stock.'

'She's stopped dancing.'

'Even in my childhood I was head over heels in love with him. His photograph hung above my bed. His smile hovered over my dreams. We walked and walked together among the ruins of medieval castles and churches, hand in hand, our eyes fixed on the horizon. "The future," he murmured over and over again. "The Golden Age...the younger generation..." And we would pluck golden apples from silver branches and laugh and break into a run like Andrzej Wajda's heroes and heroines.'

'May a man receive communion after a sexual illusion in a dream?'

'The Testament of the Old Law 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. But we should carefully examine the origin of such illusions in the mind of a sleeper; for sometimes they arise from over-eating, sometimes from excess or lack of bodily vigour, and sometimes from impure thoughts.'

'Lenin must be the Wandering Jew.'

'Or the Flying Dutchman. It amounts to the same thing.'

'The Flying Dutchman was Jewish.'

'Lenin, Lenin. Sounds Dutch.'

'I saw him fly over Red Square.'

'With a broomstick?'

'With a machine gun.'

'The witching hour of midnight! He'll fly off in a minute.'

'The Flying Dutchman hopes to find deliverance from his everlasting torture in the arms of a woman.'

'Isn't he homosexual?'

'That explains why he's still alive.'

'I didn't know Lenin was homosexual!'

'He was always beside Stalin. In photographs and paintings, and in books.'

'Until the Twentieth Party Congress. Until Khrushchev made his Secret Speech.'

'They were lying together in the mausoleum, side by side!'

'Together!'

'Until Khrushchev parted them.'

'Was he jealous or what?'

'Don't listen, my darling! People talk as long as they live and even death cannot silence them. They go on talking and talking, whispering and dropping hints. Death is a dark zone full of voices. The mausoleum is a dark zone full of voices. Outer space is full of voices.'

'There's only one voice in outer space and within inner space. All our voices are but an accompaniment to *that* voice.'

'Our voices are also *that* voice. They compose it.'

'I heard him talk in his sleep.'

'He's wide-awake. He listens to what we speak of.'

'Be careful what you say!'

'Last night I stayed in the mausoleum and I heard him talk. He said: "I am Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. I have the power to be born a second time. I am the divine hidden Soul who createth the gods, and who giveth celestial meals unto the denizens of the universe. I am the Lord who cometh forth from out of the darkness and whose forms of existence are of the house wherein dwell the dead. I rise as the Lord of Life through the beautiful Law of this day, and it is their blood and the cool water of their slaughter which make the union of the earth to blossom. I make a way among the horns of all those who make themselves strong against me, and among those who in secret make themselves adversaries unto me, and who are upon their bellies. Let me journey on in peace. Let me soar like a bird and pass over the sky.'"

'Aren't there any demons in Hell? Why did they let him escape uninjured?'

'Demons are weak. Demons are angels.'

'Lenin had them tortured. They recanted, mouthing the script he had composed for the occasion. Demons sobbed at the trial and implored Lenin's forgiveness. They were sentenced to hard labour and bundled off to Solovets Islands.'

'What will become of us without demons?'

'He's coming back. He'll hunt us down.'

'*Sauve qui peut!*'

'Is there a telephone here?'

'My son! He'll kill my son and my nephew!'

'Let them go. We shall be alone at last, alone and happy. Don't put them in prison. They mean no harm. They are just afraid of you. Everybody is afraid of you. You are as great and impenetrable as God, and people are afraid of God. They go blind upon seeing His radiance. They go deaf upon hearing His voice. They prostrate themselves before Him. They lie flat on the floor and fear He might squash them with His toe, with the nail of His toe. But you shall not squash them. You shall not even lift your foot to punish them. You have no time to lift your foot. Your time is mine, our time is yours. Love is more important than punishments and hard labour. Love is far more important than firing squads. Forget about your firing squads and your secret police! Disband your armies! We are left alone in the universe. Nobody interferes with our caresses. Nothing interposes between my hands and your eyes. I close your eyes and open them at will. You die and are resurrected through my love. There is no difference between life and death as long as your beloved is by your side. She is your life and your death. Love is too overwhelming to be borne by the living. Tristan and Isolde die in a tender embrace. But the dead cannot cope with Time on their own. They need the energy of the living to lean upon during their empty hours. They need the warmth of the living to put new life into their sinews and thoughts. Their thoughts are frozen—'

'It's minus thirty today.'

'Why do we live in a cold country? Why don't I have a villa on the Riviera? My thoughts would dance a farandole.'

'I would become Tolstoy if I had a villa on the Riviera.'

'Tolstoy lived in our latitudes, but his thoughts moved faster than a space rocket.'

'Lenin also lived in *our* latitudes and his thoughts moved fast indeed. Backwards! Back to barbarism, back to the Stone Age!'

'He used to walk backwards. In the streets! He often ran into other pedestrians who had no time to dodge him. He never apologised, never.'

'His monuments have always stood with their backs to the crowd.'

'We should read his books from end to beginning.'

'There's a shortage of axes. In the Iron Age citizens owned axes and saws.'

'Raskolnikov wouldn't have assassinated the old woman. Our shortages have their advantages!'

'There'll soon be a shortage of old women.'

'Not to mention young women. They'll all marry foreigners and settle abroad, in the United States or Europe.'

'Why don't you marry a foreigner? You might have a villa on the Riviera.'

'Her thoughts don't travel far enough. They've got no visa.'

'I see him everywhere. He has got eyes and arms without number. His arms are as long as the equator. They encompass the earth, they embrace mankind.'

'He's an octopus.'

'His thoughts are as long as the tail of a comet. I see him above and below and all around me. I see neither his beginning nor his end. He was neither born nor killed. He lived before his birth and he shall never die. His death is but an ambush for his enemies, an illusion in the theatre of life. He collapses on the stage and rises from his armchair in the wings. He shall not be in the dock on the day of the Last Judgement. He is above the Last Judgement. He shall outlive the last day of Creation. He shall fly over Hell and Paradise. Paradise is not worthy of his grandeur and Hell is too puny to punish him. He lives in his own Garden of Eden. He is the Tree of Knowledge. He is Adam and the fruit that Adam eats. He is Eve and the serpent seducing Eve and other human beings. He is God and Satan, created and tolerated by God. There is no Creation without Satan.'

'There is no good without evil.'

'There is no birth without homicide.'

'His crown is brighter than the sun. He is the undying guardian of the Law. Whatever he says is the Law. He himself is the Law without beginning, middle or end. His centre is everywhere. His heart is everywhere. His mind is everywhere. His love is everywhere. He loves you as much as I love him. He touches the sky, his mouth wide-open, his eyes glowing like the full moon. He touches you. He touches and kneads the future.'

'Careful! Put the stretcher down.'

'O Lord of gods! O Refuge of the worlds! O tomb of the worlds! Destroyer and Creator! You lick up whole worlds. You swallow them up. Judas and Tristan, kiss me!'

2

Why don't you come back to the mausoleum? Where should I look for you? I'm an old man. I'm dead. You can't expect me to run around a city I don't know. What if I go out and you come here in my absence? You might think they've buried me at last. I'll wait for another week.

He was looking for her everywhere: in hospitals, in shops, in hotels, in parks. He was allowed to leave the mausoleum for a few hours only, and these hours were spent in search of the young lady he had seen in the mist of a reverie.

Instead of taking her away, they could have installed another bed in the mausoleum. Stalin is gone, isn't he? I'll buy her a washing machine and a vacuum cleaner. And we've already got a deep-freezer.

A great many thoughts punctuated his pursuit and he would stop in his tracks whenever his brain vibrated like a jellyfish. Unlike Napoleon, he could not do several things at the same time.

Lenin was equal if not superior to Napoleon. The country he conquered was three or four times the size of the territory Napoleon had ruled over at the height of his military campaigns. Besides, Napoleon failed to conquer Russia.

And of course Lenin greatly surpassed another admirer of Napoleon's—Raskolnikov. Lenin killed thousands of old women, not to mention their husbands and grandchildren, their caged birds and gold fishes.

Lenin roamed around Moscow, pausing now and then to assess the situation. Like every novice in love he needed to assert himself.

She loves me. I'm not handsome, but I'm great. Women love greatness. And I'm the greatest among the great. Never since Marx has the proletarian movement for emancipation produced such a titanic figure. And I'm even greater than Marx because I'm the greatest among the great. Henry Barbusse says I'm the greatest and in all respects the purest of the makers of history. He says I've done more for mankind than anybody. So she doesn't love Henry Barbusse because he himself recognises my superiority. She doesn't love Marx either. Women don't love losers. They love heroes and dictators. I possess all the truly great and heroic virtues of the proletariat: a fearless mind, an iron, inflexible and indomitable will. My will surmounts all obstacles, my revolutionary ardour moves mountains. Women love men who can move mountains and remove governments. So she loves me. On some portraits I look like Clark Gable. He should play my part in a Soviet film.

After such a long and fruitful vibration, his brain might remain motionless for two or three hours. During these periods of mental inactivity Lenin attacked a house or a barn and, if beaten back, wisely retreated into the night.

Even in a state of utter immobility, Lenin would prepare a fresh attack. Nothing revealed those preparations: his brain and muscles looked like mere jelly, undisturbed by spoons. The attack seemed to mature in the fourth dimension.

Sometimes Lenin attacked rather slowly—so slowly in fact that a number of his attacks will go on for centuries, if not for eternity. 'We destroy in order to build better.' 'Only in a communist society, when the capitalists have disappeared without trace, will complete democracy be realised.' But in October 1917 he began to *run*, jostling through the crowds and knocking down almost everybody and everything. What perturbed Lenin the runner was the feeling of loneliness he experienced upon arriving at his destination: only a few crumpled notebooks lay scattered around him in a deserted street. No people, no palaces, no golden fruit. No golden apples, no silver apples. A mongrel was sniffing a stain on his trousers.

In 1992 he again found himself in a deserted street that seemed to span the twentieth century; two mongrels followed in his footsteps, barking and howling. The greater part of the houses looked like hospitals and he would open one door after another to reach the rooms where people lay dying on beds and mattresses. Weakened by death and other vicissitudes, his body and mind were now permeable to love and fear. He feared his beloved had already been destroyed by some agile psychiatrist and buried far from the mausoleum, which might entail a lot of digging and squabbling. Ghosts and guards dislike body snatchers.

Had she been conveyed to Paradise and become a twinkling little star from a song or a fairy tale? Lenin joined the palms of his hands: every star is doomed to fall on earth and find its eternal peace in the hands of a star-lover.

He waited for a long time; his hands stuck out into the air like a hook on which the portrait of a revolutionary leader was to be hung. Lenin recalled that, during one of the parades celebrating the Revolution, he had been asked to carry his own portrait. He refused at first—out of false modesty—but then realised that two Lenins were better than one. He also realised that three Lenins were better than two; he finally carried a portrait in each hand, radiating joy and happiness from six eyes.

It might not be a bad idea to cut the Garden of Eden from heaven and to let it grow on Red Square, in the vicinity of the mausoleum. Red Square should be enclosed with a wall and three rows of electric barbed wire. I'll have a bench installed in the middle of our garden and we'll sit on it all day long, listening to birds, fountains and Beethoven's music.

No star had fallen into Lenin's hands and he decided to postpone his meeting with heaven until the following night. But his hands were suspended in the air and disobeyed his command to return to their respective pockets. Lenin recalled how he had been posing for a monument destined to replace the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour. He leaned forward and blew on his fingers, hoping to warm them by the hot air that he had stored up in his lungs to cope with Stalinist deep-freezers. He approached the nearest façade and started rubbing his back against it. He expected that the wave of warmth brought about by the friction would stretch out as far as his hands and engulf them.

He made two holes in his overcoat, but his hands were paralysed. His back was paralysed too. He jumped a few times and an echo responded to his boots. Somebody was walking along the street.

'How shall I kill you?' asked the solitary passer-by, exhaling hot air into Lenin's face. 'What kind of death would you prefer? What if I burn you? A bonfire, eh? A good human bonfire warms you up. Come to think of it, I'm chilled to the bone.' The passer-by struck a match; the wind blew it out. The passer-by struck another match.

Lenin's mitten caught fire and soon the flames penetrated his lungs. He was breathing deeply to renew the stock of hot air within his body. Even his liver and intestines were now filled with hot air.

'Okay, I'm warm enough,' said the passer-by. 'So you've become a fireplace in your new incarnation.'

The passer-by departed. Lenin continued to swallow the flames that languidly caressed his cheeks and what was left of his hair and eyebrows. His hands recovered their mobility and danced to the accompaniment of the flames. The overcoat turned into an immense hole, following the wayward itinerary of the wind.

Perhaps a poor, homeless child will find my coat and put it on to save his frozen body from death. And he'll go to his mother and show her my coat. And his mother will ask him, 'Who gave you this coat?' And the child will answer, 'Lenin gave me this coat to protect my body from the cold arrows of winter.' And the mother will say to her child, 'Go out and show this coat to your comrades. Tell them how you found this coat and who gave it to you. Remember that Lenin saved your life! Lenin also saved the life of your country.' And the child will go out and show the coat to his comrades. And his comrades will show their coats to him. And the children will dance in the snow, singing, 'Lenin is great, Lenin is great, Lenin is our summer and our sun and our song.'

Lenin stood in the middle of the pavement in his pre-Revolutionary suit. The flames abandoned him as if allergic to his future nakedness, and he resumed his search, impatient and impulsive.

He visited some shops; their windows had been broken by a few hungry individuals hoping to find food traditionally hidden under the counters. But the hidden food had already been devoured either by the shop assistants or by other ruffians and the hungry individuals were queueing now for daytime, legal food. The queue kept growing in length and volume, although there remained at least five hours until the opening of the shops. Lenin joined one of the queues; he soon realised that the people were waiting for sugar, vodka and milk—not for his beloved. He climbed up onto a snow-disfigured car with a view to making an optimistic speech but realised he was mute in the land of the living and in the kingdom of the unborn. And he had no doubts that the people queueing for food were alive in spite of appearances. The dead can go without food, and those who enjoy eating for the sake of eating are provided with dainty morsels both in Paradise and in Hell.

A middle-aged woman picked up a stone from the pavement and Lenin jumped down from the car.

They still have stones. Is it really a new Stone Age?

Another woman raised a kitchen knife above her head and stabbed him in the shoulder and the heart. He collapsed onto the snow and crawled away, accompanied by catcalls. A little way off he scrambled up and continued his journey on foot.

Why doesn't she queue with other people? Does she have enough to eat at home? Is she married? Who feeds her? Who gives her money? Is she a prostitute? Prostitutes walk around at night. They are human beings and human beings shouldn't sell their love in beds. Where should they sell it? Is there a love market? A black love market? Do they queue for love? I'm queueing for love. I'm alone in the queue. She is late, no discipline at all. Don't be lazy, don't steal, observe the strictest discipline during work. Mass human material has been corrupted by a millennia of slavery, serfdom, capitalism, small individual enterprises and the war of every man against his neighbour for a place in the market, for a higher price. I can't pay, but I'll introduce her to Stalin or Giordano Bruno. Stalin is more important, I think. Less handsome but more important and powerful. *Nomenclatura*. And what about Andrey Petrovich? I'll put in a word for her. For my beloved he'll reserve the cosiest place in Paradise. He'll get us in through the back door. There's something about prostitutes in the Bible. I've got one in my bedside cabinet. I'll read it tomorrow. Only the paragraph on prostitutes. Our aim is to ensure that every worker, after finishing his eight-hour productive labour, shall perform state duties

gratis. Even in Switzerland I had no money. Even the dead need money sometimes. When they fall in love with a woman. Has she already finished her eight-hour productive labour? Not very productive, is it? Never mind. It's participation that counts, I presume. When did she start? What time is it? I can wait. Never mind. There's enough hot air in my body to last me a week. I won't exhale any more. I won't inhale either. I've never loved anybody, in my life, in my death. What a marvellous feeling! Why have I postponed it until now? Is it too late? Eternity is so short!

Love continued to usurp his mind, creeping up from his heart along the arteries and nerves. Love continued to force the Revolution and other political preoccupations out. Lenin investigated the time-beaten topography of his head with his fingers and discovered a bump created by the retreat of the Revolution into outer space.

Whenever Lenin touched his forehead, he recalled the Revolution and the sorry plight of his fellow countrymen. One night he found that the bump had diminished in size. He became alarmed and even took off his jacket to investigate the bones protruding from his skin. Where had the Revolution withdrawn? He seemed to hear the voice of the Revolution: 'Do everything in your power to hinder the enemy's advance. Set ambushes for him. Use firearms and cold steel against him.' Where was the voice coming from? Lenin held his ears to the various parts of his body but heard only the wind that sounded like *Walkürenritt*. He got the impression that all utopian ideas had taken refuge in his toes: in spite of himself, he was drawing the hammer and sickle on the snow with his boots.

Thanks to love Lenin had acquired a pair of wings and could cover the distance from the mausoleum to the suburbs of Moscow in a quarter of an hour. In a moment of desperation, however, his love might suddenly become heavy and he would sit down on boulders, mounds and heaps, his face turned downward.

He banged two doors shut and sat down on a boulder. He was weary of his own velocity that was all the more sterile since it could not even be ratified as a world record: the wind was too strong. He was exhausted and perturbed by the number of faces that the nocturnal city was offering for his scrutiny. 'I wish some of them were dead,' he announced in a whisper as if he might be overheard. He sought to narrow down the range of his pursuit. The voice of the Revolution upheld this opinion: 'Ruthless war must be waged against them! Death to them!'

'I wish all of them were dead except her. I would find her face at once,' he added with a stamp of his foot.

'Spies, instigators, Whiteguards, counter-revolutionary traitors—' chimed in the voice of the Revolution. Animated by the ardour of bygone days, Lenin's toes wriggled in the boots.

The night was also heavy with tiredness and seemed to have squatted down beside him like a travelling companion, awaiting either the return of strength or the lethal intimacy of frost. She was obviously loath to continue her solemn slide towards the daybreak, towards the inevitable queue before the mausoleum.

Nature is aware that I need darkness and eternity and willingly comes to my help. Isn't it a further proof of nature's wholehearted adherence to my policy and ideas? Even if, due to international sabotage, communism disappears from the face of the earth, nature will safeguard a huge amount of it for the sake of future generations. And sooner or later we'll extort our communism from woods, brooks, oceans, clouds, insects, sunsets, fishes, dust. And, in case of refusal or resistance, we'll threaten nature with atomic bombs. And we'll explode a few atomic bombs to bring nature to her knees. We'll conquer nature and fruit of all kinds will fall from the sky onto our tables and into our bowls. And animals of all kinds will walk into our kitchens and bow before the longest and sharpest knives aiming at their necks.

Lenin imagined himself on stilts the height of which exceeded that of an armoured car; he towered over the earth and from every side there closed in upon him humans and animals carrying flags, placards and machine guns. He was sprinkled with the flowers falling upon him from heaven and offered as many as two thousand bunches of roses to the most beautiful young ladies he had picked out in the crowd of worshippers. Presently he jumped down from the stilts, doubled up and the two thousand young ladies climbed onto his back. 'Communists have built the highest skyscraper in the universe,' shouted Lenin from under his burden. Cheered on by humans and animals alike, the new skyscraper proceeded to the mausoleum.

His imagination carried him and the women as far as the cobblestones of Red Square. Then he suddenly changed his mind and shook the women off his back. They plummeted down, screaming and wiggling.

Meanwhile the night stirred into motion, drifting towards the sun. 'Get away from the sun!' Giordano Bruno had told him in a recent conversation. 'There are other worlds in our world. There are other ideas to fight for and other lives to live.' Lenin tolerated the sun exclusively as a symbol of the Revolution: he had always felt uncomfortable on beaches. He would have discarded the sun altogether, but for Russian frost which had to be counterbalanced by cosmic heat. As for Giordano Bruno, he was protected from low temperature by the everlasting flames that enveloped him like a warm, fur-like garment.

Stalin has a lot of trouble with Giordano Bruno and other heretics condemned by the Church. Deep-freezers are not the final solution anyway. People just turn into ice creams. And ice creams melt and soften, when exposed to room temperature. People come back to life. I

did. Stalin made a glaring, unforgivable mistake. I wouldn't have, not I. I would have killed him for ever. He took no account of the Thaw, of the Russian summer. Death should be transcendental. Death shouldn't depend on time and seasons. No resurrection is conceivable in a communist society. Enemies die once and for all. Even Hell is too mild for them.

At this point the Revolution invaded Lenin's body: not only his toes but his legs and arms and torso were quaking now with excitement. He was unable to keep his balance and slumped down onto the snow.

A woman was going down the street. She wore a scarf over her hair and lugged along a colossal sack from which there rose a blackish cloud. When she got close enough to Lenin's body she turned the sack upside down and shook it, releasing an avalanche of potatoes that bombarded the snow with gay abandon.

'I've been waiting for you all my life,' said the woman. 'And now that I've found you I'll never let you go.'

The potatoes rolled around Lenin's head, deflecting each other like billiard balls; the sack was far from empty and the woman shook it violently as if to make up for the present food shortages and also for the famine which had decimated Russia after the Revolution.

'You're not the woman I'm looking for,' said Lenin bluntly and uncivilly.

'Get up,' said the woman. 'Why is your mouth hanging open? Are you hungry? Do you want a potato? Get up first! If you don't you'll starve to death!'

Lenin got up and stepped on a potato.

'You're so pale! How about some potato soup? Or baked potatoes? What do you want?'

Lenin gauged the toothless depth of the woman's mouth and headed for the lamppost—the only substitute for the sun in the street.

'You've never seen me run. I'd catch up with you before you could say Jack Lenin.' The woman lifted the sack over Lenin's head and pulled it down, increasing the quantity of darkness in the universe. 'Don't try to pull a fast one on me—it's not the only sack I've got! I'll put another one on your legs if you scream or squirm!'

In the darkness Lenin lost his sense of direction and took a step towards the woman instead of trying to seek refuge in the mausoleum. The woman softened like an ice-cream left behind on a chaise longue in sultry weather.

'Do you want to kiss me? Why did you take so long to come? My lips are old now. See for yourself!' The woman extracted a knife from her pocket and made a slit in the sack. 'Can you see my lips?'

'No.'

'You promised to marry me after the war, but you didn't come back. I thought you'd been killed.'

'I had been,' said Lenin. Inside the sack his voice resounded like an organ.

'So you're alive and full of beans! Only a little bit hungry and thirsty. Eat, my darling!'

The woman picked up a potato and tried to squeeze it through the slit. After a while she realised that the slit was too narrow and she broadened it with the knife.

Lenin bit into the potato as soon as it was level with his mouth. He *was* hungry after all, judging from the sound his jaws produced. He did not eat often and therefore fully appreciated the warmth and serenity contained in simple food. He instantly calmed down and no longer felt humiliated by his predicament. 'If I ate every day,' he thought, 'I could walk around barefoot. The boots Kostya gave me are rather tight. Too small for my toes.'

The calories and vitamins spread around his rib cage and eventually reached his heart. Lenin remembered love and female beauty.

If she gives me a cucumber my love will grow so big that I'll die of suffocation. I should share my stock of love with Andrey Petrovich. Influential archangel, isn't he? And he seems to appreciate love as a human sentiment. In token of gratitude, he'll cut the dose of sleeping pills. If she gives me a tomato I'll fall in love with a second woman. How many women can one fall in love with after a five-course meal washed down with plenty of wine? If she gives me a carrot—

The woman gave him nothing. She pulled a rope from under her skirt and set about measuring it with her fingers.

'How tall are you?' she asked. 'Looks like you've been growing smaller. Did you have any bullet wounds?'

'You wouldn't hear me if I told you.'

'Did you lose your tongue in the war? Some people do, you know. How about your ears? Still got *them*? Never mind, I'll do the talking. As usual. Solitude has no tongue either. But solitude has ears.'

The woman put the rope round Lenin's waist and tied him fast to the lamppost. 'If you don't come with me you're going to stay here all night.' She untied Lenin and pushed him towards the door. He bumped into a railing and tripped over a step, falling headlong. She set him on his feet again and pushed him forward—up the stairs. She continued to push him in the back and the neck until he bumped into the door of her apartment.

'It's a communal apartment,' she murmured. 'Here's my bed. Don't talk too loud. My neighbours are very near.'

He lay down on the bed and she removed the sack from his body. He got up and she lifted the sack with a hiss, aiming at his head. He sat down on a stool and pointed to his mouth.

'Oh yeah, I forgot, you lost your tongue,' said the woman, flinging the sack on the floor.

Once more Lenin pointed to his mouth.

'I know, I know, you lost your tongue.'

Lenin put a finger into his mouth and began to chew it.

'What do you want? Another potato? You can pick some up in the street. But don't you dare try to escape from my embrace or I'll tie you to the lamppost!'

Lenin opened the door, descended the stairs, opened another door and recognised the cold air of Moscow. The cold air of Moscow recognised him as well and bit him in the cheeks and fingers like a rabid dog. Lenin squatted down and the air bit him in the coccyx, in the hips and in the shoulders. Lenin began to swing a potato over his head, chasing away the cold air and the winter.

'Where did you get this potato?' asked a male voice.

'Nowhere,' said Lenin. 'I swear it!' He looked up and saw a bulging pocket from which there protruded two potatoes and a cucumber.

'I spent an hour on my knees. Is it fair? May I have your opinion on the subject?'

'It's *not* fair,' said Lenin.

'I'm at the head of the queue. You come along and barge in. How many children have you got? Five, seven? I've got three children and one wife. How many potatoes per day do I need? Three children, one wife. And her husband. Can you count at all? Let me introduce myself: Anatoly Maximovich. How do you do!'

'How do you do!'

'Did you finish your count? Remove your make-up, please! Do you think that actors are entitled to an extra ration of potatoes?'

Another man appeared in the distance. 'It's all over!' cried Anatoly Maximovich and the man vanished round a corner.

'It's *not* over!' cried Lenin.

'You gave potatoes to the poor and to children. At least that's what they taught us at school. Lenin took the last potato out of the sack, handed it to a scrofulous child and died of starvation. After Lenin's death a potato was found under his pillow. A note was pinned to the potato: "Give this potato to the poorest man in Russia or to the smallest child on earth." Well, I'm not the smallest child on earth, as you can see.'

Lenin touched his eyes and realised that the winter had inlaid them with a thin layer of frost. His ears were jingling like the keys to the mausoleum.

'You're a good actor,' said Anatoly Maximovich with a nod. 'Why don't you play the role of Hamlet in your theatre? You're fit for the job and Hamlet is much more popular than Lenin nowadays. Critics say that he does nothing in a rush.'

'Hamlet wouldn't have given you the potato,' said Lenin, shivering all over. His head moved even faster than his mouth. 'He would have killed you.'

When Lenin recovered consciousness he tried to recall how he had got rid of Anatoly Maximovich. He was not even sure he had killed him. He was still clutching the potato in his hand. With a smile he saw the familiar traces of his teeth on its surface. His body was covered with the sack; the owner of the sack stood by his side.

'Why are you keeping me waiting?' said the woman. 'Do you think we're immortal?'

'I do,' said Lenin.

She carried his body upstairs. He drank a bowl of potato soup and fell asleep. He woke up and deduced from what he saw above and under his body that his pleasure was immeasurable.

The 'potato-woman' was well-versed in the sexual lore of Russia; and she put it into practice with fervour and fanaticism. Soon Lenin thanked his lucky stars for his untimely death: he felt no pain in his joints, nor in his muscles.

3

When Lenin returned to the mausoleum he made an effort to recall how long he had lived with the 'potato-woman'. In vain. 'I dubbed her the "potato-woman".' The remainder of that period was as indecipherable as a Japanese novel.

Lenin did not like Japanese novels; he had never attempted to read one for fear of being overwhelmed with unpleasant feelings. Of course he knew that, should the world-revolution succeed, he would have to invite *some* Japanese writers and instruct them on how to write about the achievements of the Soviet economy. But their visit was not expected earlier than the second half of the twenty-fourth century so that Lenin could devote almost three centuries to his private affairs without bothering to read any Eastern writers.

He lay down on his bed, stretching out voluptuously; for the first time in his life he appreciated solitude and creature comforts. There were too many sacks and very few potatoes outside. And there were no cucumbers at all except in the pockets of tramps.

Inadvertently, Lenin pushed the bedside cabinet with his shoulder and heard a dripping sound; something was drumming on the floor and trickling down his forearm. He realised that he had spilt either the soup or the dessert which had been put on the table in anticipation of his arrival. He sprang up and placed his mouth and nose in the mushroom cloud of steam rising from a huge soup plate. 'A bowl of potato soup,' he murmured, licking his gums.

There was a bottle of vodka on the table, but Lenin knew that the proletariat and its leaders needed no alcohol, once the instruments of oppression and those who wielded them had been destroyed. In former days vodka used to console people, making them forget the hardships of their lives and the arabesques of whips on their backs. Now people had to *remember* their happiness and joy; their occasional lapses of memory were wholly due to the quantities of vodka they consumed at their factories and in their kitchens.

He tipped the bottle and emptied it onto the floor. A tiny brook flowed towards the bed and soon formed a pool under it. Lenin liked order and cleanliness; he fetched a teaspoon and a beer glass from the cupboard, knelt down and dipped the spoon in the pool. He detected the smell of vodka in the proximity of his trousers and found that not only the bottoms of his pyjamas but also the top and even his hair were soaked through.

'It's a pity I haven't gone *completely* bald,' he reflected. 'Do they have a hairdresser in the Hereafter?'

He dropped the spoon in the pool and rose up, spreading the smell of his pyjamas around the mausoleum.

What if she comes now? How shall I explain the presence of vodka in my room? What a smell! What perfume does she use? *Red Moscow*? *Lenin with Us*? They also smell of vodka, these perfumes. I use the perfume *Lenin with Us*, I'll tell her. Very fashionable. In the United States of America, in France. The latest fashion. It started last week. They put in an order for three tons of 'Lenin with Us'. We need hard currency to buy tractors and computers. The whole earth smells of vodka now. Good publicity for vodka but bad news for housewives. I can't get rid of this smell in the mausoleum. I air it every half-hour. I open the trap door hidden under a Georgian carpet and let the fresh air of Paradise in. Paradise is located underground—in my basement. I go down there whenever I please. Paradise smells of vodka. Tomorrow I'll have the roof taken off and the walls pulled down in order to expose my house to the winds of Hell. And I'll kill the vodka-smelling guardians with the axe I was offered by the staff of the Dostoevsky Museum. Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! oh! oh! Do you like Shakespeare? *Lenin with us* would have sweetened her little hands and her big feet in no time at all. Even my thoughts

smell of vodka. Bad news for thinkers. Is the charwoman coming today? And what about my servants? People must have servants in a communist society to keep their houses nice and clean-smelling.

Lenin's train of thought thundered out in search of the servants and came back with a few supplementary question marks. His hand reached for a bell but touched an alarm clock which was in a peaceful mood and had no intention of interrupting the circular movement of Time by the 'music of duty', as Engels put it in his diary. Lenin disregarded the intentions of the alarm clock and fiddled with its button until it started to ring.

'Did you call me?' asked a servant, entering the room.

'Yes. I overturned the bottle of vodka and—'

'It happens every week. Why didn't you call me earlier? There's a lake of vodka in your basement.'

'Did I also drink vodka in Stalin's time?'

'Of course you did. Even I used to drink vodka in Stalin's time. It was much better then—icy cold. Now they serve it *chambrée*.'

'Clean this room!'

'Why?'

'I hate grime.'

'You've always lived in squalor.'

'But I was alone. I mean I was with my wife.'

'You're still alone.'

'I'm expecting a visitor.'

'Giordano Bruno? Condorcet?'

'It's a woman. And she is not Rosa Luxemburg.'

'By the way, do you really think that Paradise is located underground?' The servant stamped his foot.

'Did you see the Moscow Metro?'

The servant laughed and stamped his foot once again as if sending Morse signals to some inhabitant of Paradise. 'How come there's a pool under your bed?' he asked suddenly.

'Vodka,' answered Lenin briefly.

'Why did you do it? To enjoy its fragrance while you were sleeping? My neighbour used the same trick to combat nightmares.'

'I'll also need a bunch of roses.'

'Have you fallen in love?'

Lenin cast a glance at the alarm clock, which resumed its air of indifference, and left the room.

He went along the corridor and reached the main door sooner than he had expected: for once the corridor followed the rules of Euclidean geometry, allowing travellers to make a journey from point A to point B without much trouble. The first guard was kissing a young woman; the second guard was waiting for the kiss to end, his mouth twisted into a grin of anticipation. The woman kept straightening her hat until it fell down on the second guard's boot.

Lenin recognised the woman immediately. 'What are you doing here?' he shouted. As no one heard him, he had to answer his questions himself. 'You came here to pay me a visit in my room. Why do you tolerate the kisses of this cad? Because he didn't let you inside the mausoleum outside visiting hours and you want to bribe him with your beauty. Why didn't you give him a few dollars?' The last question required no answer and Lenin set off on his return journey to prepare the mausoleum for the reception of his guest.

On his way he analysed the situation thoroughly and decided not to dismiss the guardians for their insolent behaviour: the servant had to finish tidying up the room and to bring in a vase for the roses. The longer the guardians kept his beloved away from his foul-smelling room, the better. He even authorised them to make love to her on condition that everybody observe the utmost decency and discretion. Their amorous scrimmage should not compromise his reputation and glory. The first guardian, the second guardian, a threesome. How long? And Lenin launched out into a differential calculus: one multiplied by two, by three. Will the servant have enough time to buy a bottle of champagne in one of the international shops? Lenin's thoughts still reeked of Ruskaya vodka and for a while he stopped thinking, disgusted and apprehensive.

The servant was crawling under the bed and did not seem to be paying attention either to the rest of the room or to Lenin's summons. Another servant had to be called up to remove the drunkard from the mausoleum and from Moscow.

Lenin found no vase in the china-closet and the only table he could put that non-existent vase on was the bedside cabinet cluttered with papers and sleeping pills. He consulted the alarm clock and regretted not having asked for a third guardian, a handsome and licentious one: the hands of the alarm-clock were moving faster than usual as if pursued by a murderer.

Lenin ordered the God of Time to slacken his pace, but the hands of the alarm clock were moving with the same alacrity.

Time is not limited to one clock only; it sweeps around the world like an ocean and imprints the flow of its waves on dials and faces. People look weary or burst with energy, according to the position of the sun and the moon. And the dials are supposed to materialise Time with more or less 'objectivity', depending on the skill of their makers.

Lenin rummaged through his desk and even ransacked his files, hoping to alight upon a docile watch or a governmental decree allowing its possessor to manipulate Time with a disregard for Big Ben.

Why haven't I abolished Time? Even St Augustine thinks that Time is a private affair and varies in accordance with our moods and needs. Isn't it a capitalist invention after all? But for Time and its sloth, the triumph of communism would have coincided with the Russian Revolution. Foreseeing the unfavourable course of events, capitalists came up with the idea of Time and thus postponed the prosperity and happiness of the proletariat.

Lenin heard the voices coming from the outside and paused for breath and reflection. Have they finished? No flowers, no vase, no table, no champagne, no servants—nothing except the desire to see her and talk to her for hours on end.

Why did I empty that bottle of vodka? She has to drink *something*. That's how women are seduced in books and on television: they drink and dance waltzes. They drink champagne mostly, but they can also drink Ruskaya vodka. I'll just tell her I'm Russian. And she'll get drunk quicker and more...efficiently. Vodka penetrates deeper into human souls.

Lenin glanced under the bed and began to dance a waltz. He still remembered how to dance despite the years that had elapsed between his last school ball and 1992. His father had taught him how to waltz gracefully and without stepping on the toes of his partners. Lenin waltzed and waltzed, carried on by the rhythm of his past and by the sway of his passion.

Love is more important than the happiness of humankind. Let them be miserable and poor. Even a prisoner can love somebody. Even the dead can love and be happier than the living and the gods.

He rushed out and soon returned to the room, carrying the young lady in his arms. Should communists carry women in their arms? Isn't this a shorter way to the heights of communism than building electric power stations? Out of joy and premature happiness he relapsed into dancing without abandoning his prey—the source of his excellent mood. After a while his beloved became seasick and her face assumed the expression common to young ship-hands who have not acquired their sea legs. Lenin however misinterpreted her stiffness, putting it down to fear and shyness. He redoubled his efforts in order to put her at ease and make her forget that she was in the arms of the greatest man in the history of mankind.

Suddenly he began to doubt her awareness of his greatness and significance: she had spent three hours in the company of two men who were neither great nor even illustrious. So he set his beloved on her feet and flung himself into his favourite armchair. He took a pen out of his pocket, shuffled forward with the armchair all the way to the writing desk and started to scribble on a huge sheet of paper, his hand trembling like a bird:

'As you know, I am Vladimir Ilich Lenin—the genius of the Revolution. Under my leadership, the Great October Socialist Revolution in the USSR triumphed. This Revolution marked the turning point in human history, representing a transition from the old capitalist society to the new socialist society. This Revolution tore one hundred million inhabitants of the globe out of the Hades of imperialism. But for my genius and my Revolution, you would not have been born.' Lenin paused for an instant and added: 'Your mother would not have been born either.' Lenin paused once again and wrote: 'Or she would have been born in Hades.'

Lenin read the paragraph and found that it suffered from a narrow outlook, limiting his achievements to the Revolution only. So he wrote down with an imperious flourish of the pen: 'I am the greatest genius of all times and of all nations, master of all the treasures of human knowledge and human culture, wielding to perfection the all-conquering weapon of the proletariat—revolutionary Marxism which is now called Leninism in my honour.'

Lenin read the second paragraph and nodded his approval, as if it had been written by somebody else. Suddenly he recalled that his beloved was timorous and shy: she might stiffen even more after perusing his text. So he pulled forward another sheet of paper and began to cover it with his handwriting:

'It is true that I am great. But I am also capable of love, friendship and responsiveness. I appreciate ordinary people and the joys of family life. And I often talk to stupid individuals, so you don't have to be frightened in my presence. Women can be accepted on their own terms provided they are beautiful. And you are very beautiful indeed. So I accept you on your own terms and welcome you in my house. I had no time to send my servant for a bottle of champagne. I hope you don't need champagne or vodka to feel relaxed. Do you feel relaxed? I promise we shall dance another waltz in the near future. I am writing this note because I am precluded from communicating my love and ideas by word of mouth. Vladimir Ilich Lenin. P.S. I had no time to send my servant for a bunch of roses either, but there are roses blooming in my heart. V.L.'

Lenin pocketed the pen and handed the two sheets of paper to his beloved. His eyes gazed at her lips reproducing his prose in a sketchy, airy manner.

'Oh, my God!' she exclaimed, dropping the sheets of paper. 'It slipped my mind. I brought you some chrysanthemums. Sasha is keeping them, Alexander. One of your guardians.'

She dashed out and Lenin sniffed the air palpitating in her wake; he did not recognise the scent she had left behind. It was neither 'Red Army' nor 'Lenin in Finland'. Was it 'Lenin in Paris'? A French perfume?

Why did she bring me chrysanthemums? To put them on my breast after killing me? She is Tosca. I thought she was Traviata. I thought *she* would die in my arms. I might have sacrificed my life for her.

She returned to the room and scattered the chrysanthemums over his body. 'Shall we go for a walk?' she suggested. 'I'd like to forget your death for a few hours.'

They left the mausoleum and strolled for a while along the Kremlin Wall. Passers-by brushed against his arms and shoulder blades; they did not seem to recognise him. In his turn Lenin did not recognise Nature: she had put on make-up overnight to substitute the colours of spring for her sickly complexion and snowy moods.

Nature must be in love with somebody—with the sun, with God. She can't live withdrawn into herself for ever, so she bursts out of her shell and meets her beloved and cuddles up against him and kisses him, giving birth to stars, to the flowers of galaxies. One should leave oneself and create unity by embracing and encompassing the opposite. I've always loved Hegel, although I'm aware of his contradictions and our divergences. Marx loves Hegel too. Don't all divergences converge upon this garden? The synthesis of human struggle for freedom and equality achieved by the ardent kiss that Nature bestows upon God! Hegel mentioned God rather often in his writings. Was my life sterile and erroneous? Did I have to kiss those who were dying all around me? The kiss of life. Why didn't I contribute to the impetus of Nature that yearns and strives for God? Winter shrouded me. I was pushing my way through snowdrifts and snowmen, crossing rivers and lakes covered with a thin crust of ice.

'What is your name?' Lenin carved this question on the bark of an old tree.

'Lilia,' she answered. 'I read a lot about you. I recall how you almost drowned in Finland. Why didn't you drown that night? People respect Amundsen. They admire and love Robert Falcon Scott. "It seems a pity but I do not think I can write any more." The final entry in his diary. What a man! Well, you wrote a great deal after that incident in Finland. Why? Why? The police were on your tracks. The tsarist government was determined to get the leader of the Revolution into its clutches. You had to flee Russia and settle abroad in

December 1907. An attempt to board ship at Helsingfors involved the danger of arrest. So you embarked upon a journey to a tiny island in the Gulf of Finland—on foot, across a vast stretch of ice. And the ice gave way under you. Why did you get out of the water?"

'Because I wished to save the Revolution and humankind.' He articulated these words slowly and clearly to enable her to read his lips. Contrary to his expectations and calculations, his lips acquired unnatural shapes as they let the sonorous and meaningful air out: their movements had nothing in common with the words he had uttered in reply to her question. They had even tampered with his lips. A lip transplant?

'And the charge of high treason? And the nickname "German spy"? The Provisional Government issued an order for your arrest and prosecution. Why didn't you stand trial? Kamenev, Trotsky, Rïkov and others expressed the opinion that you ought to. Only Stalin opposed this resolution. And he was bad company, wasn't he? Why didn't you become a martyr and a hero? And a gentleman?'

'The trial would have been a pretext for getting me out of the way. They aspired to wreak their vengeance upon me.'

'Did you say something? Why are you touching your lips? Did you hurt yourself? Did you bite your tongue?'

Lenin took the knife out of his pocket. Another old tree was chosen to bear his message to the woman he loved. He realised that he was already parting from his body to meet her halfway on the road of happiness. Didn't he see his brain outside his body—rolling on the Georgian carpet, butting against a mausoleum wall?

'I am *Vernunft* at last. All my life I wallowed in *Verstand*. I travelled abroad, fleeing Russia and the tsarist police. As a matter of fact, I always stayed at home. I crouched in my own rib cage.'

'This man stops at every tree, Daddy. Why?' asked a small boy, tugging at his father's sleeve.

'Perhaps he was a dog in his former life,' answered his father. He hastened his step and the boy tagged after him.

'I'm happy,' said Lilia. She laughed and her mouth outlined the contours of the words she did not utter. 'You can't speak to us, so what? Words are volatile. They don't exist unless we write them down or tell our adventures to the people who are fond of gossip. This tree will live for another century. It'll be put in a museum. Unfortunately they closed your museum down and the mausoleum is rather small, isn't it? And it would be a crime to cut this oak into

pieces, wouldn't it? We must preserve the whole of it at all costs. What a relic! What a message of love! I'm so happy!"

All the while Lenin was perfectly aware of the social barrier that his death had erected between them, making him a pariah doomed to dream of his beloved from afar without ever daring to touch her.

Why didn't Stalin have her shot? We would have been together in the Hereafter, on an equal footing. Of course *I* can kill her. But there's no guarantee she'll be deported to the same region of the Hereafter. There are so many regions in Paradise and Hell, I'm told. And their entrances are guarded by Soviet border patrols that are highly praised by our officials. How many iron curtains are there in the Hereafter? Anyway it's a hit-and-miss affair. How many people does she have to destroy in order to settle down in *my* area? It depends on the quality and importance of those people. Suppose she stabbed me to death. I don't mind dying once more. I'll heap this death on top of my former deaths and lives. The highest skyscraper in the history of the universe. The more people kill me the faster I'll build my personal Tower of Babel and tell God the truth to His face, whatever the consequences. If You're asking for home truths You'll get them!

Lenin brandished his fist at the lowest cloud and reverted to the question of Lilia's extramundane lodgings.

Will my death allow her to get even with me? Every Soviet citizen says I've robbed him of his life, even if he dies in his sleep at the age of eighty-two. In his own bed! I'm charged with the murder of three hundred million people by the Politburo of the Hereafter. What's my value in terms of human lives? Two hundred thousand people. At least. Ordinary men. Workers and state servants. And peasants. Fifty thousand scientists. Ten thousand Nobel Prize Winners. A thousand Beethovens. A thousand Tolstoys. Three hundred million people. How many Lenins should be killed to counterbalance this number? Three hundred million people. Can they prove it? I'll turn the tables on them. Am I allowed to have a lawyer? They've got all lawyers on a string. And it's God Himself who assigns housing facilities to newcomers. He won't let us live our deaths in the same mausoleum. Too late. My life was too short. My death is even shorter.

He turned away and headed for another tree which was spacious enough to receive his complaints and grievances. Lilia caught up with him and kissed him so passionately that he forgot to breathe for a while and fainted in her arms, dragging her down in his fall. 'The kiss of death,' she commented with a smile.

As Lenin recovered consciousness she took him by the hand and they proceeded along the alley leading to the opposite side of the Kremlin Wall and then down to the Moscvá River. The sun was shining so triumphantly that a Martian tourist might have mistaken the earth for a planet of victorious communism. Its all-embracing, soul-piercing light might have induced an ordinary Russian pedestrian into believing that even Stalin had fallen in love at last—in *his* region of Hell.

The water glittered more and more invitingly as they descended the slope. Lenin stopped by a tree and carved another message: 'I have no bathing suit.'

'Neither do I. We're going for a sail.'

They boarded a pleasure boat and went up the river—as far as the Lenin Hills. Lilia stared at the water and nodded rhythmically as if singing a lullaby to herself. Lenin thought she might go to sleep and began to devise a means of waking her up.

'I'd like to spend my next incarnation at the bottom of a river,' said Lilia. 'Wouldn't you? Ophelia must have been tempted by the underwater life. She wasn't mad. She was just a mermaid. In her heart of hearts she was a mermaid constrained to live amidst madmen. So she went on her knees and strew some flowers over the stream and immersed her hair in the water and stared at it so long that she finally joined her reflection and they became one, like two lovers. You have to close your eyes to see Russian cities and their inhabitants. Close your eyes or drown! Do you remember the invisible city of Kitezh that sank like a stone to ward off the danger of destruction? Apparently mermaids and their lovers can see its cupolas. And its bells are heard in the nearby woods. Russia is the invisible city of Kitezh.'

Lenin also stared at the water—the mirror of the past—and saw the book that he had read in German at the age of twenty: *Conditions of the Working Class in England*. Alakayevka. A farm in Alakayevka. Summertime. His sister Anna walked past him, heading for a summer house where a journalist awaited her, a pencil at the ready.

'Volodya erected for himself a study secluded in a thick lime tree grove,' she said. 'There he went every morning after breakfast with a pile of books under his arm. He worked until dinnertime. None of us entered that grove for fear of disturbing him.'

'Did he ever listen to birds and other forest sounds?' asked the journalist.

'Never.'

'Did he have an affair with one of the servant girls?'

'He didn't.'

'And what about your friends? Did he ever pay attention—'

'Never. Volodya's studies of Russian economics and history subsequently served as the basis of his masterpieces, including the celebrated book *What the "Friends of the People" Are, And How They Fight the Social-Democrats.*'

Birds, forest sounds. I didn't even listen to Wagner's *Waldweben*. I heard it only after my funeral, for the first time. And servant girls? *Conditions of the Working Class in England*. They've greatly improved, I imagine. Beria used to pick up girls when driving in his car. He would point his stick at a beautiful silhouette and his henchmen...in the middle of Moscow...in the middle of Sebastopol. Everywhere. He was also very fond of his employees' wives. They were beautiful, all of them. Because he chose *them*, not their husbands. Ladies first. Their husbands were hired afterwards. Hired or fired or murdered. Beria didn't waste his time on trifles, on those 'friends of the people'. Who are they, incidentally? I've heard a lot about 'enemies of the people'. Never about friends. *I am the only friend of the people and perhaps the only enemy as well. Who knows? Spinoza says we can't judge whatever happens on earth because we lack the perspective of the Hereafter. Even this famous perspective is no help at all. I have to go backwards for another century, for an eternity to understand anything. I criticised many people because I was a friend of other people. So all those people became deadly enemies and started killing each other. And I heard the applause in the audience. There was nobody on the stage any more. They went on with their applause. Why do playwrights create their plays? Why do stage-directors put them on? All you have to do is show an empty stage to the audience. There are lots of dead bodies in the wings. The stage is empty. Hamlet lies in the dust of backstage machinery. Ophelia lingers in her backstage room, at the bottom of a bath. The stage is empty. And the audience applaud. The audience know they've been killed. Everybody has been killed. And the audience applaud. And Beria knows there are a few beautiful women in the audience. He points with his stick at a beautiful back. His henchmen rush out of the box. No cries, no tears. And I still demolish the theories of my enemies and brandish my fist in the void. And servant girls are queueing in front of the mausoleum. *They* form the perspective Spinoza spoke about. Servant girls and other women queueing in front of the mausoleum. All the women I haven't loved.*

Lilia rose up as the boat rushed to embrace the landing stage, throwing caution to the winds. Lenin could not tear himself away from the underwater landscapes he had created and populated on the spur of the moment. His sister continued to enlighten the journalist on her brother's achievements: 'Audacious and determined, with all the ardour of youth and strength of conviction, but also armed with knowledge, he began to demolish the theories of the

Narodniks—' The journalist asked no questions. The figure his pencil was doodling in his notebook had nothing in common either with the Narodniks or with Lenin's youthful ardour.

From that day onward Lenin began a new form of existence in which so-called social life came into prominence to the detriment of books and abstract entities such as 'friends of the people', 'benefactors of humanity'. Now he left the mausoleum quite often, unconcerned about the reaction of the tourists queueing outside in all weathers and even during the off-season.

The tourists would come and see an empty coffin; a number of arrows accompanied by the inscription 'Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov (Lenin)' pointed to it from the walls and from the ceiling. Later on the director of the mausoleum had a biography of Lenin put in the middle of the coffin.

Every now and then Lenin would return to the mausoleum and replace the biography by his own body flecked with the lipstick of his beloved. Nobody seemed to notice the difference. The visitors did not care whether they saw Lenin's shoulders or something along the lines of: 'Lenin's doctrines are a beacon lighting up the path of the victorious struggle of the proletariat for its emancipation'. Nor would they have been surprised at seeing another body in the mausoleum. They might have even preferred to contemplate another body in the mausoleum—a beautiful woman lying in the nude on an eighteenth-century French couch.

Before entering the room where Lenin or his biography was displayed, some people actually thought they would be allowed to contemplate a beautiful woman striking suggestive poses; and they joined the queue. What else could have attracted so many people, they thought, in a country where eroticism had been prohibited for more than half a century? The mausoleum did not look like a department store.

The sight of an old man lying in a coffin would not disappoint them: they considered it a show, a *mise en scène*, a sophisticated trick intended to arouse their curiosity and desire. They expected the old man to remove an enormous mask from his body, disclosing a pin-up beauty, smiling and appealing. They waited and waited, consulting their watches and checking the intensity of their desire. Some of them would wait until Lenin's departure from the mausoleum; and they followed him for a while through the streets of Moscow in the hope of seeing a pin-up beauty within arm's reach, as large as life.

And they leafed through his biography in search of lewd photographs and libertine descriptions. And they would pore over this or that paragraph, trying to unearth its secret meaning, its sexual code. 'Lenin's instructions roused the working people and kept them in a state of mobilised preparedness.' They murmured the text and sometimes memorised it to profit from its incantatory power at home.

Had Lenin's biography been updated by the 'potato-woman', it might have offered much more entertainment to his new readers and potential supporters. Alas, his relationship with Lilia did not add much to what he usually experienced in the mausoleum or outside it.

He spent a lot of time at Lilia's. Her apartment was tiny but rather comfortable and displayed two staircases that she often turned to advantage by wearing mini skirts. Lenin would deduce from what he saw above him that she was very beautiful and sexy. As a matter of fact, he was already used to this sort of deduction: there are lots of staircases in the mausoleum.

Lilia was playful and also touching and fragile. She was quite soft and he suspected that his fingers might pierce her body and soul whenever he touched her. She was almost translucent and could be taken for a ghost; whereas he grew more and more fleshy and full-blooded. Even in his sleep he felt her blood overflow her veins and pass into his body, making it vigorous and death-proof.

'Do you love me because I am Lenin?' he wrote once in his notebook. 'Do love me for my own sake and disregard the myth they created for some obscure purpose! They say that I am a titan among the scientists, that I have fearlessly brushed aside old and obsolete views and solved—Believe me, I have solved nothing. The same sphinx lies in front of my tomb and his glance is as mysterious as ever.'

Eager to conquer her heart and senses, he presented her with a notebook in which Mandelstam had jotted down a few poems on the eve of *his* untimely death in a concentration camp. The poems had never been published; she was unlikely to accuse him of plagiarism.

He lay the poems before her, his hand pressed against his heart. As she perused the tattered pages covered with an unfamiliar handwriting he recited the poems inaudibly, going backwards—towards Romanticism and Ancient Greece, towards the Silver and Golden Ages. He felt at one with nature and the stars. He was a star himself—a shooting star rushing towards the earth to embrace it, to pulverise into dust on its surface. 'I am a star,' he wrote in *his* notebook. 'I am a shooting star.'

'You shall rise with Orion in the eastern sky. You shall set with Orion in the western sky. By the way, I've a recording of the opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Have you heard it? It's an old opera. But you're old too, aren't you?' Lilia laughed again. 'Why didn't they publish your poems in *The Complete Works of Lenin*?'

'They thought my poems would give the wrong idea...I was supposed...you can imagine...' Suspension points covered two pages of his notebook.

'How I love you!' she said. 'You were also a poet. A scientist, a poet, a first-rate politician, the founder of Bolshevism. A Renaissance man! A real all-rounder!'

Anxious to justify her praise of his achievements and abilities, he attempted to write a poem in free verse. The poem was entitled *Tenderness*.

I saw your hands crossed on your knees
 And I recalled my tenderness.
 I'd forgotten I was tender and romantic.
 I'd forgotten I was a man and a lover.
 The world is a body one should caress twenty-four hours
 A day. I recalled sentimentality,
 And I cried until my eyes forgot what they had seen
 In my lifetime. I'm crying still.
 And I forget. And I recall
 What you have offered me—your blood,
 Your love.
 And yourself.

He never showed this poem to her for fear of being unfavourably compared with the poet whose works he had appropriated. He was afraid of losing her love and esteem because of a trivial metaphor or an awkward run-on line.

Lilia was an artist and occasionally had to meet the owners of newly-opened galleries who kept her away from home for hours on end. In her absence Lenin would lie on the floor which reminded him of his sarcophagus and was, moreover, larger than any bed, allowing him to turn over and over without falling down. And he turned a lot during his nightmares. And he had a lot of nightmares in the absence of his beloved.

He often stayed in her apartment alone, watching television or leafing through the family albums. He would realise over and over again that he had died long before his beloved was born. Almost half-a-century had elapsed between his death in Moscow and her birth in the Crimea. He called this stretch of time 'no-love's land'.

What was humanity doing in the course of those years? They switch off the light, don't they, if nobody is at home?

She was not at home, but he left all the lights on like a child thinking that darkness swarms with wicked fairies and lame hobgoblins. He had not been to the mausoleum for a

fortnight and was more buoyant than ever. He knew she would come back very soon and watched out for her arrival, loath to lose a single gesture of hers. She was so gracious and elegant that he was constantly reminded of the performance of *Swan Lake* he had seen at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1962. Andrey Petrovich had got three tickets and -

And she danced in. She was dressed up as a fairy and her face was covered with make-up and glitter. 'How did you get along without me?' she asked.

'I saw a man on television,' he wrote.

'A man?'

'He told the interviewer that he couldn't get over his wife's death.'

'When did she die?'

'Ten years ago, twenty years ago. He talked about a scar. "You live on but there is a scar," he said. He was crying.'

'Why didn't he commit suicide?' Lilia slowly removed her shoes and dress.

'He hopes they'll meet in the suburbs of Moscow...in Tula...in a cul-de-sac. He said something odd. "Death and life are interchangeable. You think you're alive and actually you're dead. And vice versa. We all moon around the City of Satan." It looks more like a house. There are many corridors in this house. You can walk along them for years and years. There are many staircases. No doors. It is a sort of skyscraper.'

'Maxim Gorky used to call New York the "City of Satan".'

'You will never leave me, will you? I came to see you but you had gone for ever. The apartment was empty and mouldy. Two spiders were running up and down my raincoat. I had a terrible dream this afternoon.'

'Of course I'll never leave you. Look what I bought today.' Lilia unwrapped a box, opened it and took out a model armoured car. 'Do you recognise it?'

'There are many armoured cars.'

'You made a speech from it in April 1917 on your return from Switzerland. The Finland Station, the Station Square and all the adjacent streets were crowded with thousands of workers, soldiers and sailors carrying Red Flags. A wave of indescribable emotion swept through the crowd as you got out of the train and edged your way into the square. You climbed onto the armoured car and—'

'Where am I?' wrote Lenin. Anxiously he touched the top of the armoured car.

'Apparently a customer broke the figurine off. By accident. It was the last armoured car they had in the shop.'

'On purpose,' wrote Lenin. And he stroked the armoured car.

'I don't think so. Many foreigners buy them now. Do you like cats?'

'Perhaps somebody else stood on it.' Lenin continued both to write and to stroke the armoured car.

'What else was there on TV?' asked Lilia, putting the armoured car back in the box.

'A fashion show. How do you say "*grand couturier*" in Russian? Yves Saint-Laurent, Balmain—'

'We should go shopping. Immediately. A friend of mine invited us. Do you have a shop under the mausoleum? I can't go like this, can I?'

Lenin responded with a puzzled grimace. Lilia grasped the hem of her skirt and brandished it in the air, uncovering her knees and thighs.

'Do you understand?' she asked ironically.

Lenin shook his head without averting his eyes from the legs of his beloved.

'Well, let's begin at the beginning.' Lilia undressed with such speed that Lenin did not manage to catch all the articles of clothing she had flung in his face. Her panty hose landed on a lamp bracket and a smell of burning spread around the room. 'Do have a look at my underwear!' she cried.

Lenin nodded to indicate that he had already seen her half-cup bra and panties many times and from every angle imaginable.

'What do you think?' Lilia pulled her panties off. The smell of burning reached her neighbours' apartment.

Lenin nodded once again. Angrily Lilia unfolded before him an immaculate sheet of paper whose size seemed to invite a long and elaborate explanation of the disregard that Soviet rulers had always shown for women's underwear. Lenin seated himself on a sofa and set to work:

'Female beauty is a matter of controversy. We all appreciate a beautiful woman who, standing in the middle of our room in her natural apparel, needs neither frills nor flounces to enhance the harmony of her body and the marble-like whiteness of her skin. But we question the necessity of manufacturing bras trimmed with lace, for large-scale machine industry is the only possible economic foundation for Socialism and Communism. Only a powerful industry based on the electrification of the USSR is apt to unite disjointed, individual peasant farming, transferring it to the rails of socialist agriculture and endowing it with communist spirit. We have no time either for manufacturing underwear or for putting it on. Anyway, underwear would hamper our movements and thus reduce the production of steel and coal. Our women are even more beautiful without bras, panties, dresses, stockings and diadems. Nothing can

vie in purity and eroticism with the human body devised and materialised by the Maker of the Universe. Human beings tamper too often with the masterpieces of the Almighty. We should discard all superfluous details to liberate women from the yoke of optical illusions. Underwear and clothes in general are a bourgeois trick designed to mask reality, replacing it by lots of ornaments as useless as delicate food and expensive wines. Kitchens are nothing more than petrol stations propelling human bodies towards Communism or Revolution. And what is the purpose of mink coats, petticoats, scarves and hats? To keep us warm in wintertime? Do birds wear clothes? Do they freeze to death as they pierce clouds and sunsets? They live and prosper as long as they fly overhead, moving their wings up and down, up and down, up and down. We should work to keep our bodies warm in winter, in autumn, in spring and on rainy midsummer days. On May 10, 1919, the staff of the Kazan Railway decided to work overtime without pay to perform urgent jobs on the line. This idea of working voluntarily without pay for the common cause was taken up throughout the country. I still regard that initiative as an epoch-making event. These people needed no clothes.'

'My friends also denounce frills and furbelows but for a different reason,' said Lilia, snatching the paper from Lenin's lap and tearing it into a number of minuscule squares. 'They think Russia has a religious vocation and a messianic mission to carry out. They think the Russian nation should transcend fine arts and ornaments. But I think beauty is spiritual and I'll prove my point tomorrow night.'

They left the room, crossed the landing, pushed a few doors open and went along the façades punctuated by grey, feebly-illuminated windows. There was only one dress in those windows and Lilia kept trying it on. She looked ugly in the dress and Lenin had to conjure up the image of her naked body to persuade himself that the woman staring at herself in the same rectangular mirror was Lilia Dolskaya.

'We won't find anything in these shops,' she said at last and shortly afterwards Lenin saw an inscription 'Only Hard Currency, Nur Valuta' which was glued to a curtain-veiled window. He began to hammer on the window but soon realised that he had only a hundred roubles sewn up in the lining of his jacket. He turned around, spotted a telephone booth at the end of a cul-de-sac and headed for it.

He did not know the telephone number of his friend and assistant Kostya. He was not even sure Kostya had a telephone in the room to which he had been confined by God, by Satan or by the First Secretary of the Communist Party. But he was sure Kostya would answer the call and steal the money he needed. 'All roads lead to Hell,' he thought. 'All wires come from the electric power station spanning the river Styx. All telephones are being tapped.'

Kostya picked up the receiver at once as if he had been carrying it in his pocket. Do they have telephones all over the place? Lenin asked him to get a thousand dollars within two hours—before the closing time of the hard-currency shop. Kostya promised to do his best and hung up.

'Wait a minute! I'll give you the address of the shop,' shouted Lenin.

'Don't you worry! He'll find you,' said a passer-by, touching his hat with two fingers.

'How? Who are you?'

'I'll give him the address of the shop.' The passer-by touched his hat once again and jumped onto the footboard of a streetcar.

Kostya showed up around 11 p.m. This time he wore no beard. He stepped down from an empty bus that remained in the middle of the street until the following morning.

'Where's the driver?' asked Lenin.

'He's gone to see his grandmother,' answered Kostya.

'The shop is closed,' said Lenin.

'I've three hundred bucks,' said Kostya.

'What does a beautiful dress cost?' asked Lenin.

'I'm a bachelor,' answered Kostya.

'Do you think it's more expensive than a pair of trousers?' asked Lenin.

'I think it's much more expensive than *my* trousers,' answered Kostya.

'How much did you pay for your trousers?' asked Lenin.

'I bought them eighty years ago,' answered Kostya.

'There's no inflation in the Soviet Union,' said Lenin.

'Where's the shop?' asked Kostya.

They walked a few paces and emerged onto a dimly-lit square that resembled a shop in which there was nothing to buy except one dilapidated lamppost.

'I've lost my way,' said Lenin.

Kostya sniffed the air like a dog.

'Can you follow my scent?' Lenin also sniffed the air, inhaling the smell of the cheap cigars his father used to smoke in Simbirsk. 'Father!' he called out. 'Father!'

'Where's Lilia?' asked Kostya.

'She is waiting for us by the shop. She couldn't part with her future dress. Do you see her?'

Kostya sniffed the air, put two fingers into his mouth and gave a long, piercing whistle. An echo or another whistle responded from nowhere and he resumed his walk, dragging

Lenin behind him. A woman ran into them and her alarmingly provocative smile almost roused Lenin's body from its sixty-eight-year sleep.

'I see her,' said Kostya reassuringly.

'Who?'

'How many girl-friends do you have?'

Lilia was standing a little way off, her eyes glowing with impatience and anticipation. Her eyes lit the street far more effectively than the lampposts and the cars zooming to and fro in the deserted country. Lenin had the feeling that there was only one car in the Soviet Union and this car seemed to have lost its way and was now probing every part of the space lying before it.

'The door's locked,' said Kostya approvingly. 'There are too many thieves in Moscow nowadays.' He took a key from his right boot and inserted it into the keyhole. The key turned clockwise, then anticlockwise and the door yielded to the pressure of Lenin's shoulder.

They entered the shop in Indian file, incapable of breaking the rules imposed upon the visitors of the mausoleum. Their eyes got used to the darkness too quickly and they realised with astonishment that the interior of the shop was illuminated. The light was streaming from a glass sarcophagus that stood in the right-hand corner, not far from the check-out. Kostya pointed to that corner with his boot and they all headed for the sarcophagus. Once more Lenin did not recognise himself.

'What are you doing here?' said Kostya, addressing the mummy.

'For sale', read Lilia.

'How much?' asked Lenin, craning forward.

'There's no price tag,' said Kostya. 'It's priceless.'

'Ten thousand dollars,' read Lilia. 'It's going cheap for a quick sale.'

'The country needs hard currency,' said Kostya.

'It's only a mummy, a dummy. Is it life-sized?' Lenin placed his outspread fingers on the glass and began to measure the mummy out. 'How many centimetres are there between my thumb and my little finger?' he murmured. He applied his little finger to his toes and repeated the measurement, his hand moving upward like a grasshopper.

'You're bigger,' said Kostya who had counted the jumps of the fingers throughout the operation.

'I'm twice as big,' said Lenin proudly.

'So you're twice as expensive,' said Kostya. He thrust a few fingers out and said triumphantly, 'We've got twenty thousand, three hundred bucks.'

'I'm alive,' said Lenin with a series of jerks. 'Life costs money.'

'How much?' asked Kostya. He swung round to observe Lilia's behaviour and inadvertently kicked the sarcophagus, triggering off a hidden musical mechanism which executed the Soviet anthem and the popular revolutionary song *The Inimical Whirlwinds*.

Lilia roamed along the counters and drummed her fingers on their surfaces now and then, as if to detect a secret cavity or a hole in which the most beautiful dress might have been hidden for the benefit of 'distinguished' customers. The bottles of vodka tinkled and glimmered in response to her footsteps. 'My favourite liqueur,' she announced, drumming her fingers on a bottle of *Amaretto*.

'All ladies have a sweet tooth,' said Kostya in pontifical tones. 'If you want to seduce a lady, open a bottle of liqueur.'

Lenin skirted two counters, reached for the bottle of Amaretto and recoiled at the sight of Dzerzhinsky swaying with his wooden legs across the wall. His body split open, letting out another Dzerzhinsky, somewhat smaller and cheaper. The second Dzerzhinsky also split open and let out yet another Dzerzhinsky.

'There are all sorts of *matryoshkas* nowadays,' explained Kostya. 'Stalin, Beria, Brezhnev, Andropov, Khrushchev, Gorbachev—'

'Where's Stalin?' asked Lenin.

'Over there!' Kostya pitched a coin in the direction of a second glass sarcophagus in which the body of Stalin lay snoring and murmuring.

'What did he say? What is he talking about?' asked Lenin, backing out of the shop.

'He talks in Georgian,' said Kostya with a sigh.

'What is he doing here?'

'Fifty thousand dollars,' read Lilia with admiration. She stroked the sarcophagus and Stalin's features composed a happy, almost innocent smile.

'Why is he so expensive?' asked Lenin, brushing against a radiator that executed the revolutionary song *Let's Wipe Them Out*.

'He was a generalissimo. And he knew Roosevelt and Churchill.'

'And I knew Bernard Shaw. He placed confidence in human evolution, in the biological metamorphosis of human nature. "We must replace the man by the superman," he told me. "The only fundamental and possible Socialism is the socialisation of the selective breeding of Man. We must eliminate the Yahoo." I promised to eliminate the Yahoo once and for all. "As for human evolution, I rely more on our ideals than on pills and injections," I said. "Our

thoughts will change our sperm." We both laughed at the joke. "Anyway, once the Yahoo are eliminated as a class, there will be no one on earth but Gullivers." We laughed again.'

Stalin continued to snore and murmur to himself. 'He killed a lot of Gullivers,' said Kostya, shaking his head and wagging his index finger.

'I'll buy him,' said Lenin. 'We can sell three Lenins and buy one Stalin.'

'What do you need him for?'

'To get my revenge and ask him what he did to my son.'

'Did you have a son?'

'I think so. Everybody has a son. Or a daughter.'

'Do you like it?' asked Lilia, putting a dress on Stalin's sarcophagus. Stalin took a deep breath and began to cough violently.

'I like it,' said Kostya. He snatched the dress from the sarcophagus and perched himself on the edge of a counter. 'All my life I envied women,' he said. 'Try it on!' He handed the dress to Lilia and turned to Lenin whose shadow was gliding across the ceiling. 'Have you already bought a wedding dress?'

The shadow glided onto the wall and covered Dzerzhinsky and his doppelgängers lined up in battle array near a carton of Peter Stuyvesant. 'A wedding dress?' Lenin propped himself against the counter on which Lilia had spread out her skirt.

'I'm afraid you'll have to be content with a civil wedding.' Kostya unhooked an icon from the wall and blew on St Luke's face. 'It's dusty in here,' he grumbled.

'Mind your own business,' said Lenin.

Kostya dropped the icon into a plastic bag and slid off the counter.

'How do I look?' asked Lilia. Her dark hair swirled about her face as she pirouetted before Lenin and Kostya in her new attire.

'Wonderful! Wonderful!'

'What did he say?'

'Fantastic!' translated Kostya. 'What time is it?' He yawned and stretched himself, the plastic bag dangling from his crooked fingers.

'Choose a skirt,' said Lenin to Lilia. 'And a blouse.'

Kostya wove his way through a vortex of ties and shortly afterwards re-appeared with three cram-full plastic bags.

'You didn't even take her measurements,' said Lenin reproachfully.

'Let's go.'

'Never mind,' said Lilia, kissing Kostya's unshaven chin and hairy chest. 'I can lose weight within a few hours.'

'You may also have the icon.' Kostya yawned once again. 'Let's go.'

5

They went out of the shop and heard the sound which reminded Kostya of the parades on Red Square and of the Soviet intrusion in Budapest and Prague. 'What is it?' asked Lenin. Nothing moved in the neighbourhood; the houses and churches were unwilling to leave their dwelling places and venture into other areas of the city which might prove utterly unprotected and even less hygienic. 'Police? Enemies?' Lenin looked downward; there was no trapdoor on the sidewalk and the only stone lying at his feet was not big enough to kill the youngest member of the imperial family. 'Perhaps I could kill their dog,' thought Lenin as he picked the stone up and put it into his mouth to verify its solidity and authenticity.

Athene appeared from nowhere and took possession of the area by planting an olive-tree by a church. 'Do you recall what Heracles did when driving Geryon's cattle through Liguria?' she asked. 'You're not supposed to forget Greek myths. Marx said that the Ancient Greeks offered a range of cultural and philosophical achievements unequalled anywhere else in the history of mankind.'

Lenin racked his brains for several hours. 'Heracles killed the Hydra of Imperialism,' he said at last.

'Anyway Eurystheus wouldn't count that Labour as duly accomplished because Iolaus had supplied the firebrands.' Athene roared with laughter. 'I'm talking about the Tenth Labour. Two sons of Poseidon named Ialebion and Dercynus tried to steal the cattle from him.'

'From whom? From a kulak?'

'Heracles killed them of course. But at one stage of his battle with Ligurian forces he ran out of arrows and knelt down, wounded and exhausted. What was more, he could find no stones to throw at the enemy. And he cried, Heracles cried bitter tears. "There, there, don't cry," said Zeus, my father. He overshadowed the earth with a cloud from which a shower of stones hailed down. And with those stones Heracles put the Ligurians to flight. You should kneel down and pray to my father. And don't forget to cry. You should cry until the tears roll down your breast.'

Lenin knelt down and cried himself to sleep. Kostya woke him up. 'They're not policemen,' he said. 'And they don't belong to the imperial family. They belong to the future. They come from the future. Can't you see?' Three wheelchairs were advancing upon them in the semi-darkness. Their engines worked so noisily that Lenin stuffed his fingers into his ears to distance himself from the future. 'You used to like the future,' said Kostya with a grin. 'Shall we send the young lady home? I'll call a taxi. Wait for me here.'

'I'll see you tomorrow,' said Lilia, offering her hand. 'Don't forget we're invited to dinner. My friends are incredibly highbrow, you know.'

Lenin took the stone out of his mouth, kissed Lilia's hand and helped her into the taxi which vanished out of sight as soon as Kostya pushed the door closed. The dust rose in the wake of the taxi and enveloped the stars.

'Don't be rude to them,' said Kostya, laying his hand on Lenin's cheek. 'They're nice and miserable. Their future's quite uncertain. They may remain unborn for the rest of their lives. For many, many years. For eternity.'

'Who are they?'

'Children of the future.'

Lenin glanced at the wheelchairs and finally made out the figures of their occupants. They all had one eye and one ear. Their hands were twice as large as the hands of humans.

'Why are they so large?' asked Lenin, pointing to their hands.

'Come on, you're not Little Red Riding Hood.' Kostya stroked Lenin's cheek. 'They may have been working for many centuries. Dams, electric power stations, the "virgin lands", the chores. Or perhaps they've built up their muscles while defending themselves from their enemies and science-fiction mutants.'

'Your next question will concern their eyes and ears, I suppose,' said Thomas More; he had stolen into their field of vision from behind a lamppost and was now removing Kostya's hand from Lenin's cheek. 'If you stroke him too often he'll never feel responsible for the atrocities perpetrated all over the world in the twentieth century. He is the father of these unborn children.'

Kostya handed three hundred dollars to the mutants. 'You may need them. On earth.' The mutants nodded and put the banknotes into their mouths.

'They won't need them,' said Lenin.

'Who doesn't know that fraud, theft, rapine, quarrels, disorders, brawls, sedition, murders, treason, poisonings will die out with the destruction of money? Who doesn't know that fear, anxiety, worries, toils and sleepless nights will also perish at the same time as money? I wrote this in the sixteenth century. One has to live for at least a thousand years to realise that the quantity of evil in the world is constant and neither earthly decrees nor the intervention of extra-terrestrial worriers can diminish it. We would die without bacteria and microbes.'

'Capitalism is the microbe in which the cancer of our world originated. By killing the microbe we'll cure the disease,' said Lenin. 'And if our disease is called the earth, we'll blow it up and move to another, happier planet.'

'Have you ever felt the pulse of the earth?' Thomas More squatted down and laid his hands on the asphalt. 'Have you ever read about the Gaia hypothesis?'

'Everything alive is evil,' said Lenin. 'Only the dead can be good. Only ashes can be accepted as a *prima materia*.'

'Ashes to ashes,' said Thomas More. 'Look at these visitors from the future! They've got only one ear because the number of sounds they're interested in is rather small. As a matter of fact, half-an-ear would perfectly satisfy their requirements and I'm sure they'll lose the unnecessary half in a thousand centuries. The same goes for their eyes, brains and hearts. They've got no sexual organs, no prurient instincts. They reproduce by cell division and thus never die, living on in their progeny. They don't differ and might merge into one homogeneous mass in two thousand centuries.'

'Immortals,' murmured Lenin. 'Always alive. And united at last. The masses becoming one man, one single creature.'

'One-party system,' said Kostya, thrusting his hand upward.

'So I was right,' said Lenin, opening his mouth so widely that Kostya yawned once again and had to apologise to Thomas More whom he had come to regard as a high-ranking official in the intricate hierarchy of the Hereafter.

The wheelchairs did an about-face. Thomas More rose to his feet. 'The future embodied by these creatures is not inevitable. The future ramifies out in every direction, composing a network of possibilities which gain or lose ground as time passes by. The dictatorship of the present is constantly overthrown and replaced by a multi-party democracy.'

'Our machine allows multi-tasking without the need to buy extra hardware,' said Kostya.

Thomas More set off on his journey towards the future, following the wheelchairs that had already reached the intersection and stopped before the red light.

'The future is a straight line on the blackboard of eternity,' shouted Lenin. 'But, on our way along the straight line, we may swerve to the right or to the left, taking the circumstances into account. We may go in zigzags and even trace a circle on the blackboard of history. The strategy of the Communist Parties must be as flexible as possible. They must learn all methods of waging the struggle, from armed insurrection to the revolutionary utilisation of the most reactionary trade unions and parliaments. They must combine legal and underground

activities. They must be able to attack fearlessly and also to retreat in an organised manner, to manoeuvre, to enter into practical compromises even with the Devil and his grandmother.'

The green light was now gleaming through rain and mist, but the visitors from the past and the future did not budge, reluctant to leave the present. All of a sudden Lenin saw an umbrella suspended in mid-air immediately before him. He clutched the umbrella and put it up.

'You can take your umbrella down,' said Kostya, whereupon the rain stopped, the mist cleared and the freshly-painted sun made its appearance on the horizon.

Another noise, quite similar to that produced by the wheelchairs, came from behind the church which was towering over the street like a witness for the prosecution. Two jet-planes screeched over the house-tops and vanished in a mushroom-shaped cloud. A car enlivened the immobility of the pavement; it drove for almost a mile at full speed until its bumper knocked Thomas More over. The wheelchairs abandoned themselves to the enticement of time-travelling and plunged into the future.

'The masses of the working people are with us,' Lenin went on, 'and this is the source of the invincibility of World Communism.' A dozen doors opened along the façades and thousands of people poured onto the pavement; they were stark naked and their eyes gazed into the future. 'In spite of starvation and cold, the peasants and workers are united, their forces have become stronger and they retaliate to every severe blow by uniting their forces more than ever and increasing their economic might!'

The naked crowd linked arms and chanted in low voices:

*We are marching in a compact group
Along a precipitous and difficult path,
Holding each other by the hand.
We are surrounded on all sides
By enemies, by enemies, by enemies.
We are under their constant fire.
All our friends have already died.*

The light had been red for almost an hour.

'Stalone would finish them off in a flash,' said Kostya.

6

Around 8 a.m. Lenin found himself in the midst of books and the recollection of what was in store for him precluded his brain from unnecessary capers and quirks. Lilia had told him that her friends were 'incredibly highbrow' and Lenin did not wish to disgrace himself in a philosophical discussion. So he got up from the sofa on which he had slithered through a score of nightmares and headed for the nearest encyclopaedia. He opened the last volume in the hope of finding an article on the younger generation and soon closed it, after scanning the biography of Woodrow Wilson.

What do those youngsters look like? How do they dress? He peered from the window and studied the behaviour of two students making for a bus stop across the street.

What do they think about? Pity I can't see their brains. Their heads are prisons. I worked so hard in my lifetime that Stalin dubbed my head a 'concentration camp'.

He tipped the nearest shelf up and a number of books toppled down, their pages fluttering like wings. The two pages, which had unfolded right under his eyes, belonged to a scientific magazine and Lenin instantly became absorbed in the description of how Einstein opposed Bohr's version of Quantum Theory. He was fascinated by the words Einstein uttered in the heat of the debate, 'God doesn't play dice'.

Lenin was aware that the world had been created in accordance with the principles of Marxism, making no allowances for improvisation and uncertainties; moreover, he mistrusted games of chance, having lost a huge amount of hard currency in some French casino at the beginning of the century.

'In its struggle for power and supremacy the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation,' he scribbled in his notebook, right beneath the sentence 'I love you'. 'Bohr affirms that each event is influenced by the whole universe and therefore cannot be predicted. His theory is accurate insofar as it concerns the present state of affairs and will prove unsatisfactory as soon as the victory of the universe-revolution permits us to establish our rule not only throughout the solar system but also on distant stars. Each event will be predicted and taken care of by the members of our Central Committee. I agree with Einstein and Leibniz: there is such a thing as "pre-established harmony" on which reposes the felicity of future generations.'

He finished the article and entitled it *The Final Victory of Communism*. He turned the page and embarked upon the article *Our Secret Police*:

'In the present circumstances we should reject Bohr's theory and support Einstein who never admitted "nonlocal connections". Indeed their existence would amount to interference in our country's internal affairs by foreigners and extra-terrestrial tourists. On the other hand, we shall transcend "local connections" through a network of spies—'

At this point an alarm clock interfered in the internal affairs of his inspiration. Lenin tiptoed towards the door and applied his ear to the keyhole: he trusted his hearing more than his sight.

Do they know where I am? Who informed them about my sudden wish to spend the night in a library? God must eavesdrop on my life with FBI-microphones embedded in walls and chandeliers. And the members of His Central Committee send telegrams -

He pressed his finger to his mouth, as if to silence his unruly soul, and tiptoed towards an armchair. But he did not sit down.

I can't bear the noise of the chair grating on the stone floor. Kerensky fled from the Winter Palace in a car borrowed from the American Embassy. He also borrowed an American flag which ensured his protection within Russian frontiers. What if I call the American Embassy? I'm much more important and famous than Kerensky and the Provisional Government he was the head of. They're bound to give me a car and a flag. And a chauffeur.

Lenin slipped his trousers on, threw the door open and Lilia rushed in; her hair flew behind her as if racing to catch up with her head.

'Put on your shirt! We're late for the dinner! And we'll have to buy a bottle of vodka and a tin of caviar. Do you still have three hundred dollars?' Lenin turned all his pockets inside out and found the comb that he had lost in 1897. 'Not even in your lining? Is there a telephone in this room?'

Lenin began to walk around the library; after a while he chanced upon a phone book the pages of which seemed to have been glued together by a governmental censor or a KGB officer. Lenin tore a few pages off and saw the telephone number of the American Embassy which was underscored in red and blue.

'We'll bring them a bottle of lemonade,' said Lilia resignedly.

As they descended a staircase, whose steps were chipped like the glass of a drunkard, two taxis pulled up in front of the building. 'My turn,' hooted the first driver. The second driver nodded and his taxi shot away.

The streets of Moscow looked longer than usual and Lilia decided to shorten them by shouting at the driver to step on it. 'Are you paralysed or what?' At last she lowered her voice and they got out of the taxi. She bought a bottle of lemonade and the smell of urine engulfed

them like a sea-wave as they walked into the entrance hall of a 5-storeyed building. The same smell followed them into the lift and even endeavoured to cross the threshold of the apartment where they had been awaited since 8 p.m. by a group of Lilia's friends.

'The younger generation,' thought Lenin, smacking his lips. 'They'll live long enough to carry my ideas as far as Jupiter. And their children will carry them as far as—'

'He doesn't look like him,' said the host. 'A bad actor or a puppet made by Copelius's offspring.'

'Lenin,' said Lilia. 'What would *you* look like if you had been born more than a hundred years ago?'

'Come in,' said the host. 'Does he *think* like him?'

'He can't speak, but he writes a lot. Would you care to see his notebooks? You'll judge for yourself.' She opened her handbag and extracted two notebooks from it.

Who does she work for? God? Is God a matchmaker? They read my notebooks. Last week I wrote, 'One must strive to take the enemy by surprise, at the moment when his troops are scattered.' Now the enemy concentrates his troops on Red Square, in front of the mausoleum. Fortunately I anticipated his malicious move and asked the taxi driver to set me down at the library, not at the mausoleum. I fooled him once again.

'Do you really love him?' asked a man lying on the floor.

'I love him because great men have an aura, a sort of halo, even if they're criminals. And one can bathe in their streams of energy.'

'In the nude, I hope.'

'And you do nothing but talk and talk and talk—'

'You can bathe in my stream of consciousness,' said a man lounging in a rocking chair.

'I prefer his Black Sea,' said Lilia, nudging Lenin into the living room.

'His energy was bigger and blacker than the Black Sea. Do sit down!'

'Call it an ocean then, a lilac ocean,' said Lilia with a smile. Lenin sat down on a divan and his eyes began to drill a hole in the forehead of the man sitting opposite him. Anxious to preserve his brain from injury, the man hastened to satisfy Lenin's curiosity and put his cards on the table.

'What strikes one in whatever he wrote and did are his energy and stupidity,' he said fearlessly but without defiance. 'Last autumn I visited his museum—just before it was closed down for good. His ideas and the way he expressed them are so primitive and vulgar—'

'He was a popular leader,' cried a voice in the adjacent room. Lenin turned around. 'The masses don't understand Aristotle and Nietzsche.'

'He didn't know he was stupid—that's the point. We all talk stupidly now and then. A certain amount of stupidity is required in amorous games and social talk. But we do it on purpose. He did it spontaneously. We're aware of it. He wasn't. And we often betray ourselves by a smile or an ironical intonation. He never did. There was nothing to betray. Only a stupid man can electrify the crowd, because he fully believes in his own words. His force of conviction was irresistible.'

'My school friend. He is a lover of Proust,' said Lilia. Lenin was loath to acknowledge that he had never heard the name of Proust in his life, but his glance betrayed him. 'Didn't you read *A la recherche du temps perdu*? Alyosha, Alyosha, when did he die?'

'Who? Lenin?'

'Proust, Proust!'

'One and a half years before Lenin.'

'I'd rather have Proust as my guest,' said the host.

Lenin opened his notebook and scribbled, 'I am, too, searching for lost time.'

Alyosha got up, removed *Le temps retrouvé* from a shelf and threw it out of the window. A loud applause saluted his gesture.

'Let him do it! Let him go back into the past and find what we lost. He *can* do it because he did it once. There's an aura of action. Only he can undo what he did. He'll raise the dead from their tombs and they'll walk in our midst. And they'll talk to us. And they'll live with us.'

'He is not Jesus Christ, is he?'

'As a weasel, that is killed, is made alive again by the breath and cry of his dam; and as lions bring their dead whelps to life by breathing upon them—'

'He'll need the ashes of the Phoenix and the cast skin of a Snake—'

'It's not as absurd as it may seem,' said the host. 'We read that Tindoreus, Hercules and Palicy were raised from the dead. Glaucus was revived by a medicine overflowing with honey.'

The lover of the dead nodded feverishly and clasped his hands in religious ecstasy. 'We can't live without the dead. It's so hard to walk and breathe without them. And think without their thoughts.'

'It's better to populate the world with men of genius—Plato, Feodorov, Heidegger—than to live amidst mediocrities.'

'The grass was greener in the past, on the other side of Time.'

'I can live without Lenin,' cried a voice in the adjacent room.

'We won't resurrect *him*,' said Alyosha. 'I mean he won't resurrect himself.'

'Or else we'll kill him or bundle him off to the Gulag Archipelago.'

'And we'll strangle Hitler and Stalin in the maternity hospitals.'

'Shall we spare their mothers? And their fathers?'

'He'll blow his brains out after bringing back to life Mandelstam, Gumilyov—'

'Did you see the American movie *Dead Poets Society* or something? Awful. These American movies—'

'The cinema is dead anyway. We should create "Dead Cinema Society".'

'Or "Dead Art Society".'

'Or "Dead World Society". The world died in the seventies. In the middle of the seventies. Without atom and hydrogen bombs.'

'Nothing happens except nationalistic uprisings.'

'Shall we breathe upon the dead world? It's hard to live without a world.'

Without interrupting their dialogue, two men emerged from the adjacent room and joined the main group of the guests.

'The other day I took the lift at the university and heard a conversation between young students. They talked about videos, CD players and of course about money. Ten years ago they would have talked about mathematics or women.'

'Nobody reads poetry any more. Nobody buys caviar and cognac for poets.'

'There are no poets nowadays. They've all become drivers and cruise in their cars around the city, looking for the enemies of public transport.'

'Freedom means nothing without art.'

'Shall we ask Lenin to force us underground where we used to create our masterpieces and read Borges, instead of Daphne du Maurier? The open air doesn't seem to agree with our intellects.'

'We were better off in prisons and lunatic asylums.'

'My mother told me about a woman who had slept with a mummy, become pregnant and borne him a child—a beautiful daughter,' said Nina.

'Aren't you afraid of him?' asked Natasha.

Lilia shrugged her shoulders. 'He is in love with me.'

'Yet each man kills the thing he loves,' quoted the host. 'He'll do it without a sigh. He never sighed in his life.'

'He never loved either. He used to kill the things he hated. And he hated everybody,' said Alyosha with a sigh.

Lenin rose to his feet and tottered towards a window, his eyes downcast and his lips trembling.

'He's got syphilis,' said Lola. 'Do be careful, my dear!'

'Seventy years of death must have cured him,' said Alyosha.

'Is death a remedy?' asked the lover of Proust.

'A sleeping pill,' said the host.

'And a pain killer,' said the lover of lunatic asylums.

'My husband spent the night in a library,' said Lilia. 'He thought we would discuss philosophical problems and wished to take part in the discussion.'

'Are you married? Congratulations,' said Alyosha.

'His philosophical books were a model of kitsch. We had to learn some passages by heart. "To extricate natural science, and physics in particular, from the crisis into which it had been plunged, it is necessary to adopt the only true method and the only true philosophy—namely, dialectical materialism. Modern physics is giving birth to dialectical materialism."

'A stillborn child,' commented the lover of the dead.

Lenin picked up a paper napkin and wrote down, 'The limits of approximation of our knowledge to the objective, absolute truth are historically conditional, but the existence of such truth is unconditional, and the fact that we are coming closer and closer to it is also unconditional.' He put the napkin on a tin of cod liver and surveyed the faces of his opponents.

Some guests leaned over the napkin; the others continued to talk and kiss and undress in the corners of three rooms and in the spacious kitchen.

'We're rather getting away from the truth,' said the man who had moved from the floor to Lenin's chair. 'Our forefathers cooked clouds and made rain-cocktails in their kitchens. They turned out thunderbolts in their forges. And gods sat in their living rooms and played dice with them.'

'Lenin is right,' disagreed the lover of the dead. 'We're learning the ways of God. We're getting closer to Him every second. Our history is leading us to God. That's the goal of our history. Otherwise it would be meaningless and noxious. Otherwise I would commit suicide.'

Three men and one woman sauntered into the room and saw Lenin's figure as it bent over the tablecloth to write down another truth on a paper napkin.

'Who is this?'

'He reminds me of someone.'

'Lenin. I recognised him,' said the woman.

'I told you about it yesterday,' said the host.

'May I punch him on the nose? I've been dreaming about it ever since I first saw his picture in a history book.'

'You may,' said Lilia, 'but don't hurt him.'

'You can't hurt this mummy. It doesn't feel anything. What's the point of punching him? You should have done it a century ago.'

'Let's go to St Petersburg,' said the woman.

'What for?'

'To storm the Winter Palace. There are several paintings I'd like to have in my country house. We'll ask him to lead us.'

'Would you be willing to prepare and bring about another revolution?' asked the host.

Lenin nodded and wrote down, 'A combined attack by the fleet, the workers and the army. Occupy and hold at all costs: (a) the telephone exchange; (b) the chief telegraph office; (c) the railroad stations; and above all (d) bridges.'

'When shall we leave Moscow?'

'Tonight. At once. In an hour. By the "Red Arrow".'

'Not tonight. I'm exhausted. And Kolya is irremediably drunk. We won't capture the Winter Palace without Kolya.'

Lenin bent over another paper napkin. 'Kamenev, Zinoviev, Trotsky, and the few adherents who followed them did all they could to frustrate the plan for the insurrection. Trotsky, for example, proposed that it should not be started until the opening of the Second Congress of Soviets. I denounced them all as traitors. Waiting for the congress would have been sheer idiocy.'

'Instead of going all the way to St Petersburg, we might storm my neighbour's apartment,' said the host. 'He owns a few icons I've been lusting after ever since he moved into our building.'

'So we should switch his fax machine off and occupy his bathroom and bedroom. Is his wife beautiful?'

'Has he a daughter?'

'Has he a son?'

'How long will it take?' asked Lilia.

'The success of both the Russian and the world revolution depends upon two or three days of fighting,' wrote Lenin.

'But tomorrow we're invited to tea at my grandmother's,' said Lilia as she sprang up and snatched a pile of napkins from under Lenin's fingers. 'Can't you wait?'

'There are people who still invite their colleagues and relatives to tea parties,' said Alyosha. After seventy-five years of communism!'

'History will not forgive sluggish, torpid revolutionaries who could be victorious today (and will surely be victorious today), while they risk losing a lot tomorrow. They risk losing all!' wrote Lenin on the tablecloth.

'What do you think you're doing?' cried the hostess, hitting Lenin on the back with her fists. 'It's a damask tablecloth I inherited from my grandfather.'

'You can sell it as a souvenir of the Revolution,' said the lover of lunatic asylums, pensively fiddling with his friend's belt buckle and shirt.

Bored and disappointed by Lenin's repetitions, five men left the living room and joined two ladies in the corridor.

'History is stubborn and narrow-minded,' said the host. 'The same words are uttered over and over again. Do we still dwell in the woods and eat coconuts?'

'There are very few themes in our life,' said the lover of Borges. 'What counts are the variations on those themes.'

'Life is nothing but a variation on the theme of death,' said a lover of Beckett with a smile.

'There are lots of Lenins in the world. They climb up barrels, cars and pianos and thrust their arms towards rubbish bins. And their followers stick their heads out of the muck and crawl on all fours in one direction only. And Hitlers walk around us with their palettes and wink at the regiment of Stalins. Recently I wrote a poem to give a new slant on last year's putsch. I'll recite it now in memory of our *soirées poétiques*, God rest their souls.'

The host stood up and the laughter in the adjoining room died away.

*Again. Once more. History is insatiable
And unimaginative: tanks, stupid mugs...
Over and over again. Why do you mock this country?
Why do you never grow tired
Of your own mockery?*

Why do you still create

*Ends without beginnings,
Death without birth?*

*Why don't you choke with our blood?
Drunk and filthy, you've staggered
Around our land for centuries,
Trampling our relics underfoot and mashing
Our bones. Where did you learn
The doctrine of eternal recurrence?
Did Pythagoras whisper it in your ear?
Was Nietzsche your tutor and professor?*

*History. Why didn't you study mercy
In the City of God? Why
Do tyrants and cretins live here
And not in Hell? Why don't they write
Their Mémoires d'outre tombe? Good-bye
History. Devil rest your soul!*

*At least
Give us a break!*

'Some of them do live in Hell, but there are flights every week from the City of Satan to Moscow.'

'And we're in radio contact with them. Every hour.'

'And their followers deposit flowers on their tombs.'

'Yesterday I took a stroll along the Kremlin wall and saw a fresh bunch of roses on Stalin's tombstone,' said Lilia.

'History haunts us. History is the Hound of the Baskervilles.'

'But history did give us a break.'

'Did it?'

'According to Mallarmé, the world exists only to supply us with a material for our books, for our poems.'

'A similar idea is formulated in Book VIII of the *Odyssey*. There are very few ideas in life.'

'The August Putsch broke out for the sake of your poetic imagination.'

'Three people died in the putsch,' said the host, sitting down.

'In the Revolution there were only two casualties,' wrote Lenin on the window.

'A great many poems were inspired by the Revolution.'

'And how many poems were nipped in the bud?'

'Our lives were also nipped in the bud by the Revolution,' said the lover of Beckett.

'We're crawling on all fours—in different directions and without raising our heads from the muck.'

'Aren't we crawling towards the United States?' asked Alyosha. 'All of us? In one direction?'

'We're already in the United States, aren't we?'

'How many supermarkets have we got?'

'My Parisian friend goes to supermarkets only for toilet paper.'

'We'll never live in Paris,' said the lover of Proust and King Lear. 'Never, never, never, never, never.'

'Despair, despair, despair, despair,' said a lover of Hopkins.

'I lived in Paris for a while,' wrote Lenin on the window pane. 'I took an active part in the work of the Bolshevik group in that city, delivered lectures at the Proletarii Club and addressed a meeting of political refugees. Soon after my arrival, the Fifth Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. was held and, as the principal speaker at this conference—'

Lenin listened to the philosophical discussion, which was the key point of the party, and participated in it with the ardour of a young revolutionary. He did not miss a single word and was implacable towards the people who, reluctant to deliver a final blow to the common enemy, procrastinated and jeopardised the reputation of the Party.

Suddenly Lenin grew impervious to the ideas voiced and debated in the room. He turned his attention to Lilia whose loyalty he had come to question in the light of recent events and remarks. His consciousness dissected Lilia's soul and stumbled upon an image of Andrey Petrovich.

In the meantime, another space of Lenin's consciousness busied itself with holes, alias loopholes. This 'escape-space' was already half-full with 'escape-ideas' out of which protruded the word 'toilet'.

The sooner I leave this room the better. They expect me to honour the long-standing Russian tradition and stay in this apartment till dawn, drinking and refuting my opponents' arguments. I'll leave before midnight. What's the use of storming the Winter Palace? The capital has been transferred to Moscow.

Soon the opportunity to take French leave presented itself: Lilia gripped her handbag and headed for the corridor. Lenin caught up with her and, after an eloquent exchange of gestures and prods, they found themselves in the street. 'Why? What's wrong?' asked Lilia for the umpteenth time. The moon included them in a mournful cityscape and a taxi swerved towards their silhouettes.

Like a plain-clothes policeman, the moon followed them along the street. At an intersection Lenin got out and rushed towards a restaurant under the vigilant eye of a red light. He heard Lilia's shouts but his attention was held by a bully whose body stood between him and the toilet—a strategic point of the utmost importance. He pictured to himself a small window, a backyard, a winding path leading to freedom and communism.

'The restaurant is closed,' said the bully, whereupon the toilet door flew open and a woman stalked out.

'She lost a chance,' thought Lenin.

With a meaningful moan the woman sank into the arms of a cloakroom attendant who had no alternative but to lean upon a counter and remain in the same posture for five minutes; the bully receded a few steps and bumped the far side of his head against a column; the janitor

said, 'Welcome Vladimir Ilich' and almost toppled over in his eagerness to usher Lenin into the dining room. With a few strides Lenin reached the toilet door.

He waded into and across a stream to the accompaniment of swear words that issued from beyond an enormous stain. The garrulous visitors to the toilet remained invisible throughout their dialogue so that the swear words seemed to originate either in the stain or in the stream. A grey, striped cat was dangling from a window through which she had apparently tried to squeeze in search of fresh food. Her body was swaying in the draught and threatened to fall on Lenin's head wherever he strolled or stood in contemplation of his surroundings.

He tiptoed through a door and trampled a few plates and cups into the ground as he squelched along a corridor overgrown with ivy and moss. He tripped over the trunk of a cherry tree and heard a multitude of axes hacking and chopping in the distance. A rat darted from under his feet and he jumped up, lifting a few lumps of clay that had adhered to his shoes. 'There are many cats in this restaurant,' he thought, groping for a cat in the darkness. 'Do all of them die under the ceiling?' He jumped up once more but did not touch anything. 'Why don't they eat rats? We shouldn't kill cats as long as rats run around. At least we shouldn't hang them.'

The corridor opened out onto a backyard cluttered up with coffins and the remnants of archaic machines. Short of breath, Lenin sat down on a stump that looked like a malignant tumour maturing within the body of the courtyard. By means of a crutch he had found in a tool shed, he tried to prise off the lid of the nearest coffin—to make sure the coffin was not empty. He failed and threw the crutch on top of a woodpile that towered over the backyard like a monument. He began to clamber up the pile to avail himself of the panoramic view of the area. The logs were rolling under his feet but he continued his ascent towards the crutch. He finally hoisted himself onto it and glanced around with eagerness. What he saw from this vantage point made him spit and curse the day he had encountered Lilia: a circular wall seemed to hold the backyard in a tight embrace and even rats were unable to find a way out. Lenin cursed the day he had fallen in love with Lilia and slid down, frustrated and furious.

A narrow door opened beside two rusty crankshafts and a cloud of steam hid for a moment the cook and the kitchen utensils. Lenin edged his way through the saucepans and spoons, the steam haloeing and hallowing his head; the janitor bowed to him and a green light sanctioned his flight along the Garden Ring.

He broke into a run and outstripped five pedestrians who, by strolling in the streets at a late hour and under the full moon, tested and defied the assassins of the city.

'Can I give you a lift? Where's the jogging suit I offered you last summer?' Felix was poking his head out of a black Mercedes.

Lenin continued to run along the Garden Ring.

'Where do you intend to spend the night? Not in the mausoleum, I suppose. It's dangerous, isn't it? Let's go to a hotel. They won't find you at an ordinary hotel, will they?'

'—alone,' said Lenin, having bungled the beginning of his demand. He slackened his pace and took a handkerchief out of his sleeve.

'I've been appointed as your bodyguard, you know,' said Felix, getting out of the car. 'I'm accountable to the Almighty for your safety and well-being.'

'Does God still care about me?' asked Lenin out of sheer curiosity.

'He certainly does,' answered Felix. 'God cares about everybody. Even *I* am entitled to a bodyguard.' He glanced back and winked at the chauffeur; the latter immediately removed his cap and bowed to Felix, Lenin and Andrey Petrovich who was waving from a rooftop.

'I'm also entitled to a bodyguard,' said the chauffeur proudly. He donned his cap and pointed to a motorcycle creeping along the curb. By way of an answer, the motorcycle grumbled, screeched, roared and reared up.

'Incidentally, what we call "the Almighty" is the head of our area. Newcomers usually confuse him with God,' explained Felix nonchalantly.

'Where's your hotel?' asked Lenin wearily.

'Just round the corner.'

Deprived of the Beethoven-sublimated moonlight, the hotel in question was even darker than the Garden Ring. A janitor snored so loudly that two chandeliers tinkled in rhythm with his respiration.

'It's on the third floor,' said Felix, pressing a button. The lift slept as profoundly as the janitor and remained deaf to the button's pleas.

They headed for a staircase, which was wide-awake like a conscientious guard, and soon found a woman whose half-open eyes were able to distinguish between reality and dreams.

'Who are you?' she asked apprehensively.

'Do you have a double room for one night?' asked Felix.

'We don't allow homosexuals to stay at the hotel,' said the woman, closing her eyes.

'Do you have two rooms?' asked Felix.

'Are you foreigners?' asked the woman, without opening her eyes.

Felix placed his passport on the counter and began to whistle a doleful tune. The woman opened her eyes, picked up the passport and put it under the counter. 'Is your friend a foreigner?'

'Don't be a doubting Thomas, my dear lady.'

'What nationality is he?'

'German.' Felix modulated from E minor to A minor.

'Where's his passport?'

Felix placed another passport on the counter and the lady picked it up. 'He doesn't look like a foreigner,' she said.

'He was born in Munich.'

'I met him in Moscow.'

'He's worked in Moscow for seventy years. Let me see: one, two—'

'What's his profession?'

'He is the curator of a very important museum.'

The woman unhooked two keys from a board and Felix pocketed them with a flourish. The chauffeur handed him an attaché case and Lenin found himself in another corridor which proved almost as long as the ones he had coped with during his other journeys through days and nights.

'Here we are!' said Felix, inserting his index finger into a keyhole. The door opened and Lenin crumpled in a heap on the only bed standing opposite a window. 'You were right about Trotsky.' Felix sat down on the only chair. 'What did you call him? Judas! An unreliable fellow. He insisted I should send him a girl from our Turkish House. Hell doesn't destroy sexual instincts, he said. Hell is no concentration camp, I said in vindication of my principles. In France and other civilised countries of Europe prisoners watch television and swill wine, he said. I offered him a television set and a case of Mouton Rothschild. He refused, arguing that wine and television would only quicken and sharpen his sexual instincts without providing them with a "tangible outlet". I finally gave in and asked one of our girls to visit him in his tent from time to time. But at that point he went on a sex strike because he hadn't received authorisation to make a speech before the Red Army soldiers. The girl was disappointed and offended. Now she looks after Dzerzhinsky and Malenkov.' Felix produced a pack of photographs and cast them in a fantail on Lenin's head and pillow. 'Our Turkish girls are renowned in the whole region. Very beautiful, aren't they? Booked until 1996, I'm afraid. But there are many whores in this hotel, don't you worry! One of them used to call me at 1 a.m. "Do you speak English? May I come to your room?" I sent this girl about her business. In

English of course. I'm faithful to my wife and don't tolerate betrayals except for therapeutic purposes. Besides, these whores are dangerous from a medical point of view. They drink too much and don't care a bit about hygiene and precautions. They go from one client to another, forgetful of diseases and viruses. Door-to-door selling! No wonder they die like flies. Their clients die too! They contaminate each other without prior notice. They often die at the hotel, crumpled in a heap on threadbare carpets, hunched over half-full glasses of water or vodka. After much suffering patiently borne. No Extreme Unction, no visa to Paradise, no pass to Purgatory. I'm not sure the whore I mentioned is still on the hotel staff. I seem to have spotted her in our Haiti Palace. I'll find a substitute, don't you worry! Fire ahead! "I was compelled to load my weapons with a double charge," you wrote in a pamphlet entitled *The Elections in St Petersburg and the Hypocrisy of the Thirty-One Mensheviks*.'

'Toilet,' said Lenin, dropping the photographs on a carpet. 'I'll be right back.'

Once under the protection of the bathroom walls, he locked himself in and opened all the taps to preclude Felix from recording and shooting his stream of consciousness.

I'll say I'm taking a bath. There are bathrooms in Hell, aren't there? The other day, I came across a few bars of soap. And I'll brush my teeth and dry my hair with a towel. They don't have hair-dryers at the Moscow hotels. Another excuse. Another forty minutes. That's always something! They'll get tired and leave my room. Is it my room? Can I stay in this room until the day after tomorrow? To avoid high tea at her grandmother's. At least I can stay in here. And what if they break in, fish me out of the bath and carry me, dripping and wriggling, all the way to the mausoleum? I'll splash water over their faces. I'll train the nozzle on their eyes. They do it in films. With the dust or the snow. Or the mud. To blind the enemy and kill him while he rubs his eyes and nose. While he sneezes. I do it myself in the movie *Lenin in October*. I kill an officer and escape to Switzerland or France. Shall I escape to France from here? But I have a daughter. And she lives in the Soviet Union. I must bring her up. I'll send her to an Ivy League University. Or to Geneva. And I'll find her mother in the eternal darkness of the Moscow streets. At a hospital. At a cemetery. And I'll exile Lilia to Nizhny Novgorod. What if she comes to this hotel? Why did they take the lid off? Looks like a skeleton. Is it broken? Shall I pull the chain to see if it functions? It doesn't. Something must be broken within the skeleton. Will our corpses look like that in a thousand years? Right before the Last Judgement? On the evidence of spies and provocateurs, angels will fabricate charges against me and my successors. High treason, genocide, famine, destruction of churches. And God will sentence me to death. He might also banish me to the Gulag Archipelago. My arrest and banishment will rouse a wave of protest among the broad masses

of workers and Western intellectuals. And the last Congress of the Party will express its disapproval of God's methods. The delegates will send me a message of greeting. Anyway I won't stand for trial! I never did! I'll hide myself in a bathroom. Shall I stay here for ever? Before and after the end of Time? It's a pity the water closet is out of order. Shall I repair it? Where does this water come from? Have I used the toilet? The taps. I've got another opportunity to drown. Too late and useless. Silence. Does Felix walk around the room? Has she arrived already? I can always say I'm ill and have to keep to my bed most of the time. Even outside the sarcophagus and the mausoleum. I can say I'm dead, in case she insists on our going out. I drowned in my bath. Somewhere in Finland. I slipped on a tiled floor, fell into the bath and drowned. Irrevocably. She'll never find me under water. I still haven't recovered from my incurable disease, I'll tell her. But I'm not contagious. Is death contagious? It is. Life is nothing but an incubation period, however long it may last. Do the dead love the living? They hate them. They envy them. Twenty-four hours a day they brew poisons for them. Why do the living die? Because the dead poison them. Why do the cars of the living skid into telegraph poles? Because the dead blow them off their itineraries. The dead are bored to death. They want the living to join them in the Hereafter. To play a game of dice, to talk about earth.

The door opened and Lilia stalked in. 'What are you doing in my bathroom?' she asked, wrenching a towel from his grasp. 'Did you hide yourself in here to watch me take a shower?' Lenin shut his eyes and turned his head away to face a bare wall. 'You're a bit of a voyeur, my darling.' She removed her skirt and hung it on a hook. 'Well, you may stay, if you wish. Sit down!'

Lenin bowed and brushed against the lavatory chain as he moved towards the door, his eyes downcast. 'I must be off,' he said. The chain started to swing to and fro, hitting the wall and Lilia's elbow.

'Sit down! Are you forgetting your manners?' shouted Lilia, getting hold of his right foot. 'Your shoes are soaked.'

Lenin sat down on the lavatory bowl and Lilia pulled off his shoes. 'The damp has come right through the lining. You behave like a schoolboy. There's a hole in your stocking. Two holes. They're completely worn out. Don't fidget!' She threw her tights over his shoulder. 'Once I went for a swim near our country house. Shall we go down to the country next weekend? Do you like mushrooming? I realised I'd forgotten my bathing suit. But there was nobody on the beach and anyway I always swim stark naked. So I undressed. Sit down! Suddenly I saw a little boy hiding behind a bush.'

8

'I've heard a lot about you from my granddaughter,' said Lilia's grandmother as she held her hand out and eyed Lenin from head to toe. 'I hope you're a serious young man and I think your intentions are honourable. If I'm not mistaken.'

'I also read his biography out loud to you, grandma.'

'I don't like his biography. It's ridiculous and cruel. And there's a lot of nonsense in it. Next time you'd better hire a professional biographer. Otherwise you'll bring disgrace on your family and on your country.'

'And you saw him on television.'

'I prefer him in the flesh. He was too small and impertinent on television. And he talked too much. I hope you don't talk too much, do you?'

'Only on television, grandma.'

Lenin bowed, clicking his heels, and the grandmother withdrew her hand with a grunt. 'All this nonsense about kulaks—'

'You're confusing Lenin with Stalin, grandma.'

'I thought Stalin was Lenin. Anyway he is your fiancé now. You love him, don't you?'

'Of course I love him.'

'Who? Lenin or Stalin?'

'Vladimir Ilich Lenin.'

'I was acquainted with Vladimir Ilich Paromsky. Are you his relative? A cousin perhaps?'

'No,' said Lilia.

'Whose cousin are you?'

'He has no family.'

'Are you an orphan? Did your mother abandon you in your childhood? A lot of babies were found on doorsteps—'

'His parents died a long time ago.'

'What was the cause of your mother's death? Usually children inherit their mothers' diseases, not their fathers'. It's hereditary, you know.'

'His mother died of old age.'

'It's not a mortal disease, I can assure you.' The grandmother attempted to leave her armchair with a view to demonstrating her ability to move around; she would have collapsed under the weight of her own body, but for Lenin's timely interference. 'Don't help me, sir!'

'He always treats his subjects with kindness and understanding,' said Lilia.

The grandmother sank back into the armchair and began to thump with her walking stick on the floor in retaliation for her failure. 'Don't you dare come to my rescue in the future! Let me fall, if I feel like it! Are you a weight lifter? Or a porter? What's your profession?'

'He is a politician.'

'Like Kerensky? I was in love with Kerensky. I was fifteen years old.' The grandmother put her walking stick near an apple tart.

'Yes, grandma.'

'He doesn't look like Kerensky. Are you sure he is a politician?'

'He is the head of the government.'

'He is not an artist, is he? Artists are unreliable and unfaithful. And they adore prostitutes. I knew an artist who wasted all his money on prostitutes and schoolboys.'

'He hates artists, grandma.'

'And when they die of syphilis in a distant country—'

'He is dead already.'

'And who inherits his money, may I ask?' The grandmother reached for her piggybank. Lilia shrugged her shoulders. 'So he *is* an artist. No money, no will. What are you going to live on? You have no money of your own. Your father was also an artist.' The grandmother pushed the piggybank away.

'He's written many books. We'll live on his royalties.'

'Books, books. What are your means of existence, young man? Can you provide for your family? And you'll have a lot of children, I hope.'

'He is Lenin, grandma. Have you forgotten who Lenin is?'

'Lenin, Stalin, Brezhnev. I'm asking what his means of existence are!'

'He can have...everything.'

'Tell me what he can have.'

'The whole of Russia. And Europe. All he needs to do is adjust his views to the present circumstances. And he'll enfold every god in his arms, their lands and—'

'Will you adjust to the present circumstances, young man?'

'He's always done it. He wrote by the end of the nineteenth century, "We do not regard the theory of Marx as something fixed and inviolable. On the contrary, we are convinced that it laid only the cornerstone of the science which Socialists must carry further in all directions if they want to keep pace with life." He'll keep pace with life!'

'Your mother is always late.'

A black curtain of clouds was rent asunder by Zeus's walking stick and the grandmother cast a look at the door.

'Is it your mother?' she asked. 'Or your father? I didn't invite your father, did I?'

'You didn't.'

'He was a handsome man. But he betrayed your mother. Twice. And he lied to me in the presence of your mother. Twice.' The grandmother pulled her walking stick off the table and tapped four times on Lenin's foot, echoing the thunderclaps. 'Are you going to betray my granddaughter? Answer me!' Lenin shook his head. 'Are you impotent? Are you?' She raised her walking stick above Lenin's head and put it near a cherry tart.

'He likes cherries,' said Lilia.

'Does he?'

'He also likes apples and mushrooms. The other day we went mushrooming in our woods and I swam in our river.'

'Can he swim at all?'

'He drowned once near Helsingfors, but he is an excellent swimmer.'

'Can he dive? I saw a shark on television—'

'He only swims in my bathroom, grandma.'

The doorbell rang. Lenin jumped up and dashed towards the window.

'Did I allow you to take your leave, young man? Sit down!'

Lenin sat down and stood up again as Lilia's mother bumped her head against an open window and apologised, discreetly rubbing her eyebrow.

'You remember Lenin, don't you?' asked Lilia.

'Do you always keep your windows open during thunderstorms? It's been years since I saw you last. I do the shopping and clean our flat. I've no time to meet interesting people. I lost my husband thirteen years ago. He died in a car crash near Yasnaya Polyana. And Lilia paints still-lives and goes to picture galleries. Did you make her acquaintance in a museum?'

Lilia shut the window and traced the outlines of the mausoleum with her hands. 'It's Lenin, mother. Lenin.'

'My husband died near Yasnaya Polyana, but he is buried at the Pyatnitskoe Cemetery in Moscow. Do you think we should have buried him near Tolstoy's tomb? Do you believe in ghosts? Do you believe in telepathy?'

Lilia approached the cherry tart and raised a knife over it.

'In Paradise everybody is bound to become Tolstoy and Montaigne,' said Lilia's mother, laying her handbag on the windowsill.

'And Kerensky,' said the grandmother. 'I wonder where he lives now,' she added, lowering her voice.

Lilia was cutting the tart and licking her fingers. She took one of the triangular slices and beckoned Lenin over with her eyelashes. He came up to her, bent over her palm, snapped the slice into his jaws and swallowed it quickly.

'Your husband didn't look like Tolstoy,' said the grandmother, twisting her daughter's wrist with both hands. 'He looked more like Dostoevsky, because of his beard.'

'Tolstoy also wore a beard,' said Lilia, dropping a slice on the floor.

'Kostya wore a beard too,' thought Lenin, kneading his chin and knitting his brows. 'Perhaps he was this woman's husband thirteen years ago.'

'I haven't heard anything yet,' said the grandmother, reaching for Lenin's tie. 'What do you think I invited you for? You're not hungry, are you? Eat another slice and tell me what I'd like to hear.'

Lenin swallowed another piece of tart, setting his Adam's apple in motion.

'I'm waiting,' said the grandmother.

'A cup of tea?' asked Lilia, stuffing a slice of cherry tart into her grandmother's quivering mouth.

'My mother adores music,' said Lilia's mother, touching Lenin's elbow. 'Do you play the piano? Did you promise to play a Chopin nocturne for her? She's got an upright piano in her room. My husband played the piano wonderfully. I could listen to his nocturnes for hours and hours. He was wounded in the war. But his hands and legs remained intact and as skilful as ever. He even improved his technique in the last years of his life. And he grew a beard. Once he played a polonaise. Or was it a mazurka? But it wasn't a waltz. I watched his hands flutter about the keyboard.'

'This voice reminds me of someone,' thought Lenin with a frown. Suddenly his head became a concert hall in which a number of voices were talking to each other and reciting monologues in order to be recognised, labelled and returned to the people gathered in the wings. Lenin singled out the voice of Lilia's mother and she herself appeared on the stage, beaming with delight.

'Now I can speak to you frankly. Do you recognise me? Do you?' She leaned over to him and blew on his eyes—softly, with infinite tenderness.

'Are you my mother?'

'Of course not. You've seen your mother already. Do I look like her? Do I sound like her?'

'So I must be your late husband. I'm dead, you know. And I wear a beard, like Dostoevsky.'

'I'm dead too. Can't you see? You're not my husband.'

'I proposed to you many years ago, didn't I?'

'You wrote at the end of your letter, "Before we can unite, and in order that we may do so, we must first of all firmly and definitely draw the lines of demarcation." We drew the lines of demarcation and forgot to wipe them off. There were nothing but lines of demarcation in your life. And the world remained beyond them.'

'What I cared about was history, not the world.'

'And you never played the piano. You refused to take piano lessons in your childhood. There are far more important things to do than playing the piano, you said.'

'I was your lover.'

'You were more than a lover. Lilia is your daughter.'

'My daughter? Is she?'

'What's the matter?'

'She is my mistress! I'm Oedipus—the most fortunate and most wretched of men.'

'Oedipus? Did you make love to your mother?'

'To your daughter!'

'Then you're not Oedipus. You're Lenin!'

'Did Lenin make love to his daughter? He had no daughter.'

'You have one. And you're Lenin!'

'Am I?'

'You died in 1924, didn't you?'

'Would you mind telling us the story of your death, Vladimir Ilich?' said Felix, entering the room.

'On October 19, 1923, I went to Moscow for a few hours. I visited my apartment in the Kremlin, looked into my own office, went for a drive through the main streets of the capital, visited the Agricultural Exhibition and returned to my suburban house. On January 21, 1924, at 6 p.m. I suddenly had a severe attack of my illness. What kind of illness was it? I don't remember. I don't feel it any longer. My death must have destroyed the microbes. I lost consciousness and at 6.50 p.m. I died.'

'Stalin killed you,' said Lilia's mother. 'At 6.45 p.m.'

'I know.'

'Do you feel his fingerprints on your neck?' asked Felix.

'Of course.'

'So you're Lenin,' said Felix. 'Why don't you recognise your own daughter?'

'She's grown a great deal—'

'You've never seen her,' said Lilia's mother. 'I didn't want you to know we had a child, a beautiful daughter. And I concealed the identity of her father from my husband. I loved my husband dearly. Until his death he believed that Lilia was his daughter, our only child. Every time you paid me a visit I managed to send her somewhere. She is a young lady now. Beautiful, isn't she? Very intelligent too!'

'Why didn't you ring me up from the maternity hospital?'

'My husband was waiting for us in the street. He held a bunch of flowers and his eyes were fixed on the window beyond which his daughter was about to be born.'

'Why didn't you ask a nurse to leave a message on my answerphone?'

'Stop interfering!' said Felix. 'We're not in a court room, are we?' He kissed Lilia's mother on the neck. 'Go on, I beg of you.'

'How happy he was when I told him we would have a child! And then he waited and waited—at home, by the wall of the maternity hospital.'

Her breathtaking contralto. I recall her singing an old Russian song. On a terrace somewhere. Where was it? In Alakayevka? But there was nobody in Alakayevka except my sister. Is Lilia's mother my sister Anna? 'Impossible' is not French, say the French. And it is certainly not Russian. Everything became possible in Russia after the Revolution. Wives, sisters, daughters, mothers.

'He kissed me and his daughter so many times that the nurse asked him to leave the room.'

'Lilia is *my* daughter,' said Lenin.

'And he showered her with gifts. All these toys she would scatter about her room! And he caressed her so often and with such an ecstasy of love—'

'Why didn't you tell him the truth? Why?' Lenin stamped his foot wrathfully and for a while the reverberation of the bang remained in the air.

'He would have been disappointed. He might have committed suicide! And I wanted him to live and to raise our daughter.'

'*Our* daughter!'

'She did look like you in her babyhood. I often told myself, "She looks like the greatest man in the history of mankind." Once or twice I was on the point of shouting your name at the dinner table. But my husband hated the Revolution and couldn't even tolerate your first name

and patronymic. Vladimir Ilich Paromsky was a good friend of my mother's. My husband almost killed him in a fist fight after a match of table tennis. I think he wanted to murder you and your ideas. By proxy. By killing someone who bore two thirds of your name. By killing your name. "An Australian black," he told me once, "is always unwilling to tell you his real name, because through his name he may be injured." And I stuck pins and needles into your portraits.'

'Why?' Lenin shielded his heart with both hands.

'To please my husband. And I was sure my magic ritual wouldn't harm your health.'

'But I was shot. I was severely wounded. The imperialists and the exploiting classes deposed by the Revolution vented all their malice and hatred against me. The counter-revolutionaries had hatched a wild plot, the main object of which was my assassination. The terrorists constantly shadowed my shadow. On August 30, 1918, I addressed a meeting of workers in the Basmanny District of Moscow. I left the meeting and was walking to my car when a woman shot me with notched and poisoned bullets. Are you this woman?'

'I wasn't even born in 1918,' said Lilia's mother. 'I was far away from the Basmanny District.'

'Every criminal has an alibi. Do you still have the gun?'

'I had no motive, did I? You were my daughter's father and I loved my daughter more than anybody or anything.'

'My daughter...' Lenin shifted his gaze to Lilia and forgot that the Bolsheviks cried neither in public nor in the privacy of their bedrooms and bathrooms.

'The more she grew the less she resembled your portraits. My husband did all he could to efface your features from her face and your speeches from her books. He made a mockery of your opinions and philosophical conclusions. I feared he might be arrested. I implored him to talk to Lilia in the woods or open the taps in the bathroom to deaden his voice.'

'Was he arrested?' asked Felix.

'He died in a car crash—a widespread form of assassination,' answered Lilia's mother.

'Why did you allow him to brainwash my daughter?' Lenin nudged Felix away from his former mistress.

'She even began to look like him. For a while I thought *he* was her father, not you. The likeness was unmistakable.'

'Is Lilia my child? Yes or no?'

'Of course she is,' said Felix. 'Didn't she come and visit you in the mausoleum, in your Egyptian tomb?'

'Many people come to the mausoleum from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Are they all my children?'

'Spiritual children, no doubt,' said Felix, pointing to heaven.

'Lilia *is* your daughter,' said Lilia's mother. 'I told her everything before I died and settled down in the Hereafter.'

'Where do you live?'

'I'm not supposed to tell you anything about geography and urban development. I was asked to speak about your daughter. What a pity you didn't see her playing with dolls and doll houses. At the age of six she went to school.'

She is a particle of my soul, my doppelgänger. Things exist independently of our consciousness, independently of our perceptions—outside of us. But she is both outside and inside me, myself and not myself.

'She was brilliant at school. My husband worked with her every day and got her to read Platonov and Proust. And she was so pretty that three boys fought a duel over her.'

'*Le temps perdu*,' said Lenin, dabbing his eyes. He approached Lilia and kissed her on the forehead.

'How dare you kiss in my room? You have no right to kiss!' shouted the grandmother.

'Lilia's my daughter.'

'Vladimir Ilich proposed to me last night,' said Lilia. 'We're going to get married.'

'We can't!' shouted Lenin, stupefied and horrified.

'Congratulations,' said the grandmother. 'Do you have a regular job?'

'He is an exhibit in the mausoleum.'

The thunderstorm had subsided and the sun was squeezing in between the clouds with the obvious intention of coming down upon the earth. But Lenin stood with his back to the sun. 'Lilia is my daughter,' he shouted again and again.

'You fear incestuous intercourse,' said Felix at last. 'What's incest? "Honourable is marriage in all, and the bed undefiled," writes St Augustine. "And this we do not so call a good, as that it is a good in comparison of fornication: otherwise there will be two evils, of which the second is worse: or fornication will also be a good, because adultery is worse: for it is worse to violate the marriage of another, than to cleave unto an harlot: and adultery will be a good, because incest is worse; for it is worse to lie with a mother than with the wife of another—"

'Is it really worse?' asked Lilia's mother. 'If I had a son—'

'A handsome young man,' Lilia chimed in.

'St Augustine doesn't say anything about lying with a daughter,' continued Felix. 'Neither does St Thomas Aquinas who, on the other hand, strongly opposes the union of brothers and sisters on the grounds that their mutual attraction, combining the love of husband and wife with that of brother and sister, would be so strong as to cause unduly frequent intercourse.'

'If I had a brother—' said Lilia.

'Cinyras begot his son Adonis in intercourse with his daughter Myrrha at a festival of the corn-goddess,' said Lilia's mother.

'Who's Cinyras?' asked the grandmother. 'Is he an artist or a politician?'

'He was a king and a priest of Aphrodite. His riches passed into a proverb,' said Lilia.

'Why didn't you marry *him*? Do you really prefer this man?' The grandmother picked her walking stick up and poked Lenin in the navel.

'He is my father. Shouldn't I choose my father in preference to any other man?'

'Harken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old,' said Felix.

'My mother is still very attractive,' said Lilia. 'She has expensive tastes in clothes and perfumes. And she is looked at in the streets and on the beaches.'

'If I were alive—' said Lilia's mother.

'And don't forget that you're a corpse.' Felix took Lenin's brain from his attaché case and put it in the Grecian vase. 'Sexual intercourse between a dead man and a living woman can scarcely be considered incestuous. Neither linguists nor sexologists would approve of this term.'

'She is my daughter,' repeated Lenin.

'In children we have a great charge committed to us,' said Felix. 'Let us bestow great care upon them, and do everything that the Evil One may not rob us of them.'

'Who said this?' asked Lenin out of scientific inquisitiveness.

'St Chrysostom. By combining the love of a father with that of a husband you'll bestow the greatest care imaginable on your only daughter.'

'And you won't dissipate your sexual power and your romantic élan, which always happens when a man loves two women—his wife and his daughter,' said Lilia's mother.

Anyway I can count only on my genes to create the ideal future. Plato said something to this effect. An abundant offspring from the best persons. The most beautiful women were enjoyed and shared by the secretariat of the Republic. And people slept with their own daughters without knowing it. Lilia *is* my body, my genes, my own flesh and blood, my sweat

and tears, my joy and sadness. We'll replenish the earth, leaving no room for others. Mirrors, nothing but mirrors. Mirrors everywhere: in the bathroom, in the streets, in the woods, on Jupiter.

Felix left the room and presently returned with a boiling cauldron. 'Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd,' he said.

'How do you mean?' Lenin shivered and looked up. He recalled his wanderings in the restaurant.

'Show!' shouted Andrey Petrovich, hanging from a cornice. 'I do apologise for my intrusion, but I'm here on business.'

'Vous êtes tout excusé,' said the grandmother. 'Show!'

'Show his eyes, and grieve his heart!' shouted Lilia.

Lenin lifted his arm and recoiled a few steps; his former mistress was advancing upon him. He looked at himself in the mirror she carried and saw her husband, multiplied to infinity.

'What! will the line stretch out to th'crack of doom?' he vociferated, propping himself against the wall.

'I'll charm the air to give a sound, while you perform your antic round,' said Felix, sitting at the upright piano.

Lilia began to dance.

*A smoky mist,
 A misty windscreen.
 I cannot see you, my beloved.
 Where did you hide yourself?
 Where did I lose my way?
 Beyond the Pyrenees,
 Beyond the seven seas.*

*The mist penetrates the depths of my eyes,
 My soul has been smoked out.
 I am sailing across the Atlantic.*

*Take the next flight! Do not wait!
 I spend my days at the airport.
 I cannot eat, I cannot drink,
 I cannot live without your silky
 Hair.*

*I go out for a breath of air
 And see the sun and feel the wind.
 Do come here, my fair
 Lady!*

'Who are you?' asked Lenin. 'Why have I slept in the corridor?'

'You're not allowed to go to the main hall of the mausoleum.'

'Who issued the order? Stalin? Is he back?'

'The bridesmaids are brushing the tress of the bride. They're combing and twining her hair. "O woe is me," says the bride, her eyes filled with tears. You should be away from her. You can't stay in the same room. Such is the ancient custom. I'm your substitute.'

'I need no substitute. What's your name?'

'Vladimir. You can call me Volodya. I'll sing many songs and perform other duties.'

'What did you sing?'

'The song you had no time to memorise. Besides, you have no ear for music and poetry.'

'I'd like to sleep in my bed.'

'You've slept long enough. Your friends will come in a few minutes.'

'I invited nobody.'

'They're wedding guests. It's your wedding day.'

'Lilia? Her mother? I won't marry them! Those women betrayed me!'

'They're twining her hair with a red ribbon. "Plait, plait my daughter's little tresses," says her mother. They're twining her hair with a blue ribbon.'

'She betrayed her own father.'

'Shall we listen to their song?' Volodya plunged his hand into an orifice shielded by two panels.

You're a liar,

A cold fire!

Why have you been talking to us

About cloisters and monasteries?

Why have you never, never kissed

A man or a woman in our presence?

We thought you were sexless.

Now we know everything—

You are of our number!

You expect him to kiss

Your lips and your tits

In the dead of night,

In the broad daylight.

And if he does not,

You break your crockery

And throw your cutlery

Out of the window.

You tear your clothes.

Why all these tears?

You are not a widow.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Here comes your bridegroom!

So kneel down

And prepare yourself

For a long caress.

Volodya withdrew his hand from the orifice and held it up to the light as if to verify whether he had not lost anything in the labyrinth of the wall. 'Did you appreciate the quality of the sound? We bought a Japanese microphone and a pair of German loudspeakers. The acoustics are much better in the corridor. And the CD will have digital sound. So the buyers of the video disc will derive more pleasure from your wedding ceremony than the participants. Would you care to listen to the "bride's complaint"? It's a digital recording.'

Volodya plunged his hand into another orifice and his face creased into a smile.

O my mother!

What have you done to me?

Why have you felled the Tree

Of my Life?

The Tree was too small,

The apples did not ripen.

What fruit can I offer

To my future husband?

Like a wheel is my life,

It is rolling away.

Why don't you allow me

To catch it today?

*Why can't I sleep
In my virginal bed?
Why should my blood
Spill on his sheet?*

*O my mother!
What have you done to me?
Why have you felled the Tree
Of my Life?*

A middle-aged woman appeared in the corridor; she apologised for being late and started to sing into a microphone.

*Don't weep, my dear! Your tears are vain!
Your Tree of Life will grow and grow.
Your virginal blood will water it.
He is your husband, your sun and your rain.*

'Where's the steam bath?' asked the woman, having finished her song.

'You're in the mausoleum,' said Lenin.

'But the custom requires that we have a wash in a steam bath—'

Volodya plunged his hand into another orifice, produced a bar of soap and handed it to the woman. 'There's a lavatory in the adjacent corridor. You can wash yourself, if you wish.'

'I took a shower this morning,' said the woman, pushing the soap away.

*Virgin Mary, come, come!
Virgin Mary, comb, comb
The fair curls of the bride.*

'We can go to the main hall now,' said Volodya. 'They'll comb and brush your curls.'

'He is almost bald,' said the woman.

'Such is the ancient custom,' said Volodya. 'What kind of razor do you use?'

Take a taxi and drive up to town!

Buy some pure olive oil!

'I've found neither olive oil nor corn oil,' said the woman.

'You should have bought two bottles of sunflower oil,' said Lenin.

Arm in arm, they entered the main hall of the mausoleum.

'Shall we just wash his hair in mineral water?' suggested Lilia's mother.

Shall we brush and comb and oil

The fair locks of the bridegroom?

'Where are your parents?' asked Lilia. 'Did you send them an invitation?'

'Why did you betray your father? You showed me the future.'

Lilia's mother translated this remark into the language of the living.

'I didn't betray my father. You shouldn't talk business during the ceremony. Just say, "Let my fair curls be in order."'

'There was a mirror. And I wasn't in it.'

'Do you have a monopoly on mirrors?' asked Lilia's mother.

Volodya stepped forward, ruffled his hair and struck up a song:

Let my fair curls be in order!

Don't ruffle my beautiful hair

On my wedding day, on my wedding night!

My wife will not recognise me.

The nuptial bed will be cold.

'My wife sends you her greetings,' said Lenin's father, appearing in the doorway.

'Her blessings,' corrected Lilia.

'The doctor advised her to stay indoors. There has been a lot of illness in the family over the last hundred years. And illness makes one weak and shaky.'

'You look young and healthy,' said Lilia's grandmother.

Glory to the father!
Glory to the mother!
Glory to the children
And grandchildren to come!
Glory to the unborn!
Glory to the dead!

'We haven't found the olive oil,' said Lilia's mother.

'Wouldn't any liquid do?' asked Lenin's father.

'Did you bring the golden crown?' asked Lilia's mother.

'Was *I* supposed to tackle the problem of the crown?' asked Lenin's father with apprehension.

'It's *your* son, isn't it?'

On his brow
Set a crown!

'And what about wedding presents?' asked Lilia's grandmother.

'I'm queueing for a car,' said Lenin's father.

'A Jaguar?' asked Lilia.

'I'll offer you my Mercedes,' said Felix.

'Carriage and pair,' said Volodya.

'Carriage and four,' corrected Lilia.

Look at the horses
That pull their carriage!
Look at the engines
That push their cars!

'Is it a horse show, a car show, or a wedding?' asked the middle-aged woman.

'Have you heard about Frou-Frou?' asked Lenin's father. 'This horse is a hot tip for the 5.30.'

'We've already had a drive along the Tverskaya,' said Lilia.

'I hope I'll make it. May I use your car? I wish they wouldn't sing so often. When are you planning to retire to your nuptial chamber?' Lenin turned away from his father. 'Wouldn't you be interested in savouring your wife's corporeal allurements a few hours earlier? At 5 p.m. at the latest? Shall we put the clock forward? You're used to it, aren't you? How many clocks have you put forward in your lifetime?'

'What's the next item on the agenda?' asked Lilia.

'He must kneel down before his father,' said Lilia's mother.

'Graciously,' specified Lilia.

*With grace he kneels before his father
And kisses his father's hands.*

'What are you waiting for?' asked seven people in unison.

'My son, you don't have to—'

'Such is the ancient custom,' said Volodya.

'He must also kiss his father's right foot!' shouted a grey-haired man, raising his staff.

'It's not included in the ritual,' said Volodya.

'He is the prodigal son.' The man lowered his staff and a thunderclap resounded throughout the mausoleum.

'He hasn't come home,' said Felix. 'Not yet.'

*The prodigal son is stranded
On an island in the Atlantic.
He has no money, he has no matches.*

'You're singing out of tune,' said Lilia's mother to the choir. 'Here's a tuning fork.'

'How much did you pay them?' asked Lilia's grandmother.

Volodya shut the lid of the sarcophagus, climbed onto it and struck up another song:

*Why do I hear the doors in my house?
They bang and grate and rotate on their hinges.
Is it the wind? Is it a hurricane?
My friends have come. They greet me and hug me.
They sing our praises out of tune.*

'What a beautiful bride! You lucky thing!'
They greet me and hug me. They're green with envy.

'I'm hungry and thirsty,' said a friend of the bridegroom. 'Have you gone on a hunger strike to protest against the economic reforms or is it natural starvation?'

'You should first make a speech in praise of the bridegroom. You may recite it as a poem, but don't sing!' said Lenin's father.

*Death in no way weakened his will-power,
 His avidity for work, his sexual potential.
 He decided to take a wife—a beautiful young lady,
 The pride of the living, a flower on his tomb.
 She would travel with him over the world -
 A secretary, a public relations officer,
 A wife sometimes—and his numerous enemies
 Would flock round her and drop down dead.
 Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
 Hail to thee, Lady Macbeth!*

'I'm fed up with *Macbeth*,' said Andrey Petrovich to Felix. 'The play was over many years ago. He killed everybody except Stalin. And Stalin killed him. And the curtain fell.'

Hail, King of Scotland!

'And who is the King of Scotland now? Yeltsin?' asked Lenin.

'Please don't interfere with the wedding ritual,' said Lenin's father to Andrey Petrovich.
 'It's long enough.'

'Why didn't we invite him to our wedding?'

'Who?' asked Lilia's mother.

'Who are you talking about?' asked Lilia's grandmother. 'Kerensky?'

'Yeltsin,' answered Lenin firmly. 'I wish your horses swift, and sure of foot; and so I do commend you to their backs. Farewell.'

'Did you say something?' asked Lilia, opening a notebook.

'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, till thou applaud the deed,' said Lenin. He shut the notebook and slipped it under his pillow.

'The play isn't over yet,' said Felix, scanning a volume of Shakespeare's works. 'The greatest English bard and playwright is immortal.'

'Lenin is immortal too,' said Lilia.

'So are the French Academicians,' said Lenin's father.

*There is a mare in Vladimir's stables.
At dawn, Vladimir unties the mare
And rides up to Moscow, to Red Square.
The mare jumps over the city wall
And neighs with pleasure. She doesn't fall.*

*The bridegroom takes his opera glasses
And examines the houses, one by one.
What is he so interested in?
What is he so curious about?
He doesn't care for architecture.
He doesn't feel like a glass of beer.
He yearns to fill his heart with love
And bring a housewife to his castle.*

*Beyond the windows there are girls,
But his beloved is nowhere.
Will he come home empty-handed?*

'He will not. Lilia's beyond the windows. Lilia's in the streets. Lilia's on his mare. Lilia's in his castle. Lilia's in his heart. Can't you find a suitable ending?' Lilia rummaged for a while under Lenin's wool mattress, fished out three notebooks and handed them to the choir master.

'I do feel like a glass of beer,' said Lenin's father, unfolding a newspaper. 'You don't have draught beer in the mausoleum, do you? May I disappear for half-an-hour? You'll kiss my hand later on. At home.'

'And what about your songs, shouts and dances on the bearskin? And who's going to kill a cock or two chickens?' asked Volodya, putting himself in the doorway and spreading his arms out.

'My song?' asked Lenin's father, humming a tune from *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

'I can't stand in for everybody! You're a counter tenor, I presume. And your wife is a wonderful coloratura. Didn't she perform the Queen of Night in last year's production of *Die Zauberflöte*?'

'She was Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*.'

'And who were *you*? The Commander, Don Ottavio?'

'I've always been Lenin's father and nobody else!'

'Did you find an ending?' asked Lilia.

Lilia's in his room,

Lilia's in his bed,

Lilia's in his thoughts,

Lilia's in his death.

Lilia empties his chamber pots.

'What do you pay them for?' asked Lilia's grandmother. 'The words are obscene!'

'Is it a traditional Russian wedding?' asked Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in unison. 'Quite an exotic country, isn't it?'

'I'm proud of the Russian people,' said Lenin. 'They created a mighty, virile state and defended it against foreign invasions and invisible foes—spies. I'm proud of the Russian nation which produced the most revolutionary working class in the world. I'm proud of Russia in whose bosom the greatest—'

'Stop this abomination!' shouted Restif de la Bretonne. 'You should flee this place at once.' He showed Lenin his wristwatch.

'I'm the owner of this house,' said Lenin.

'Did it also belong to your parents, your grandparents, your great grandparents?' asked the Count Claude Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon.

'Marriage fulfils human desires,' shouted Restif de la Bretonne, whirling around the sarcophagus. 'Too easy, isn't it? Marriage entitles you to everything, including unlimited sexual gratification. Your parents can't prevent you from meeting your wife every day—the law is on your side. Your wife always accompanies you to your bedroom unless you order her

to stay in the kitchen. And your desire grows dim, soft, blurred, foggy. And you order your wife to stay in the kitchen.'

'There's no kitchen in the mausoleum,' said Lenin.

'But you've got a wife. So you should heighten sexual tensions and intentions by denying easy fulfilment. Go away! Take the next flight to New York! If you don't wish to forsake your property, lock yourself up in your bathroom. Then climb out of the lavatory window and join your wife in a tavern under an assumed name—to mislead a private detective engaged by your father.'

'A private detective?' Lenin glanced under the sarcophagus. 'In Russia all detectives were nationalised after the October Revolution. They're state-subsidised -'

'They'll keep your sexual desire at its peak by putting obstacles in your way,' shouted Restif, glancing under the sarcophagus.

'And what about *my* desire?' asked Lilia. 'How old are your detectives? Are they dead too?'

'You won't see them,' whispered Andropov. 'Detectives are invisible.' And he faded out from Lilia's mind.

'I've been commissioned to say—'

'Who are you?' asked Robert Owen.

'He is *my* guest,' said Lilia.

'He is not invisible, is he?' asked Lenin.

'I'm a representative of the French encyclopaedists.'

'Listen carefully!' said Lilia, glancing around.

'All practitioners agree that the different symptoms of vapours or hysterical afflictions from which girls and widows suffer so abominably are a consequence of the deprivation of marriage. It is in fact observable that wives, especially those happily married, are ordinarily free of them, and that these maladies are very common in the vast establishments harbouring a large number of girls who are obliged by duty and estate to keep their virginity.'

*O Holy, Holy St Luke,
Be with us now,
In our hour of need!
Doth thou speak Volapük?*

'They must speak Russian in the Hereafter,' said a bearded man. 'Only Russian. The language of the Third Rome.'

We have invited thee!

Hast thou received our card?

Has thou received thine fee?

'How did you send it? By post?' asked a young man. 'We don't even have chequebooks in this bloody country!'

Indeed celestial postmen

Are no better than Russian drunkards!

'Do they use credit cards in the Hereafter?'

Art thou invisible?

Art thou amongst us?

Lilia's mother laid a bottle of vodka on the sarcophagus, snatched the sheet from the nuptial bed and unfolded it under Lenin's feet.

Drink the vodka, my son-in-law,

Drink it to your heart's content!

Why intimidate my daughter?

Do not rub your index finger

Back and forth across her labia!

My dear daughter knows nothing

About adults and their ways.

Just kiss her on the mouth

And take her by the hand

And guide her to your house!

*But do not slip your stubby fingers
 Deep inside her fragile body!
 Do not tug her pubic hair!
 Do not stroke her clitoris!*

Lenin's father knelt down before the sheet and asked for a magnifying glass. 'Where's the blood? Not a drop!'

'I've forgotten the chickens,' said Lilia's mother. 'Last night I put them on the cupboard and of course—'

'It's too early!' said Beria.

'It's never too early to shed human blood!' said Hitler.

'It's never too late to shed human blood! Do you know how to handle a virgin?' Beria came up to Lenin and pinched his shoulder blades. 'You should slide down on her body, licking your way round her navel until you reach—'

'Not a drop!' exclaimed Lenin's father.

'Licking and biting, you place your tongue over her and dive in and out until you reach—'

'Give me the cock!' shouted Lenin's father.

Lilia folded the sheet and handed it to her mother.

*It is not too late!
 Not a drop of my blood
 Has fallen on the sheet!
 My fiancé is dead.
 Can't you see?
 Do take his pulse!
 He has no heart,
 He has no veins,
 He has no blood.
 He's an assassin!
 O mother, mother,
 He holds a knife!
 What will become*

*Of my soft flesh?
 My flesh is fine
 Like alabaster.
 My breasts are firm -
 No sag at all.
 What will become
 Of my full breasts?
 What will become
 Of my poor life?*

'What knife? What are you talking about?' screamed Lenin.

'Dinner is served!' said the middle-aged woman.

'It's not too late—I haven't swallowed a morsel of ham,' said Lilia.

'Aren't you hungry and thirsty?' asked her mother. 'I thought you were pregnant.'

'Shall we have a walk before dinner?' suggested Lenin's father. 'Walking gives one an appetite.'

KGB agents and military officials lined the route of the wedding procession. About eight hundred secretaries of the Party saluted the married couple with their shouts and shots. Various Eastern men and women, dressed in their native costumes, were particularly colourful.

Lilia proceeded across Red Square under a canopy carried by sixteen high-ranking members of foreign Communist Parties.

The people had been arriving at Red Square since the evening before, attracted by the distribution of moonshine—the highlight of the ceremony. Their enthusiasm and fervour resulted in a terrible crush; once knocked off their feet, people could not get up as the waves of human bodies swept over them.

*We drop a wine glass and break the wine glass.
 And our friends say, 'It'll bring you luck!'*

*What will happen to the engaged couple
 If wedding guests are crushed to death
 In the course of the wedding ceremony?*

*'It'll bring you luck!' we say to them.
 'Luck favours you, luck's on your side,
 Your guests have died, so you'll never die.
 Somebody must remain on earth!'*

'Why?' asked Samuel Beckett. He thrust his arm in a sack, took out a few tins, emptied them out in the mud, put them back one by one in the sack, changed his mind, took them out again and, with the gesture of one dealing cards, threw away the empty tins. They fell without a sound.

To guard it from extraterrestrial foes!

From the banks of the Moscva River, a thousand guns thundered, announcing to the city that the wedding ceremony was under way.

The joy of the people and the ringing of bells were not confined to Moscow; all throughout the immense Russian land the resounding 'hurrahs' could be heard.

At 7 p.m. there was a 50-gun salute.

'Where's your father?' asked Lilia's mother.

'Perhaps he perished in the crush,' answered Lenin.

'The dinner will get cold,' said the middle-aged woman.

'And who'll warm the bed for the bridal pair?' asked Volodya.

'There are a lot of candidates for the job,' said Felix. 'Richard III, Henry VIII, the executioner of the Tsar Nicholas II. Stalin was on the list until a few hours ago.'

'What happened?' asked Lilia. 'I like his moustache and uniform.'

'He wouldn't have found your bed anyway. He went blind this afternoon.'

'Did he suffer from glaucoma?' asked Lilia's mother.

'Did the Duke of Cornwall pluck his eyes out?' asked Lenin.

'I hoped he might be the best man,' sighed Andrey Petrovich. 'There's no democracy in the Hereafter.'

Fill the goblets

*And drink a toast
To the bridal pair,
To Lilia the Fair.*

*Pick up your forks,
You merry folks,
And stuff dainty morsels
Into your throats.*

For almost half-an-hour Lenin was so absorbed by the food he had heaped up on his plate that he did not notice anything. When he finally looked up and saw the human faces outlined against the bare walls, he realised that they had something in common with the chunks of meat he had been chewing and swallowing at the head of the table: they were immobile. 'Did I tell them to shut up?' he wondered. 'Is Stalin back? Has he really gone blind? He isn't deaf, is he?'

Felix opened his attaché case and an invisible choir broke into song:

*Why do you not drink, dear guests?
Why do you not eat, dear guests?
Why do you not honour their nest,
Their restful, velvety, blanketed nest
That Lilia the Fair has furnished herself?*

*Do you think our meat is tough?
Is it as tough as Kostya's boots?
Why not appreciate the food
Cooked in the kitchen by our staff?*

'Why indeed?' asked Andrey Petrovich. 'Our chef is renowned all over the southern regions of Hell.'

'What's his name?' asked Felix.

'Titus Andronicus. *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, Her Lover*. Have you seen it?'

'You admire Peter Greenaway, don't you?'

'The thief is bulldozed into eating his own victim—his wife's lover.'

'What party did the lover belong to?' asked Lenin, sticking his fork into another chunk of meat.

'He belonged to the Adulterous party,' answered Andrey Petrovich. 'You also partook of your own victims. One of them is on your fork right now.'

Lenin dropped the fork into a gravy boat and covered his mouth with both hands.

'Has he killed only a quarter of a human being?' asked Beria, counting the chunks of meat in a huge bowl.

'Oh, it's only an appetiser, an *amuse-gueule*. This dinner will last for ten thousand years.'

Listen to what the bridegroom says!

Have you gone deaf?

Have you gone deaf?

Watch the bridegroom's impatient eyes!

Have you gone blind?

Have you gone blind?

He says, 'I'd like to go to bed.'

He stares at the bedroom door.

'And what does the bride say?' asked Lilia.

The bride pesters the bridegroom

With her practical questions:

'Is the bed cold and narrow?

How many people can lie on it?'

'Only two people,' answered Volodya.

'I must bless them on a bearskin,' said Lilia's mother.

'A doormat would be cheaper,' said Lilia's grandmother.

'Are you blind? Are you deaf?' asked Volodya, staring at the bedroom door.

'I suppose, it's time,' said Lilia. 'We won't wait until he finishes his *amuse-gueule*.'

The guests and the bride's relatives seated themselves on a bench before the bedroom door. Lenin rose to his feet.

'There's no hurry,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'What's your opinion of our red wine?'

'Take your time,' chimed in Felix.

Volodya carried Lilia's body into the bedroom and slammed the door, leaving Lenin empty-handed on the threshold.

'You see, old boy, your doppelgänger is to stand in for you until you've memorised your cue,' explained Andrey Petrovich. 'Besides, he is also a member of the Adulterous party.'

The friend of the bridegroom squatted down before the keyhole.

*Tell us, tell us what you see,
Tell us all and don't conceal
Tiny details, minute details!
Tell us how she undresses!
Does he rip her clothes off?
Tell us all about her tresses!
Do they float? Do they float?*

'I'll tell you everything, I promise,' said the friend of the bridegroom.

*She gently lowers her head,
She lowers her head to his groin—*

'What for?'

*Your only daughter
Flicks out her tongue
And gently runs
Her tongue along
The top side—*

'What's he doing?' asked Kostya.

*Slowly but surely
Her touch has its effect:
A discernible stiffness
Is now quite apparent.*

*His penis is still limp,
But as she licks and kisses
Its top, it grows harder,
And thickens under her tongue.*

'Are they all pneumatics?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'Pneumatic brakes...pneumatic tyres...' murmured Lenin.

'A Gnostic sect,' corrected Felix. 'Always pestering us with their concept of an "extra spirit" – a privilege conferred upon a new type of humans.'

'Like Russian communists they're pretty old by now,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'Unlike the ordinary, purely "physic" individual, the pneumatic is free from the requirements of the Law, showing a shameless contempt for human rights and the norms of human decency. The sacredness of sin—'

And with her own spittle—

'She is my wife and my daughter!'

*With a gentle flexing motion,
Moving her mouth back and forth—*

'Don't you dare treat her like a harlot!'

'What's this rubbish about Lilia being his daughter?' asked Andrey Petrovich anxiously.
'He must be seeing things.'

'It's my fault,' said Felix, lowering his eyes.

'Did you tell him she was his daughter? His granddaughter?'

'I wanted to awaken his paternal feelings—'

'What for?'

'He was the father of the Revolution,' cut in Lilia's mother.

'He didn't seem to love her any longer. Violence reared its ugly head again,' said Felix.

'She *is* my daughter,' said Lenin. 'Her mother was my mistress.'

'She is not! She was not!' Andrey Petrovich nudged Felix towards Lenin. 'Don't you realise my assistant has played a trick on you?' Lenin closed his eyes, opened them and looked at Lilia's mother. 'And she is *his* assistant and mistress. Don't you understand?'

Lenin let out a scream and collapsed before the bedroom. He was slapped on the face and sprinkled with Coke. He recovered consciousness and screamed again.

'Have you got your ear plugs?' asked Andrey Petrovich. 'They're lucky. They can't hear him. Being alive has a few advantages. What does it remind me of? Have you seen *Der blaue Engel*?'

'Emil Jannings? His screams?'

'A professor turned clown. Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do!'

'He saw Marlene Dietrich in the arms of her lover.'

'Cock-a-doodle-do! And he tried to strangle her. Cock-a-doodle-do!'

'Marlene Dietrich died a few months ago.'

'What a terrible scream! Cock-a-doodle-do!'

'Where's the cock?'

'Do we still need it?'

*Show us her blood,
Her virginal blood!
Has the bridegroom killed
The bride's virginity?*

'Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do!'

'He does scream like Emil Jannings.'

'Cock-a-doodle-do!'

'And he looks like him, doesn't he?'

'No wonder, he is a professional clown!'

'He has always been a clown. They didn't take him seriously in 1917. Otherwise they would have defended themselves.'

'And Russia.'

'And democracy.'

'And freedom.'

'Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do!'

'Coco the clown.'

'It's outrageous. I'll call the police.'

'Do break an egg on his head! I'd like to see it trickle down his red nose.'

'I've no more eggs in the kitchen!'

'Let it trickle down his belly.'

'Off with his trousers!'

'He looks like a cock.'

'And he sounds like Lenin. You know, his last illness—'

'You overstepped—'

'A double yolker!'

'Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do!'

PART THREE

1

Citizens of Hell! We salute you from our studio and hope that you're glued to your televisions in expectation of an instructive programme. Tonight you'll be able to follow the adventures and misadventures of your favourite heroine Natasha who, charged with the murder of her eight-month-pregnant daughter-in-law and of the womb-imprisoned heir to her five-billion fortune, opted for suicide and swam right into the jaws of a world-famous shark. At the last moment, however, she lost her nerve, jumped out and ran for an hour along a California beach. At the end of the last episode we abandoned her stark naked in the arms of a district attorney. Don't miss the 156th episode of *Red and White*! Now I propose to put you in the picture about what is going on within the confines of Hell and also outside them—in the so-called land of the living.

'Switch it off!' said Stalin.

'Did you hear a shot?' asked Beria.

'Leave the sound on,' said Stalin.

—remind those suffering from amnesia that they live in a democratic society which respects their liberties and private longings. Our constitution guarantees freedom of speech and our tourist agency offers a variety of package tours, including one-day visits to Jupiter and Mars. You're kindly requested to show your numbers to our employees—

'I'll never undress in front of those people,' said Stalin.

—make sure that the aforementioned planets are located in the area to which you have been assigned by our officials and thereby spare yourself the disgrace of expulsion. Tickets are available only during your holidays—

'I've never been to America,' said Stalin.

'But you've travelled as far as Siberia, haven't you?' asked Beria.

—a bad reputation among the dying who muse on what lies in store for them and repent profusely, preferring honey and milk to red-hot frying pans and sulphur. They derive their information mostly from medieval tales of chivalry—the outdated books of no scientific value—or from the accounts given by so-called prophets who claim acquaintance with angels and other foreign spies. Their attitude is sure to change as soon as they breathe their last breath and are welcomed by our border patrols—

'They never talk like that on television,' said Stalin. 'I wonder what's happened. Do you see anything?'

'The speaker,' said Beria.

'And your informers?'

'No news from the outside.'

—and the Garden of Eden. The inhabitants of Hell love their country and don't regret the sins they have committed on earth. They admire and love Satan steering His ship through the storms of history and the ups and downs of God's moods.

'Is God no longer a persona non grata?' asked Beria.

—and cruelty. In the period following the death of Jesus Christ, our farms and factories sustained large-scale losses; our Leader faced up to the incessant attacks orchestrated by The Fathers of the Church who were liable to repeat calumnies and defamatory reports and never took the trouble to ascertain the veracity of their information. Industry, the transport system and agriculture were ruined. Starvation and weariness provoked discontent among some of the workers who had to be executed for the sake of our citizens' prosperity and welfare. Meanwhile our Leader devised a plan for the reorganisation of our economy, setting before the inhabitants of Hell a task of gigantic

proportions unprecedented in its audacity, scope and consistency. Satan looked boldly into the future, relying on our ability to defile holy vessels—

'Do you see tanks and parachutists?' asked Stalin.

'No,' answered Beria.

—is fond of a joke and laughs heartily whenever—

'Something is wrong,' said Stalin.

'I know it by heart,' said Beria.

'What?' asked Stalin.

'The biography of Satan.'

'Did you learn it at school?'

'I also studied it at home. "Satan showed parental concern for the health and well-being of children and took special measures to improve the supply of milk and butter for them."'

—the best friend of the young and of stillborn children. He displays paternal concern for their upbringing, always inquiring—

'What are they driving at?' asked Stalin.

Satan is exceedingly modest in his tastes and habits. His living quarters, his food, his clothing are strictly utilitarian. He shuns luxury and ornaments. He always wears a dark-coloured suit; His pipe-like trousers seem a trifle too short for his legs. For centuries He has sported the same tie: black, with little white flowers—

'They need our moral support,' said Beria proudly.

—excels God in His instinct for modernity. Like an experienced gardener watching and nursing a new plant—

'A revolt?' suggested Stalin.

'A plot?' suggested Beria. He knelt down and glanced under his bed. 'Will you participate in it?'

Under Satan's banner our people will rout and exterminate the hordes of foreign interventionists: angels, archangels, saints, the Fathers of the Church -

'Do you hear anything?' asked Stalin.

'Do you want me to open the window?' Beria opened the window. 'I hear a tank rolling up the road. A general—'

'What general? A generalissimo?'

'Listen!'

In these stern times, when our country is engaged in mortal combat with God, the great image of Satan inspires our heroic people to perform feats of immortal valour for the glory of their motherland. We should all rise and fight in this Patriotic War against the invaders who wantonly attacked our peaceful -

'What do you see?'

'The general. And two tanks.'

'I knew something would happen. When I lost my sight. They wanted me out of the way.'

Satan was resting in his villa. He kept continuously in touch with the dead and living worlds via a battery of telephones. They were ringing round the clock. Satan's old adviser had resigned a few days before, pre-empting a move to expel him. He had forewarned that religious fanatics were gathering to suppress the achievements of Satan's Revolution.

'A plot,' said Stalin.

'A revolt,' said Beria.

—and the chief of his KGB bodyguards entered the room. He said that thirteen unexpected visitors had been admitted to the garden. Satan reached for the telephone. The line was dead. So was the next one, and the next, and the next. The internal line was also—

'Well done!' said Beria. He reached for the telephone. The line was dead.

Satan called out to his wife and his son and soon they met in the kitchen to discuss the situation. Our correspondent Yury Levitan reports live from Satan's kitchen:

'I'm standing near the oven in which, at this hour, the wife of our Leader usually cooks a delicious meal for the whole family. The oven is cold now. Our Leader is engaged in a discussion with his son and heir who listens to every syllable his illustrious father utters in a calm, assured voice. Let's eavesdrop on their dialogue.'

'Will you fight with me against God?'

'My horse will gallop alongside your horse in the vanguard of the troops.'

'What you need in the fight against such an enemy is military discipline and military vigilance carried to the utmost. Lack of vigilance or consternation means losing everything. It's dangerous to oppose God. I may be killed in the battle. At school you must have memorised *Paradise Lost* by Milton.'

'I did.'

'The oven is cold today.'

'And now you'll hear the voice of Satan's wife Satanella.'

'While you're away, fighting the battalions of God, I'll cook you a delicious meal.'

'What are they doing?' asked Stalin. 'I don't hear anything.'

'Don't you hear their footsteps?' asked Beria, turning up the sound. 'The speaker is on again.'

So our Leader returned to the sitting room and received the delegation which had stolen into his villa unannounced.

'That's how *I* was killed,' said Beria.

—an ultimatum: either He signed the decree or He handed over authority to the archangel Gabriel. Satan rightly pointed out that a revolution in Hell would mean nothing but a return to a 'bloody circle'. He suggested they should play a game of chess and resolve their problems on a chessboard rather than on a battlefield, saying, quote, 'I don't want my subjects to die again. One death is more than enough.' The chief of the delegation replied, quote, 'Lift up your gates, your everlasting gates. And the King of glory shall come in.' Satan said to his bodyguard, quote, 'Secure well and strongly the gates of brass and the bars of iron, and attend to my bolts, and stand in order, and see to everything; for if he come in here, woe will seize us.'

'Who is this King of glory?' asked Stalin.

'The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle,' said an angel, piercing a hole in the ceiling.

'Let's go to the toilet,' whispered Beria.

'Why?' whispered Stalin.

'CIA,' whispered Beria.

'Does God intend to appropriate our territory?' asked Stalin, sitting on the edge of the washbasin.

'The whole of the Hereafter will become the Garden of Eden,' said Beria, switching the television on.

'We should overthrow the government of Satan.'

'Isn't He our ally?'

'It's easier to vanquish God. We vanquished Him in Russia. We'll vanquish Him in the Hereafter.'

'How? By desecrating churches? By burning the remaining copies of the Bible? By executing bishops and priests?'

'By 1939, out of 163 bishops active in 1930, only 12 were still at liberty. My past record,' boasted Stalin.

'By selling icons to the Martians?'

'Satan is cunning and shrewd. God is naïve. We'll fool Him sooner or later. Besides, I'm not satisfied with our living conditions.'

'They allow us to enjoy the company of Turkish prostitutes.'

'They struck me blind.'

'You can't see these girls. But carnal desires—'

'We'll fight for Paradise. And we'll live in Hell. Paradise is too soft. Its gardens and fruit are designed for lazy people.'

'And it's easier to turn Paradise into Hell than—'

The emissaries of God held a press conference in the Palace of Harmony that was erected for the 1982 Olympic Games. We hope to bring you a live report from Russia via our satellite hook-up.

'A dead report,' said Beria.

Our correspondent Alexander Nevzorov reports live from the Palace of Harmony:

'I'm speaking from the Imperial box of the Palace. An unprepossessing group of grey archangels headed by Michael—'

'He looks like Gabriel,' said Stalin.

'Where did you meet Gabriel? In Georgia?'

'We arrested him once. He escaped from the Taganka prison.'

'And the Lord is about to set His cross in the midst of Hell, which is the sign of victory, and which will remain even to eternity.'

'Whose voice is this?' asked Beria.

'Michael's.'

'—regions of Hell are not supposed to be a bare cavity, nor some subterranean sewer of the world, but a vast deep space in the interior of the earth, and a concealed recess in its very bowels.'

'Hell isn't located in the interior of the earth,' said Beria.

'Hell is everywhere,' said Stalin. 'On Earth, on Mars, on Jupiter.'

'And in this toilet.'

'We should get out of here!'

'Their tanks are rolling around our house.'

—bored to death as the conference went on. Archangel Michael, after giving a false description of Hell's whereabouts and topography, said the conspirators aspired to bring God's ideas to the victims of Satan's tyrannical rule and to restore without delay the rule of law, putting an end to pornography and bloodshed.

'I recognise this voice.'

'Do you? It's another speaker,' said Beria.

'We should get out of here!'

'Lenin!'

'What about *him*'?

'He peeps out of a tank.'

'Why don't they fire? Have they run out of bullets?'

'He sides with God. He gets out. He stands on the top.'

'In 1917 he made a speech from an armoured car.'

'He is reaching for his cap.'

'I know this speech by heart.' Stalin rose to his feet. "'The proletariat must first overthrow the bourgeoisie and conquer state power, and then use the power of the state—the dictatorship of the proletariat—as the instrument of its class for gaining the sympathy of the workers by satisfying their economic needs in a revolutionary way at the expense of the exploiters—'"

'Many years ago the Almighty and the communists united against their common enemy—the rich. "Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant." Accordingly we took the land from the rich and gave it to the poor. All landed properties of landlords, the state, the church and others not engaged in farming were confiscated without compensation and turned over to peasants. The land must belong to those who work it with their hands, to those whose sweat flows abundantly. Rich peasants—kulaks—were liquidated as a class in the early thirties, thanks to the unwavering resoluteness of my disciple and successor Josef Stalin.'

'I am also his murderer.' Stalin sat again on the edge of the washbasin.

'—oppressors. For it is written, "He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor." We broke the oppressors in pieces! And we scattered those pieces all over the earth. You can see those pieces

exhibited in our museums and showrooms. And also outside our museums and showrooms—in the open air. The whole world is a museum of our revolutionary fervour. And your brains are filled with the ruins of what we destroyed in the twentieth century. We destroyed the old world in which oppressors oppressed the oppressed. And we're building a better world in which the oppressed oppress oppressors and the oppressed oppress themselves. It's not enough to kill oppressors, because they have houses and children. So we burn their houses and kill their children. Sometimes we are compelled to destroy everything down to the houses and children of the oppressed. They have been contaminated by their oppressors and therefore should be rubbed off the face of the earth. We should prevent the bourgeois disease from contaminating the future. We should prevent the past from destroying our present. The past is our enemy because we live in the future. And those who don't live in the future are the enemies of the future and should be destroyed in the present. They should become the past, a thing of the past. For it is written, "Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded: they shall be as nothing; and they that strive with thee shall perish." They have perished. Only the future is invincible. For many years we have been united with God against our common enemy and we have built together a kingdom, "which shall never be destroyed. And it shall stand for ever." Our communist regime shall spread over eternity. God said it. We say it. Every decision of our government is echoed in the Bible. In 1918 we decided to requisition peasant surplus produce. All who resisted seizures of grain were turned over to Revolutionary Tribunals and shot on the spot. Kulaks were deprived not only of their surplus grain but also of that required to sow the next crop. For it is written, "But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want." And I wrote, "He who does not wholeheartedly and devotedly help the Red Army must be ruthlessly exterminated." Another example. We have always despised and persecuted intellectuals. From 1928 to 1931 there was a series of instructive, well-publicised trials of intellectuals and so-called specialists. They were accused of sabotage.'

I wrote on this occasion, "Wrecking by the bourgeois intelligentsia is one of the most dangerous forms of opposition to developing socialism," said Stalin, moving closer to the television.

'—hissed at their lectures. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" Indeed, where are the scribes? where are the disputers? where are the intellectuals and specialists? In October 1917 I brought to nothing the understanding of the prudent. I wrote, "The Bolsheviks must seize power immediately. To wait is a crime against the Revolution." Kamenev and Zinoviev argued against the party taking the initiative in any armed uprisings in October and November. They thought an immediate uprising would compromise the Revolution. They were too prudent and I denounced them as traitors.'

'What time is it?' asked Stalin, yawning and fidgeting.

—bored to death. Lenin went on in this vein for half an hour -

'The speaker and two officers,' said Beria.

'I hear the voice of Satan.'

'He is speaking from a balcony. Your skyscraper! Satan is in Moscow!'

'—no notice of what Lenin told you! He is your sworn enemy. He thinks the origin of religion lies in the social oppression of the toiling masses, in their helplessness before the blind forces of capitalism. Improving on Marx's famous aphorism—"religion is the opium of the people"—he declares that religion is a low-quality vodka. In January 1918, Patriarch Tikhon pronounced an anathema on the Bolsheviks. He called on the faithful to stick together and resist the communist upstarts.'

"But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first," quoted Stalin.

'—draws between the Bible and Soviet history are irrelevant. The Bible encompasses everything, even the blood shed by the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union and other countries.'

'Once I was publicly invoked as "Our Father" by a metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church,' said Stalin.

'Satan and his son are the most beastly, the most savage exploiters. These bloodsuckers—'

'Lenin again,' said Beria.

'—these spiders have grown fat at the expense of peasants and workers—our mothers and fathers, our brothers and sisters! These leeches have drunk the blood—'

'He confuses devils with vampires,' said Beria.

Stalin rose from the washbasin and groped for Beria's ear. 'Did you ever drink human blood?'

'Did you?'

'I used to, once in a while. It's not as good as Georgian wine.'

'Don't defile the honour of Russian arms with the blood of your own people, of your dead friends and relatives, of your ancestors, of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—'

'Satan again.'

'Is Tolstoy in Hell?' asked Stalin. 'He believed in God, didn't he?'

'He was excommunicated. And Dostoevsky adored games of chance.'

'Have they enlisted in Satan's army or do they belong to some guerrilla group?'

'A tank crunched the barricades of buses.'

'Are they firing? Why don't they fire? Has Lenin been killed?'

'They're draping the tanks with tarpaulin.'

'What for?'

'To blind the drivers.'

'I'm blind already. I wish I were in a tank.'

'Can you drive a tank?'

'I can't even drive an automobile.'

'Kerensky might give us a lift.'

'We quarrelled three days ago.'

'What about a bicycle?'

'In the midst of tanks and barricades? I'd rather go on foot.'

'Two tanks have been set alight. Molotov cocktails.'

'Molotov was partial to the odd Bloody Mary.' Stalin smacked his lips.

'I'm also fond of Bloody Mary!'

'Everybody likes someone else's blood. And everybody likes Georgian wine except the French. Is Moscow far from here?'

'Two hours' drive.'

'It was. Last week.'

'But we're in the same house, aren't we?'

'No.'

'You can't see the house, can you?'

'I can feel it. The air is different.'

'You mean the smell—'

'The air. Let's get out of here. Where's my dog?'

'I'll be your dog.'

They went out and the air changed instantly. Stalin sniffed the air and recognised it.

'We were in this courtyard last week.'

'It's not a courtyard.'

'What is it?'

'A road.'

'Let's go along this road.'

'Where to?'
 'To Satan's headquarters.'
 'Can you feel the tanks?'
 'Feel?'
 'The rumbling...'
 'No. Can you?'
 'I can't see any.'
 'They're in Moscow, on the banks of the Moscva River.'
 'Watch the step.'
 'Is there a staircase in this area? Are we in the Law Courts?'
 'We're in the castle.'
 'In what castle?'
 'We came here last year.'
 'Did the road lead to the castle?'
 'The road branched off the main road at—'
 'Why didn't you take the other road?'
 'The main road, you mean?'
 'Are there other roads?'
 'I thought you wanted to visit the castle.'
 'Is Satan in here?'
 'No.'
 'Are his followers camping around the moats?'
 'No. But I'm told everybody wants to reach this castle.'
 'Is the throne of God around here? Where's the throne room?'
 'Are we looking for God or Satan?'
 'Aren't they identical? Aren't they Siamese twins?'
 'One man or one woman.'
 'Is it dark in here?'
 'There's a candle in the adjacent room.'
 'Let's get out.'

The mausoleum is blacker than the night which envelops the city like the dress of a woman in mourning. Only at very close range can one make out its outlines, its bulk and notice the otherworldly glimmer of its marble whose coldness is proverbial and frightens even the ghosts of the numerous victims executed on Red Square. The mausoleum takes care of the body which sleeps within its walls and often walks around, causing the floor and the ceiling to reverberate with such an intensity that the soldiers guarding the entrance drop their rifles, stop their ears, run away along the streets and get shot as deserters by some firing squad. The body walks around the interior of the mausoleum and lies down once again in the sarcophagus, for the body is still tired after the Revolution and the Civil War during which it went through tremendous contortions in an effort to turn the world upside down. The world did turn upside down in the long run and human heads disappeared, moving and talking somewhere below; whereas human legs grew conspicuous and began to march inexorably towards the ever-receding horizon. They kicked whatever stood in their path and soon there was nothing in the world except a living jungle of legs that nobody was tempted to cross for fear of being entangled and captured.

The mausoleum is proud of the body and protects it from cold and heat, from assassins and hooligans, from microbes and disintegration. The mausoleum fears emptiness and is grieved when the body forsakes it and sleeps in ordinary houses inhabited by ordinary people who do not observe silence in its presence and, broadly speaking, fail to recognise its importance and uniqueness. The sarcophagus also feels lonely in the body's absence and tries to console itself with the thought that nothing outside the mausoleum can provide sufficient comfort to the dead.

So the mausoleum and the sarcophagus know that the body is bound to return to the fold and fill the emptiness with its footfalls and screams. They know that the body will never go too far, for it is tied to the mausoleum by an umbilical cord.

The world continues to create its own history; shots are fired and tanks roll up and down the streets; people lie down on cobblestones and sacrifice their lives for the sake of immobility and silence. The body is afraid of stray bullets and dogs, of street urchins. Why does the body's soul roam around the city instead of sleeping and dreaming and snoring? Why does it still vociferate, making its subordinates cringe and crawl on their hands and knees? Why do so many souls march through Moscow? Is it a show, an exhibition? Are they shooting a horror film in Russia?

Betrayed by Lilia and the wedding guests among whom there were his father and some of his staunchest adherents, Lenin is now faithful to the mausoleum on which he can rely both

in his nightmares and in his waking hours. The marble seems impervious to the moods of God and to the mockery of angels playing dice on the mausoleum roof. Even the echo of the songs and hypocritical cheers has quietened down, giving precedence to a soothing, all-embracing voice. 'Mummy,' says Lenin, reaching out his hand and opening his mouth as if in expectation of a honey drop.

'Sleep on, sleep on,' says his mother.

'Don't let her near me, mummy.'

'She is gone, she is gone. She won't betray you any more.'

'Did she betray me?'

'Forget her! The echo of her voice has died away. Do you still hear it?'

'I do.'

'It is my voice you hear. Can't you see who I am?'

'I can't see anything.'

'You're not blind, are you? Open your eyes.'

Lenin opens his eyes and sees his mother lay a cold, wet towel on his forehead. 'Am I ill, mummy?'

'It's nothing. Just a fever.'

'Did anybody fire at me? Was I wounded?'

'Sleep on, sleep on.'

'I attended a meeting in the suburbs of St Petersburg. Someone spotted the cavalry charging the demonstrators and shouted, "Cossacks!" I began to run. I was afraid of being killed. I wished to preserve my brain for the Revolution. I jumped over a balustrade and lost my bowler hat and my walking stick. I fell, got up and she shouted behind me, "I thought you were a hero. You're a coward. And you're ugly, hideous. You're bald, your bare skull perspires and glistens under the sunlight, your trousers are too short for your legs, your tie is shabby..."'

'You've got a pair of long legs you can be proud of. Women envy you. Men detest you.'

'Because of my legs?'

'Of course. Did you ever doubt it?'

'I'll have my legs cut off! I'd rather spend my life in a wheelchair than endure their hatred and sarcasm. Does God envy me too? I'm more venerated than Him in this country and in Eastern Europe. They didn't put *Him* in the mausoleum, did they?'

'God would have refused to set His foot in it. He doesn't need human tombs.'

'Why does she hate me? Why does she laugh at me?'

'Do you still hear her voice?'

'I see her everywhere. I'll never forgive them! The wedding. Do you know what they did?'

'You're married, Volodya. Congratulations. I'm sorry I couldn't come. I was ill.'

'I'm not married! I'll divorce her!'

'You'll never get your marriage annulled. The Pope—'

I don't have a wedding ring. Did I conceal it under my pillow? I must have lost it. I lost my crown too. I was a king in former times. Pyrrhus. I was victorious. Where's my ring? I was a dragon. Siegfried, Volodya. Is he still in the bedroom? It's *my* wedding after all. I know everything by heart, my songs, my kisses. She's not my daughter. A stranger. My wife perhaps. 'I don't like your reddish beard and your trousers. I hate your Mongol cheekbones. You're no hero. Why don't you stand up to the Cossacks? Where's your sword? Why didn't you slay the dragon? Coward! Coward!' I'm no hero, but I won. And heroes get killed. My enemies get killed too! Other people kill them for me. Some Frenchman said I was a thinking guillotine. I thought a great deal at the beginning of the century. I was thinking all the time. I'm the greatest thinker in the universe. I think, therefore others are not. What am I thinking of now? Avenge thyself! God did it. Nobody else could have mounted such a plot. She's a woman. Andrey Petrovich is God's messenger and assistant. He was there, he goaded them. I was scoffed at by everybody. A clown of Andrey Petrovich, a clown of Lilia. A clown of God. Am I responsible for what I did? Posters in Petrograd. 'Russia is no guinea pig for Lenin's experiments.' Am I God's guinea pig? Is He bored in his infinity and eternity? Did He create Russia for amusement? Did He create Lilia to punish me? She has no life of her own. My torturer, my executioner. My guillotine. She has no thoughts of her own. It's God Who acts through her. What about *my* thoughts and actions? A clown of God. How many clowns does He have? Nijinsky, Lenin, Russia. 200,000,000 clowns. I reduced the number of clowns. God must be angry with me. I broke some of His toys. Voices, voices. What are they doing here? Echoes? Does the Revolution still resound in the air? The Earth has exceptional acoustics. For murders. I executed orders, His orders. Why this punishment? Injustice. There's only one remedy against injustice, against everything. Even against a cirrhosis of the liver. Murder, a military coup. Should I send a delegation to God? Should I have Him sign a decree? What decree? I should cut His telephone lines. With a pair of scissors. Where's the internal line? In the moat, in the oubliettes? A pair of scissors. Kostya will arrest a few archangels. Has he got handcuffs? Did Kostya ever betray me? Does he often speak with

God? Tanks, tanks. Tank divisions wheeling across the steppes from Kazakhstan to the Caucasus. From Paradise to Hell.

'How are you today?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'Another week, perhaps a fortnight—' said Felix.

'Don't you recognise your wife?' Andrey Petrovich held up a book. 'Lilia. Her name appears in the last chapter of your biography.'

'He started divorce proceedings.'

'Really? Don't you desire to have a son or a daughter? Your own flesh and blood? A small creature—'

'Do you want them to be born out of wedlock?' Felix glanced at Lilia.

'When thirsting for children a man falls into a kind of trance, softened and subdued by the pleasures of generation as by sleep; something drawn from his flesh and from his bones is fashioned into another man. For the harmony of the bodies being disturbed in the embraces of love—'

'The harmony of *our* bodies was enhanced in our embraces,' said Lilia.

'—all the marrow-like and generative part of the blood, like a kind of liquid bone, coming together from all the members, worked into foam and curdled—'

'Like champagne,' said Lilia.

'Like yoghurt,' said Felix.

'—is projected through the organs of generation into the living body of the female—'

'From the dead body of the male,' said Kostya.

'—so that the father may again appear in the son.'

'Or in the daughter,' said Lilia.

'You're not my daughter!' shouted Lenin.

'And let them inculcate marriage not only upon the young, but also upon those advanced in years—'

'And also upon the dead,' said Kostya.

'—lest burning lust bring a plague upon the Church by reason of whoredom or adultery. For above every other sin, the wickedness of adultery is hated by God, because it not only destroys the person himself who sins, but those also who eat and associate with him. For it is like the madness of a dog, because it has the nature of communicating its own madness.'

'We invited him to high tea. He ate two slices of cherry-tart,' said Lilia's mother.

'Three slices,' said Lilia.

'As the husbandman throwing the seed into the ground awaits the harvest, not sowing more upon it, so to us the procreation of children is the measure of our indulgence in appetite,' continued Andrey Petrovich.

'I protest,' said Lilia.

'Tanks,' said Lenin.

'Again?' asked Felix. 'Another putsch?'

'Lock the door,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'So much for your marriage.'

'You forgot Hegel,' said Felix.

'Has he come with his wife?'

'She is in our maternity hospital.'

Hegel walked up to the sarcophagus and unfolded a sheet of paper.

'Your wife represents an object of your cupidity and a depository of your seed required for the procreation of your progeny whom you will entrust with the task of carrying the torch of your *Wille* into the future.'

'He looks like Hegel but sounds like Schopenhauer,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'He is very fond of Schopenhauer,' said Felix. 'As a birthday present—'

'Besides, your wife is supposed to cure your spirit which, in spite of your fame and wealth, suffers from a psychological disease called "*le mal de vivre*". Your wife is in a position to reconcile your authentic inner self with your behaviour towards the outside world lying before you, behind you, on your left-hand side, on your right-hand side; she will also direct your attention to the spiritual world hanging above you like a canopy. I am sure that the amount of love you treasure and nurse in your bosom is sufficient to keep your wife supplied with the tools for her job. Marriage is first and foremost a religious bond which completes the sentiment of love most advantageously, for, to become complete and wholesome, love needs something more elevated than what it is in itself, by itself and through itself. The complete satisfaction of your ego—"being happy", in common parlance—cannot be accomplished without religion and the sense of duty, for only with the aid of religion and under the control of your sense of duty will you successfully remove all the particularities of your temporal Self which is sprawling now in a sort of sarcophagus, not deprived of geometrical dignity.'

'Now he sounds and looks like Hegel,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'And he loves like Hegel,' said Lilia.

'However renowned and worshipped, your temporal Self is liable to unsettle your mind and your reality, all the more so that, in a way, reality is "unfinished" and should not be regarded as the definitive version of the cosmic oratorio.'

'Lenin's mind is also unfinished,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'Do you know that one hemisphere of his brain is utterly rotten and has never functioned?'

'Syphilis?' suggested Kostya.

'Congenital idiocy?' suggested Lilia's mother.

'Nevertheless, it is in reality—i.e. before you, behind you, on your left-hand side, on your right-hand side—that resides what is called "terrestrial happiness".'

Lenin was a great admirer of Hegel's, although there were a few minor points on which they did not quite see eye to eye. He listened to Hegel's speech and even nodded several times—out of politeness and respect. He did it almost automatically: his thoughts were elsewhere. They were neither before him nor behind him. They were above him. They were situated at the crown of his head. He was thinking of God.

He sought to justify and vindicate the putsch he was about to launch in Hell and in the suburbs of Hell—in Moscow. What act of God did he single out for his attack? He had not read the Bible since his childhood and therefore had to rely on his memory and imagination. He recalled the Tree of Knowledge and smiled to himself: this piece of information was enough to push communists to storm the castles of Paradise, to appropriate the Garden of Eden and confiscate the fruits of knowledge and berries of enlightenment. 'God forbade us to pluck apples from the Tree of Knowledge in order to enslave us through our ignorance and illiteracy. But we probed into the secrets of the universe and realised that the world was matter in motion and that Nature had existed before man and would exist after man. Even after *my* death do flowers continue to bloom. We also realised that things were beyond our consciousness—in the Hereafter, so to speak. We infuriated God by our scientific discoveries and He banished us from the Garden of Eden, renowned for its fruit and vegetables. Now, the critical situation of the food supply, the threat of famine caused by speculation, the sabotage of capitalists and bureaucrats, as well as the prevailing chaos, make it necessary to take extraordinary revolutionary measures and appropriate whatever can be appropriated.'

'Your former KGB agents don't live up to their prestige,' said Andrey Petrovich to Lenin.

'They're dead,' said Kostya. 'They're droopy.'

'Though alive and in good health, they proved rather sluggish during last year's putsch,' said Felix. 'What's more, there were reports of defections by a KGB general and 20 senior officers.'

'We must realise that the metamorphosis undergone by the Soviet Union in the past few years has affected the KGB like everyone else,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'Is *our* KGB influenced by what happens on earth?' asked Kostya incredulously.

'As above, so below. Whatever happens on earth is bound to happen in Hell and in Paradise.'

'Modern technology,' explained Felix. 'Television, the telephone, supersonic aircraft, communications satellites. The world grew smaller in the twentieth century. Hell is no longer far from Paradise—within a stone's throw.'

'Isn't the Hereafter spaceless and timeless?' asked Hegel.

'Why did you leave me, my darling?' Volodya grasped Lilia's hand and covered it with kisses.

'Eternity is subject to Time. Your wedding is over,' said Felix. 'You played your part superbly and were highly praised by our theatrical critics. But now your bride is Lenin's wife.'

'I love her! I've written a few poems about our love.'

*'You go rigid as I pull you close,
I feel my climax sweep up from my toes
And roar and howl over my whole body.
You rear up and—you're heaven!—come as well.
And, though I'm utterly exhausted,
My body's crisp, my lust begins to swell—'*

'He did play his part superbly,' acquiesced Lilia. 'May I have him as a lover? Revolutionaries used to admit and even advocate free love as a prototype of—'

'Those women who desire to commit adultery,' said Andrey Petrovich, 'are prepared even for the slaying of their injured husbands, and not one only, nor two, but ten thousand murders are they ready to venture upon. And of this sort of tragic plot there are many witnesses. For such is the nature of whoredom.'

'Do you want me to kill Lenin?' asked Lilia.

'I love her. I love her body, I love her cruelty. I love her whims and limbs. My life has become a poem in her company. Whenever parted from her, I am like a windmill on a windless day, or like Don Quixote deprived of windmills, or like Cervantes unable to write *Don Quixote*. But for her words and songs, I would be deaf and mute. Her caresses warm my skin. My body is *The Unfinished Symphony*, my heart a truncated cone—'

'Over my dead body!' shouted Lenin.

'Why did you marry her off to this butcher, to this ignoramus?' shouted Volodya. 'In his lifetime he never went to concerts or the theatre. Even now he can discuss only one subject: the "Revolution". He is interested in nothing else and has nothing interesting to say about anything else.'

'He'll make her laugh,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'We'll have our own circus and our own theatre at home,' said Lilia's mother. 'Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog—'

'He was a splendid Richard III,' said Felix. 'Only, instead of "My kingdom for a horse!", he kept saying, "My horse for a kingdom!"'

'And he got his kingdom. For nothing,' said Andrey Petrovich.

At this point the discussion was interrupted by Satan's envoy. He handed Andrey Petrovich a sheet of paper in the middle of which there was a cross painted in black ink.

'The sign of surrender?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'Yes,' answered the envoy.

'So soon?'

'Your tanks are omnipotent.'

'Not our tanks—our ideas.'

'Lenin's ideas, not yours. He talked to them. He made a speech.'

'Who? God?'

'Lenin.'

'The New Spiritual Policy?'

'I'm ill,' said Lenin. 'I haven't left this room for a month. Anyway I'll speak only in the presence of my lawyer.'

'Does he have a lawyer?' asked Felix.

'He said God was his ally. He said God invited him to dinner last weekend.'

'Another Lenin?' asked Felix.

'How do they multiply? By cell division?' asked Andrey Petrovich.

'He's a virgin. He makes love to no one. Not even to his wife,' said Kostya.

'I would have declined the invitation,' said Lenin firmly.

'Nobody invited you,' said Lilia's mother.

'I wouldn't shake hands with God. His hands are smeared with the blood of the working people. He has created and tolerated feudalism and capitalism, slavery and serfdom.'

'And what about free will?' asked Andrey Petrovich. '*Your* free will, for instance? You're afraid of the Cossacks and rebel against God. Isn't that proof of His mercy and indulgence? Lenin would already have sentenced you to death.'

'I'll never sign an armistice with God. I'll never forgive Him for trifling with my fatherly affection.' Lenin's soul rose up and approached the envoy who returned its salute. 'Have we done everything to help your Master? It's not enough to undermine God's regime. We must uproot and destroy it.'

'How?' asked the envoy.

'Let's call a taxi. Is it far from here? Can you fly?'

'Within a stone's throw,' said Felix.

Andrey Petrovich reached for the telephone.

3

What's exhibited in the mausoleum? My body, not my soul. What was embalmed after my death? What should I save from eternal fire? The soul feels pain. The soul falls in love. Let them kill it! The soul is superfluous. Who's afraid of immaterial substances? Can one threaten people with an immaterial revolver? Do immaterial bullets pierce human hearts? Does anybody obey immaterial orders? The Machists and the fascists tried to refute materialism with the aid of 'neopositivism', 'the philosophy of modern natural science', and so forth. Regarding the world as a 'complex of sensations' they merely repeated the old subjective idealist views. My soul *is* a complex of sensations. Words and bombs are in my brain. They're more efficient in my brain because it has closer ties with my body. It's connected with my body through veins and muscles. Bombs slip from my brain into my body through a network of tubes and my arms throw them at the enemy.

Lenin spent most of the time in the mausoleum, going out only when his wife needed to show him to some intellectual friends of hers who laughed at his physique and often slapped him in the face. When lying in his sarcophagus, he stared at the ceiling and would not close his eyes even during visiting hours so that tourists thought he was still alive, though dangerously ill. A few ominous signs corroborated this hypothesis: he looked paler than usual and did not talk spontaneously.

His friends were reminded of his last illness in the course of which he went through many a crisis and even asked a nurse to procure him cyanide or arsenic. She disobeyed his order and he continued to suffer, biting his lips and staring at the chandelier inherited from some executed nobleman.

'In 1922 he was invited to take part in the international conference at Genoa. Lloyd George himself sent him a letter to say that his personal participation in it was desirable and might lead to economic equilibrium in Europe. On the eve of his departure—'

'He suffered the first stroke. He lost the use of his right leg and arm.'

'His power of speech was disturbed.'

'His friends were forbidden to involve him in political discussions.'

'He couldn't talk anyway.'

'He forgot his mother tongue.'

'Tell us something in Russian. Please!'

Lenin said a few syllables in Russian, then in German, and was kissed on the hands and congratulated enthusiastically.

Stalin was among the very first to visit Lenin in his retirement. Stalin had already recovered his sight and looked around more often than before.

'So you've managed to get some rest after incessant and exhausting battles. You're refreshed by the repose.' Stalin broke into loud applause and Lenin pulled a box of earplugs from under his head. 'But you still show signs of overwork and fatigue.'

'Leave me alone.'

'You're not paralysed, are you?'

'Leave me alone.'

Lenin was not allowed to read newspapers. He read a few books instead, underlining words and sentences, muttering metaphors and ideas. He felt a void at the core of his ego and sometimes drew a deep breath, trying to fill it up.

Andrey Petrovich also paid him a visit. 'You can receive your colleagues and transact business for a few hours a day. Did you have a philosophical discussion with Lao Tzu this afternoon? Are you still angry with me? Well, I had to do it. I suppose I owe you an explanation. *Noblesse oblige*. *Glasnost oblige*, rather. At first I didn't object to your enjoying the benefits of free will. We could have arrested your soul many times and on various occasions. Taking advantage of your sleep and our broken computers, it mooned around the country almost every night. Did you often suffer from headaches in the morning?'

'Very often.'

'Your soul was tired after its nocturnal escapades. You don't suffer from headaches any more, do you? Your soul would thread its way through the crowd of other souls.'

'Do they all travel at night?'

'Air traffic has become rather heavy. There are too many corpses in the history of humankind.'

'Is there a night train for souls?'

'A night train, a lot of night flights.'

'Why did you arrest it?'

'Your soul continually incited our population to civil disobedience, but we decided to overlook its subversive tendencies. We even helped you keep it inside your body. On the day of Stalin's departure from the mausoleum, we plugged your nostrils with deerskin to preclude your soul from following your friend.'

'It wouldn't have followed him.'

'Whenever we heard the mosquito-like buzzing of its wings, we replaced it in the nape of your neck. Once we caught it by the foot as it was about to plunge into the light cast by the souls of the dead.'

'The moonlight?'

'The twilight. The souls of the dead pass in and out of the underworld and—'

'Why did you arrest it?'

'Didn't you have a philosophical discussion with Hermes Trismegistus last night? As outside, so inside. By killing Yeltsin you would have messed up the papers in my drawer.'

'Yeltsin?'

'"They made a mistake by not shooting me in the morning," he said in a recent interview.'

'What else do you accuse my soul of?'

'"We must execute not only the guilty. Execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more," said your Commissar of Justice.'

'Did he?'

'Apart from everything else, your soul snooped into my private life and once stole some secret drafts and two thousand dollars from my Louis XV secretaire designed by—'

'Where are they now? My wife needs dollars.'

'They were confiscated—'

'Give them to my wife!'

'I'm afraid it's out of the question,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'The charges made against your soul were so overwhelming and irrefutable—'

'Overwhelming?'

'Do you know what we found inside it? We didn't even have to use a microscope.' Andrey Petrovich put four sheets of paper on Lenin's stomach. 'Read them!'

Lenin sat up and slipped his hand under the pillow. 'I've broken my glasses,' he said.

'You can use mine, if you wish.'

All hopes for the peaceful evolution of the Hereafter Uprising have disappeared without trace. The objective situation: either the ultimate triumph of God's dictatorship or the triumph of the decisive struggle of the workers.

I can tell you a lot about Yeltsin. Why don't you consult me? My hearing is wonderful and I fly further and faster than material things. Yeltsin signed a decree suspending the activity of the Russian Communist party. He dismantled the Soviet Union and almost

disbanded the KGB. Free-market prices were introduced in January 1992. There was a putsch last year. Muscovites blockaded Yeltsin's office building and the tanks did not get through.

We can strike suddenly from three points: St Petersburg, Moscow and the Baltic Fleet.

Power seizure is the task of the Uprising. Its political and spiritual goals will become clear after power has been taken.

Lenin dropped the sheets on the blanket and lay down. Andrey Petrovich recovered his glasses and opened his attaché case.

'Where are you keeping it?' asked Lenin.

'Your soul? It's being re-educated. The pernicious influence of your body and brain—'

'In the Gulag Archipelago?'

'On the Riviera. Your soul is staying at a five-star hotel and sunbathes on a private beach. Didn't you receive the card?'

'What card?'

'A Christmas card. Your soul also sent you a photograph of the hotel and a book.'

'What book? *Conditions of the Working Class in England*?'

'Your soul looks quite harmless. Even without the make-up. It's very fond of remedial gymnastics: eurhythmics, Swedish movements—'

'Who am I now?' asked Lenin.

'I beg your pardon?'

Lenin turned towards the wall and the sheets of paper rustled down. 'Is she coming today?'

'Your wife? How should I know?'

'You know everything.'

'She'll come after midnight.'

'I'll be asleep.'

'You will not.'

Andrey Petrovich put his glasses in the attaché case, shut it and left the room. The ensuing silence somehow echoed the void that Lenin had recently discovered in his existence. The silence responded to his wish to remain alone in the Hereafter whose aggressiveness and monstrosity were on a par with the orders he had issued at the dawn of the Soviet rule, shaking the world and those living in it. Yet he regretted the departure of Andrey Petrovich: he could no longer dodge his wife's questions and skirt round the subject of money—the

unavoidable and main feature of all the discussions they had been engaged in for almost a year.

Lenin wondered to what extent his wife might be influenced by her grandmother who, propelled around by a brand-new electric wheelchair, shouted out of the bathroom or through the window, 'Sell his brain!' 'Sell his body!' 'Sell his pyjamas!' 'Sell his mausoleum!'

'Not a bad idea!' said his wife. 'We can sell your brain or rather—'

'My brain has been taken apart. Why don't you come closer to the bed?'

'An exclusive interview for a Western magazine. Better still—a book. What about writing your memoirs and selling the rights to the Americans?'

On the following day, Lenin wrote in a gigantic notebook:

'My mother, Maria Alexandrovna Blank, was the daughter of a physician. Well educated, highly cultured, she had a fine intellect and was familiar with Russian and foreign literature. She was very keen on music and played *Für Elise* every weekend and during thunderstorms. She devoted herself entirely to the upbringing of her children, striving to inculcate her own high ideals—'

'Sounds like one of your ridiculous biographies,' said the grandmother.

'The air is poisoned with his biographies and clichés,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'Perhaps he should stop breathing.'

The memoirs Lenin was writing in his seclusion differed considerably from official biographies prepared and published by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow. He spoke chiefly about his mother, quoting in full her lullabies and fairy tales, bringing out the tiniest inflections of her voice. His wife did all she could to make him change the style and the subject matter of his book, but he remained adamant and continued to dwell upon his mother's whims and clothes. He also described the flowers and bushes among which he used to scatter his half-broken toys.

His wife reminded him that he also had a father who, being a typical representative of the progressive Soviet elite, devoted himself entirely to the cause of popular education in Purgatory. 'Diligent, persevering and exacting towards himself and others, he places the interests of his work above all else.'

Lenin continued to write about birds and the taste of his mother's lipstick. He could not resist the urge to add a Japanese touch to the garden of his youth, putting in the middle of it a cherry tree and a rock, 'which was regarded as the most desirable garden stone in the whole country. Wrapped in silk, decorated with flowers, the stone had been brought to my garden with the music of flutes and drums and the chanting of the labourers.'

'He must be seeing things,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'Hire a professional biographer! Offer him one-tenth of the total amount!' shouted the grandmother from the roof.

'At five years of age you were already able to read. You were particularly fond of books in which the heroes were men of firm and indomitable character,' shouted his wife from the bedroom.

'On December 4, 1887 you were arrested at your lodgings in Kazan,' shouted Volodya. 'On the way to prison the constable asked you a question. What question did he ask you?'

Lenin continued to write about the musical murmur of cascades.

'"Why are you making all this trouble, young man? Can't you see you are up against a wall?" What did you answer?'

'A wallflower?' asked Lenin.

'A wall, yes, but a rotten one. A rotten one. It only wants a push, and it will collapse. Col-lapse.'

Soon the idea of publishing *Les Memoires d'outre tombe* was abandoned and Lenin resumed his study of the ceiling. He also set up a stone in the main hall of the mausoleum and planted it round with rose bushes. The shouts of the grandmother disturbed him no longer and he did not know what part of his body she had singled out for a forthcoming auction in St Petersburg. He even forgot he had a brain somewhere, preoccupied as he was with the life and exile of his soul.

He was therefore surprised to hear that, after visiting the Moscow Institute of the Brain, a Bavarian journalist had written an article on his powers of persuasion and imagination.

'Twenty years ago, the head of the Institute, Dr Grünwald, managed to isolate the substance of your genius,' said the journalist.

'Is it solid, liquid or gaseous? Does it look like a filmy cloud?' asked Volodya.

'They keep it in a cupboard. I wasn't allowed to see it. Apparently it's red.'

'Does it look like my soul?' asked Lenin.

'Have you already visited the Institute of the Soul?' translated Volodya, unfolding a map of the Riviera.

Lenin reached for his notebook.

Two days later, the journalist returned to the mausoleum in a jeep stuffed with cameras and microphones.

THE JOURNALIST: Good afternoon, Comrade Lenin.

LENIN: Good afternoon.

THE JOURNALIST: We're all concerned about your illness. How are you feeling today?

LENIN: My handwriting has become human. I understand what I write in this notebook.

THE JOURNALIST: So do I.

LENIN: I also understand what I say to myself.

THE JOURNALIST: You've been dead for almost seventy years now. Would you say that your state of non-being affects your work and morale?

LENIN: I'm trying to live—that's all. Two years ago I set about writing my memoirs. My mother was a very nice woman and our Japanese garden was renowned in the whole area.

THE JOURNALIST: When your elder brother was executed you were quoted as saying to your sister, 'No, we shall not take this road. This is not the road to follow.' What kind of road are you following now? Where does it lead?

LENIN: I'm dead and all the dead follow the same road. Knots of people go through the streets of a silent town and there's nothing at the end, not even a cul-de-sac. There's nothing on the horizon.

THE JOURNALIST: Has your sojourn in the Hereafter widened your horizons? Do you have a world-view that includes God? In other words, do you believe in God today? Is there God at the end of your road, on your horizon?

LENIN: God exists.

THE JOURNALIST: Did you have an opportunity to discuss with God the collapse of the Communist regime in Russia and in other countries of Eastern Europe?

LENIN: Is it so important? The same Shakespearean tragedy is performed throughout human history.

THE JOURNALIST: In your lifetime you didn't seem to appreciate Schopenhauer's philosophy.

LENIN: Macbeth destroys his enemies and gets killed before the fall of the curtain. But the curtain doesn't fall. All the daggers are floating between us and our victims. The killing can start anew and this time our victims are bound to avenge themselves.

THE JOURNALIST: What would you do if the monarchy were restored in Russia? Would you have the new Tsar and his family killed by KGB agents?

LENIN: Why should one kill a Tsar? Why should one kill Macbeth or Duncan or Banquo? They'll all die in due course. And they'll never die. They're immortal. You can't kill anybody. We're tired but we must go on. We have no choice, no alternative. To be or not to

be—that's no question. We are! Even the unborn are alive and trudge along the same street. Trudge, body, and climb, trudge and climb. My soul sent me an anthology of British poetry. I liked Robert Graves.

THE JOURNALIST: You did kill Duncan—to borrow your terminology. It's established that the final decision to 'liquidate' the Tsar and his family was taken by you personally. When Trotsky asked Sverdlov in August 1918 where the Tsar was, Sverdlov replied, 'Finished.' 'And who decided the matter?' asked Trotsky. 'Vladimir Ilich. He thought that we should not leave the Whites a live banner—'

LENIN: I was young at the time. I didn't understand the structure of the universe.

THE JOURNALIST: In history books you die of overwork and haemorrhage of the brain. Dr Victor Ossipov affirms that you died of syphilis.

LENIN: I suffered a lot. My face was disfigured. My former wife didn't recognise me on January 21. Even now I feel pain. Death doesn't eliminate pain. He deadens it like a drug. Did you recognise me?

THE JOURNALIST: Do you believe in metempsychosis?

LENIN: I fear another life. I might become Hitler in my next incarnation.

THE JOURNALIST: What kind of person would you like to be in your next incarnation? Lenin again? A revolutionary? A Tsar?

LENIN: A pianist. And a poet, an English poet. We speak English in the Hereafter. A neutral English. A dead English.

THE JOURNALIST: Wouldn't you rather become an animal? A domestic animal? A wild animal? A bird of prey?

LENIN: In my very last incarnation I'd like to be a stone in my own garden.

THE JOURNALIST: Stalin was once quoted as having said, 'What strikes you in Comrade Lenin is his thirst for information and his craving, his insuperable craving for work. He is famished for work.' Wouldn't your existence in the shape of a stone contradict Stalin's appraisal of your personality? Do you think we can change at all in the course of eternity?

LENIN: Don't we always lug our karma around with us? Doesn't it pursue us everywhere? I'm weary of myself. I feel like a holiday. On the Riviera, on Mauritius. I wish I could forget humans. I'm much more interested in the history of stones.

THE JOURNALIST: In your opinion, is the history of stones linked to that of humans? Just consider all the evidence for this theory—we pick up stones and throw them at our enemies. We also make sculptures out of stones. And these sculptures represent our figures and faces.

LENIN: Does this stone bear any resemblance to humans? Do you like my mausoleum garden?

THE JOURNALIST: It's very beautiful.

LENIN: Perhaps I am already this stone. Perhaps this garden is located in the future. We live in parallel times.

THE JOURNALIST: Would you mind being your own monument or bust? There are so many of them in the former Soviet Union.

LENIN: Some were toppled and smashed to pieces. I wouldn't mind being one of those pieces.

THE JOURNALIST: Aren't you being too modest? Is your modesty a mask? There's a theory according to which a modern tyrant is not distinguished, as many former tyrants were, by the difference between himself and his subjects. On the contrary, he tries to sound and look like his subjects, continuously stressing what they all have in common.

LENIN: A small object is easier to hide. I aspire to be hidden in someone's pocket—

THE JOURNALIST: In God's pocket?

LENIN: God is pocketless.

THE JOURNALIST: What do you worry about in the middle of the night? What's your biggest problem?

LENIN: I don't wake in the middle of the night.

THE JOURNALIST: Are you given injections? Do you take sleeping pills?

LENIN: What's the use of worrying about anything? The past shouldn't be regretted. The future is unpredictable and ungovernable. And whenever we start worrying about the present, it's no longer with us.

THE JOURNALIST: Do you worry about stars? One can't see them clearly nowadays because of the pollution.

LENIN: I see them very clearly. All you have to do is look at them.

THE JOURNALIST: Do people starve to death in the Hereafter?

LENIN: They don't eat. Do you know a better solution to the food problem?

THE JOURNALIST: Do you have any friends or supporters in the Hereafter? Are you well liked in the Hereafter?

LENIN: Are you acquainted with the people who don't dream of killing you? Human beings need a lot of space around them. Lebensraum. Have you ever been killed?

THE JOURNALIST: I'm still alive.

LENIN: Are you? Who knows. After my death, I often thought I was alive. People walk around you. They stare at your throat. Lots of daggers float in the streets. I don't mind now. Another drop of blood in the river of eternity. Another death might do me a lot of good.

At the end of the interview Lenin brightened up and even smiled as the television crew shot his garden and the bridge leading through the window to the roof and 'thence to heaven', as Volodya put it. His wife, wearing a Gautier suit, joined him and answered the last questions.

'We're planning to spend our honeymoon in France. My husband wants to show me around Paris and I'm longing to taste oysters and frogs. We're going to settle in New York or in California. The choice of our residence depends on a few business transactions which are already under way and will have been over by Christmas. I love the United States, although I've never been out of Russia. I've read a lot about the American way of life. The Americans live in the future, sometimes in the distant future. And I'm fed up with the twentieth century, especially with the Russian twentieth century. You can't live comfortably in Russia, even if you have millions of dollars. Suppose you bought a Cadillac and had it delivered to Moscow or St Petersburg. Who'll keep your Cadillac in proper repair? Besides, you won't find the right grade of petrol outside Moscow and St Petersburg. And roads are very bad in Russia. There are no motorways. What's the point of having a luxurious car in such a country? You can furnish your house with eighteenth-century French furniture. But what awaits you outdoors? Mud, cracks, ditches and famished-looking dogs running around the streets. So what happens? Your furniture goes up in a smoke, figuratively speaking. As outside, so inside.'

'Are we going abroad?' wrote Lenin, once the journalist and the television crew had departed.

'Do you want to stay in Russia? Have you become a patriot? You didn't care much for Russia and her inhabitants in your lifetime. You thought the Russians were lazy, soft and rather stupid.'

'Why? Won't you allow me to die here?'

'Because we live only once—at least on earth. And we don't die twice. I've invited the *Moulin Rouge*.'

'What? When?'

'Tonight. Just an ordinary show. And our guests will have dinner. I've ordered fifty bottles of French champagne.'

'Where?'

'What?'

'Where will they dance?'

'In the mausoleum.'

'Where?'

'Around your sarcophagus, on your sarcophagus. We'll put a few tables along the walls.'

'Why?'

'It's not a cocktail party! Personally I don't like having a plate on my lap.'

'Why?'

'Because we need money!'

Lenin stared at the ceiling and reflected on his wife's friendship with Volodya. He preferred to think about it in terms of friendship despite the great many proofs to the contrary he had gathered under his pillow and in his memory which obediently supplied him with the most intolerable images and sounds whenever he was in a masochistic mood. Lenin loved his wife. He had not married her out of self-interest: she had no money and was in no position to introduce him into one of the newly-created, joint-venture firms whose employees travelled in the West and earned their livings in hard currency. She was simply wonderful and beautiful and he loved her in the old-fashioned way, bringing her bunches of roses from his garden and writing poems and songs in her honour. In the morning he would stand before the bedroom door with a guitar in his hands; an inaudible serenade streamed from his lips, melting away into a remote, paradisiacal sky.

He was also preoccupied by the necessity of leaving the mausoleum and settling down in the country he had visited neither in his lifetime nor during his holidays in Hades. However, he had no particular attachment to his motherland and would never have returned to St Petersburg from Switzerland, but for the abdication of the Tsar, which had left the Russian throne vacant and accessible. 'It's yours for the taking,' said his former wife, packing the Grecian vase in straw.

That mediocre, badly-scratched replica of a Sosibios vase was the only 'useless' object he always carried in his trunks and bags. Why? Had he been a Greek in one of his earlier incarnations? Had he been Socrates or Keats or just another vase, broken by a barbarian and trampled into the ground by a horse? Had he been a man of genius or a beautiful object before his fatal birth in Russia?

Lenin shifted his gaze to the vase and slowly a smile disarranged the rigidity of his features. After all, he reflected, their departure would rid him of his rival who had an important post in the Moscow area of Hell and, like Soviet nuclear physicists, was not allowed to go abroad.

We'll be alone at last. There are so many beds on earth and underground. And every house is a mausoleum. Only she is unique and incomparable.

A young lady approached him and asked where the dressing room was. 'To change,' she said in English. '*Est-ce qu'il y a des loges quelque part? Je ne suis pas une strip-teaseuse.*' Presently she went away, irritated by his silence. Another young lady entered the mausoleum and began to dance near the sarcophagus; she was kicking her legs so high that Lenin recalled the 'potato-woman'.

The diplomats and other guests arrived around 8 p.m. and Lenin closed his eyes, feigning the ultimate death or a deep sleep. He was stared at and admired by a few ladies who later on bombarded his personal beautician with questions and supplications. Lenin was asked to stand up and walk a few paces towards the Dutch ambassador who congratulated him on his immortality and asked if he had seen the film *Little Vera*.

'There was a fair bit of necking. And she was topless—something unheard-of in the Soviet cinema.'

'All Soviet cinema has become sexy,' said the Portuguese Minister of Culture.

'Ladies and gentlemen! We welcome you to the mausoleum,' said Volodya. 'Since the inauguration of this one-man museum in 1924, nobody except tourists has ever crossed its threshold to contemplate the corpse of the greatest man in Soviet history. As you know, Soviet history is now a thing of the past, but the man in whose image the Soviet state was created continues to arouse curiosity and controversy all over the world. Many people wonder what our country and our planet would have become had Lenin survived beyond his 54th birthday. Would the human species have been annihilated? Would the reign of God have come to an end? Lenin did not survive beyond his 54th birthday and whatever he strove to achieve after his death was controlled, regulated and moderated by our doctors and computers. History makes us suffer. History also makes us forget our sufferings. Lenin no longer constitutes a threat to our lives and amusements. In a few months he'll be exhibited at Madame Tussaud's in London. He is already exhibited in the museum of mankind. He is powerless and distant. He cannot throw us away from his tomb and the scantily-dressed *Moulin-Rouge* girls will not be arrested and shot for obscene behaviour. Now we dismiss his ideas and suppress his cruelty. He walks amidst us and drinks champagne from our glasses. He smiles. We tell him that all his projects have failed in the long run, after inflicting physical pain and mental torture upon millions and millions of people in Europe and Asia.'

'And in Latin America!'

'And of course in Latin America. Lenin has partly shaped the world where we are living now. We shouldn't dismiss this world of ours with an impatient shrug of the shoulders. After all we can still meet and talk and drink French champagne and enjoy the beauty and elegance of cabaret dancers. Lenin allowed our grandmothers to have children—our parents. And our parents lived long enough to get married and give us an opportunity to be born in this vale of tears. Our history might have been better. It might have been far worse. Lenin did not annihilate our planet and I'm grateful to him for this unexpected sin of omission. We must live in hope—as long as we live! Thank you for your attention!'

There was another show and yet another—within a week. Lenin answered questions, ate caviar and drank champagne with German businessmen who invited him to Munich and asked him to sign a few photographs: Lenin in his sarcophagus, Lenin on the armoured car, Lenin during his funerals, Lenin and children by a Christmas tree, Lenin and Stalin, Lenin and Hitler, Lenin with his new wife, Lenin with his daughter.

Once he slipped out of the mausoleum and stopped before the cathedral of St Basil the Blessed. He recalled a remark he overheard during his last visit to Lavra of the Holy Trinity and St Sergius, 'Have you ever studied the anatomy of joy? In this monastery you'll find its various shapes and shades.'

'How can you explain your intolerant attitude towards churches?' asked a passer-by. 'Why were these magnificent city cathedrals and modest village churches condemned to ruin and demolition when they so beautifully fitted into the Russian landscape?'

'For the anatomy of joy he substituted the anatomy of murder,' said Andrey Petrovich, removing his gloves. 'Have you seen this movie?'

'Is it about Lenin?'

'No movies are made about him any more. Even murders are committed by other people and not necessarily in his name.'

'Human memory is short. Human history is long.'

Lenin went down to the Moscva River and realised he would never see it again. 'Water is the same everywhere,' he told himself several times. 'What's the difference between the Seine and the Thames? Only mermaids differ from one another. Only mermaids are beautiful.'

'Repent, repent!' said another passer-by. 'Kneel down and implore our forgiveness!'

Lenin knelt down and immediately stood up, not knowing what to say.

'Aren't you guilty? Don't you feel guilty about your life? Go back to Red Square, bow down to everybody—to the whole country, to the whole of history—and implore our

forgiveness. How many Christmas trees have you felled? Kiss Russian soil. You sinned against it too.'

Lenin returned to Red Square, knelt down, kissed the cobblestones, stood up, bowed down to three passers-by and one policeman, bowed down to the mausoleum that was crammed with foreigners and Russian nouveaux-riches: a fashion show was in full swing and cameras clicked faster than usual.

'Please forgive me!' said Lenin.

'Speak louder!' said a teenage girl.

'Forgive me!'

'Do you know what's going on in the mausoleum?' asked a student.

'A fashion show,' answered the policeman.

'Hard currency?' asked an old woman.

'Of course,' answered the policeman.

'I hope they'll buy him a decent suit.'

'Who are you talking about?'

'Lenin. They can't bury him like that.'

'Like what?'

'They can afford it, can't they? In his Sunday best!'

'They're going to sell him.'

'They'll get more money if he's properly dressed.'

'He shouldn't wear a Soviet suit in a Western museum.'

'They don't need a *gentleman*. They're buying a Russian revolutionary.'

'Local colour!'

'Why don't they sell him naked? Westerners will wash and dress him from head to foot. Why should we spend our money on this corpse?'

'Did he spend his money on us?'

'He must be burnt at the stake!'

Lenin knelt down once more and kissed the cobblestones.

4

THE CHAIRMAN: Now, gentlemen, the next thing on the agenda is the removal of Lenin's body from the mausoleum. I suppose you're all acquainted with the problem and its implications. I think I should inform you that we've received a few enticing offers from our American friends, which range from 1,000,000 dollars to 27,000,000 dollars. You will hardly need to be reminded that an agreement of this importance can be signed only on condition that the future owner of our leader's body solemnly promises to treat it with due consideration and respect. Moreover, potential buyers will be requested to explain why they wish to acquire the body of our former leader and whether they intend to put it to good use.

A DEPUTY: He should be judged in accordance with our new constitution. After the trial his body will be burnt at the stake in front of the mausoleum.

A MATHEMATICIAN: Lenin was the cruellest man in the history of the world. During the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in 1968, an inhabitant of Prague painted on a wall, 'Lenin, wake up! They've become mad.' What would have happened had Lenin woken up? The city of Prague might have been utterly destroyed. Our former leader was not even a sadist. He was so indifferent to human suffering that he didn't rejoice when somebody was executed under his window. He never looked in the direction of a shot or a shout. He wrote numbers on sheets of paper. There was always a sheet of paper by his couch and he carried at least two notebooks in his pockets. He also used an abacus and, later on, a minicalculator. In 1911 he announced, 'We must kill a hundred Romanovs.' He ought to have received a Nobel Prize for Mathematics. Let us deal with him on his own terms. 27,000,000 dollars seems to be a good number.

ALFRED BERNHARD NOBEL: 'Corpses shouldn't be counted,' he said in one of his interior monologues.

A BUSINESSMAN: Why not organise an auction? Have you already got in touch with Christie's? He might fetch more than a Van Gogh self-portrait.

A PAINTER: Paintings are much more valuable now than human beings posing as works of art. Anyway the fashion for 'living sculptures' died down in the early seventies. I think the expression was coined by the Englishmen Gilbert and George. They made a cult reputation with a piece called *Singing Sculptures*. The piece was repeated in different locations. The two performers, with hands and faces gilded, stood on a plinth and mimed to a recording of the music-hall song *Underneath the Arches*.

A COMPOSER: What would Lenin sing?

A SINGING MASTER: Can he sing at all?

A DEPUTY: He is to have lessons under your supervision.

A BIRD IMITATOR: How about whistling?

A DEPUTY: Those Englishmen stood on a plinth, you said. Lenin lies in a sarcophagus.

THE BUSINESSMAN: We'll prop him against a wall.

THE DEPUTY: He is to be tied to a stake in front of the mausoleum and burnt to ashes.

THE BUSINESSMAN: But ashes have no commercial value. By selling his body, he might compensate—

A LAWYER: He should pay the damages.

A PATRIOT: He must do *something* for Russia.

A MORALIST: Lenin is no prostitute. He can't sell his body.

AN OLD COMMUNIST: He shouldn't sell his body to capitalists.

A WOMAN: No one wants his body in Russia.

VOLODYA: He's got a wife. She is in love with him.

A TIBETAN MONK: (*to Lenin*) Don't be frightened by what they are talking about. Don't pay attention to what happens on earth. You exist in the intermediate state. You see tourists, foreign diplomats and Russian authorities as if in a dream. You speak to them but they don't hear you. You speak to them but receive no reply. They stare at you. They say, 'He's dead. We'll sell his body. He's worth a lot of money.' You think, 'I'm dead. What shall I do?' You feel great misery, just like a fish cast out of water on red-hot embers. Such misery you experience now. But feeling miserable will not avail you. Pray to the Tutelary Deity, the Compassionate One. Why are you still attached to earthly matters? You don't live on earth any more. You cannot lie with your wife in the same bed. You cannot touch her lips with your lips and your tongue. Her lips are far away. They are in the land of the living. They speak to the living and kiss the living. And you are in the intermediate state. Don't be attached to her! Pray to the Compassionate Lord and you will have no sorrow, no terror, no pain. When you are driven by the ever-moving wind of karma, your intellect is like a feather riding on the horse of breath. Ceaselessly and involuntarily you are wandering about. In dreadful gusts, the fierce wind of karma drives you from behind. Fear it not! It's your own illusion. A thick, awesome darkness appears before you continually. From the midst of this darkness there come shouts and screams, 'Strike!' 'Slay!' 'Murderer!' 'Beware!' 'Kill him!' 'Sell him!' 'He's our slave!' 'He's our prisoner!' 'He's Jack the Ripper!' 'He's Hitler!' 'He's a militant Marxist!' 'He's the founder of the Russian Communist Party!' 'He's the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution!' 'He's the founder of the Communist International!' 'He's the laughing stock of Russia!' Karma-

born, heavily-armed demons loom out of the darkness and pursue your body to the confines of the earth. Mountains crumble down. You flee in every direction, not caring whither you flee and what your means of transport are. The way is obstructed by three awful precipices: white, black and red. They are terror-inspiring and deep. They are Anger, Lust and Stupidity. It is the *Sidpa Bardo*. Invoking by name the Compassionate One, pray thus, 'O Compassionate Lord, and my *Guru*, and the Precious Trinity, suffer it not that I fall into the unhappy worlds.'

THE PATRIOT: Don't sell him to the Americans! Sell him to our nouveaux-riches. They can pay more than 27,000,000 dollars.

THE BUSINESSMAN: Not for Lenin. I might pay this sum for Helen of Troy.

A SEX MANIAC: Is she available? Is she in the mausoleum?

A JOURNALIST: (*taking out his notebook*) Is she Lenin's new wife?

A MUSLIM: When a man dies, he is consigned from this world to *Barzakh*. The corpse is put on the bier and the people carry it to the graveyard. If the dead is a pious person, he requests them to carry him as fast as they can. If he is a wrongdoer, he curses the wretchedness in store for him and asks where he is being led. Lenin asked this question and heard the answer, 'To Hell, sir.' He ordered the bearers to stop and wait for him to collect his wits. They deposited the bier in the middle of Red Square and looked at their watches. They waited for half-an-hour. Lenin said nothing. They picked up the bier. 'Put me down and wait for another ten minutes!' shouted Lenin. They obeyed his order and sat down around the bier. They waited for an hour, for two hours. Lenin said nothing. They stood up. 'Another ten minutes!' shouted Lenin. They sat down again. They waited for two days and two nights. They grew tired of waiting. So they built the mausoleum and installed a few beds in it. A few years later, all of them died and were buried along the Kremlin Wall. Lenin remained in the mausoleum. You cannot remove him from where he lies and sell his body to the Americans. He will shout, 'Put me down!' and you will wait for years and years by his sarcophagus.

A JOURNALIST: When asked about the destination, the bearers will say in unison, 'We're taking you to Paradise!' And he will hurry them across Poland and Germany. Many Russians regard the United States as Paradise on earth.

AN ORTHODOX PRIEST: Can't we just bury him in some faraway cemetery? No religious service, no funeral oration, no crowd...

A FRENCH MUSIC LOVER: Mozart's body was flung into a ditch. Is Lenin better than Mozart? Let him lie naked on Red Square and our musicians will play *Réveil des oiseaux* and *Catalogue d'oiseaux* by Olivier Messiaen to lure vultures towards his corpse.

AN ORNITHOLOGIST: Why should we poison the fowls of the air? Are they inferior to humans? Let us give them an honourable corpse, worthy of their palates and of Messiaen's music.

THE DEPUTY: Let us burn him at the stake, drop his ashes in a container, seal the container up and sink it in a swamp.

A CATHOLIC PRIEST: Let him repent in peace.

A CHINESE BUDDHIST: (*to Lenin*) Should a murderer come into great agony of spirit and earnestly desire purification, there is no better way than the practice of Dhyana. You should seek an open and quiet place. Red Square is an open place, but it is far from quiet. There are too many tourists on Red Square and often tanks and cannons rumble through it. You should seek a quieter place. Once you have found it, sit down with determined and concentrated mind and recite Mahayana Sutras. Gradually you'll get rid of your guiltiness and realise the usual Dhyana and Samadhis.

LENIN: My Mind-essence is potentially an infinite number of sentient beings. I vow to bring them all unto deliverance and banish them as far as the Gulag Archipelago. I vow to suppress the evil passions in my mind and body, inexhaustible though they seem. I vow to learn the countless systems of Dharma in my Mind-essence. I vow to attain the Supreme Buddhahood of my Mind-essence.

A RABBI: God waits for the wicked to repent, and they do not. At long last they desire to repent, but He removes from them the power. Even if they wish to return to the Lord and seek to pray, they are unable to repent, for He shuts the door upon them. After death there can be no repentance.

A GNOSTIC: If the souls transgress and come out of the bodies before they have repented, the judgement of those men is sorer than all the judgements. The judgement of those men is severe and ruthless even if their souls are *débutantes* in the world, having no experience of former lives. They will not return to the changes of the bodies from that hour onwards and will not be able to do anything, but they will be cast out into the outer darkness and perish and be non-existent for ever.

THE RABBI: It is said, 'The crooked cannot be made straight, and the wanting cannot be supplied.' In this world he who is crooked can become straight, but not in the world to come. (*To Lenin*) Don't you know that this world is like the Sabbath, and the world from which you came is like the Sabbath eve? If a man does not prepare on the sixth day, what shall he eat on the seventh? Or this world is like the sea, and the world from which you came is like the dry land. If a man does not provide on the dry land, what shall he eat on the sea? Or

this world is like the desert, and the world from which you came is like the inhabited land. If a man does not provide his victuals when he is in the cultivated land, what shall he eat in the desert? What then does he do? He wrings his hands and eats his own flesh.

THE MAUSOLEUM COOK: He eats very seldom now. Two potatoes a week. He adores potatoes.

THE CHINESE BUDDHIST: (*to Lenin*) Like the great Masters of the high mountains, you should live on herbs and seasonable fruit. Or you should beg for food like an itinerant monk.

THE CURATOR OF AN AMERICAN MUSEUM: I am sure he will like Big Macs, Kentucky Fried Chicken.

THE MAYOR OF ST PETERSBURG: Let us keep his body in our country. History shouldn't be confined to history books and documentary films. The younger generation need to touch Lenin's body and breathe the putrid air of his life.

SIGMUND FREUD: The putrid air of his unconscious! One of my patients—a Russian boy whom I didn't analyse until he was in his twenties—had been haunted by a dream featuring a wolf. As a consequence of the dream, the boy had developed a fear of being devoured by a real wolf—like the seven little goats in the fairy tale. As it later transpired, his father, when playing with him, used to pretend he was a wolf eager to gobble his son up. This fear, which has a few parallels in mythology—the myth of Kronos, for example—gives expression, in a form that has undergone regressive degradation, to a passive, tender impulse to be loved by one's father in a genital-erotic sense. The Russians loved their Tsar and called him 'our little father'. They also feared and hated him, which resulted in Nicholas II's abdication. As a Russian subject, Lenin shared those feelings. He couldn't help loving the Tsar and he had every reason to hate him. His elder brother was executed by the tsarist regime and he himself was placed on the list of 'unreliables' and put under police surveillance. He was expelled from Kazan University and saw before him no future. His mood was desperate and verging on the suicidal. He developed an inordinate hatred for his father—the Tsar. He thought the Tsar would devour him: he had already devoured his brother. He wrote in his notebook, 'The Tsar is a wolf devouring the Russian people.' The idea contained in his anxiety was a substitute by distortion for the idea of being castrated by his father. And the only way to preserve his masculinity was to devour his father—the Tsar. And devour the Tsar he did!

A SEXOLOGIST: Why did he want to preserve his masculinity? He never made any use of it—neither before nor after his death!

A TAOIST: He who realises the foolishness of passionate actions always keeps his mind concentrated and tranquil. The valleys become the source of rivers on account of their lowness; modest and meek, the perfect Sage returns to the simplicity of a little child. If anyone desires to take and remake an empire under his own reforming plans, he will never be successful. The empire is a spiritual thing that can't be remade after one's own ideas and he who attempts it will fail most piteously. Even he who tries to hold it will lose it. Therefore, the perfect Sage doesn't seek to take and remake an empire.

LENIN'S LAWYER: I should have stayed at home. And I would have done so had I owned a house, an apartment. God keeps company with those men who lead a happy family life and betray their wives only once in a while, once a month, on a business trip. Now I've got no family and consequently no family life. And God is far away. He does not sit with me by the fire because there is no fireplace in my woods. I am not even allowed to make a bonfire, for some obscure reason. It is cold on Red Square.

AN ECONOMIST: In the years preceding World War I, the Russian economy was gathering momentum. Agricultural yields in central Russia increased enormously. Compared with the beginning of the century, iron and coal production more than doubled. So did exports and imports. The rouble was among the most reliable currencies in the world. A French economist predicted in 1912 that if Russia maintained a similar pace of economic growth, by the middle of the twentieth century she would dominate Europe politically, economically and financially.

A PHYSICIST: Lenin viewed the world as a magnetic field where a number of forces were engaged in a permanent struggle. One of these forces was the Romanov family, which he denoted by the figure '100'.

A MONARCHIST: Even as a child, Tsar Nicholas II was pious and keen on icons. Above all the creatures of the earth, he loved birds—especially sparrows. The Sovereign was imbued with the sacredness of his service. He was concerned for the welfare of everyone and did much for soldiers and their families. The Sovereign's visits to the infirmaries were very touching episodes in which his involvement was revealed not only in words and deeds of mercy, but also in tears—he could scarcely conceal them. Once, as he was putting on his cloak, a few large tears fell from his eyes because a soldier who was left without arms and legs had told him, 'You can do anything, Sire. Order that I be killed.' The soldiers loved their Emperor.

A GRAVEDIGGER: Three days before the assassination of the Tsar and his family, a last church service was conducted. At one point in the service, instead of the proper reading

'With the saints give rest—' the deacon began to sing. Hardly had he struck up his song when he heard the members of the Romanov family kneel down. They were preparing for their death, taking on spiritual provisions for their funeral journey.

A PEASANT: This man cannot lie in our earth. If you bury him, our earth will belch up his body from her bowels. And he'll lie on the ground, spurned by animals and birds of prey. Even the air will refuse to touch him. He'll lie on the ground. He'll remain untouched, unhurt.

THE OLD COMMUNIST: Alive!

THE PEASANT: And we'll trip over his body. Why should we have to trip over his body?

A DEPUTY: I disagree with the Mayor of St Petersburg. Even deprived of Lenin's corpse, the younger generation will not lose touch with history and reality. The consequences of his deeds are around us. We touch them every day. We breathe them every second. Why keep his corpse and his statues in some suburban museum? Why preserve his clothes and toys? His everyday life deserves no place in history. When judging an assassin, we don't care whether he likes dogs. We don't need to know that at the outbreak of World War I Hitler volunteered for the German army and was subsequently rewarded with the Iron Cross for his bravery. Lenin's clothes give us no information about the Revolution and its disasters. Lenin's statues are not works of art. They all look alike and don't even live up to the standards of communist kitsch. But we do need to know that Lenin played games with his victims. He would receive their relatives and even sign letters of pardon, addressed to his right-hand man Dzerzhinsky. Under his signatures he always drew crosses and the executions were carried out. 'Too late,' said the guardians. 'You've come too late, alas. What a beautiful letter! How kind our leader is!' Where are these letters? Where are these crosses? The younger generation should touch these crosses and these double-acting signatures.

AN ARCHIVIST: The greater part of his letters was destroyed.

A FORMER KGB AGENT: Lenin did all he could to dissociate his name from the terror. He signed a lot of spurious letters of pardon but never put his signature under a death sentence or an extermination order.

A COMMISSAR OF JUSTICE: Lenin told me once, 'Do you really believe that we can be victorious without the very cruellest revolutionary terror?' I replied, 'Then why do we bother with a Commissariat of Justice? Let us call it the Commissariat for Social Extermination!' Lenin's face brightened and he said, 'Well put...that's exactly what it should be...but we can't say that openly.'

THE FORMER KGB AGENT: Lenin spoke of terror only in the abstract and kept so remote from it that a legend has grown up to the effect of his having no part in the murders.

THE OLD COMMUNIST: Lenin didn't know anything. He never went down to the basement of the Lubianka. Anyway the terror began in 1937 and stopped in 1938.

KRISHNA: Wise men grieve neither for the dead nor for the living. We have always lived in the world and shall never cease to be. The soul passes in this body through childhood, youth and old age. Likewise the soul will take on another body. What pervades the world is indestructible. Nobody can bring about the destruction of this immutable being. Nobody slays and nobody is slain. We are never born, nor do we die. We are unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. We are not slain when our bodies are slain. Weapons do not cleave us, fire does not burn us. We are the same for ever.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Is it my apartment? Have I found the key? Is it a bathroom, a colossal bathroom? There are too many people in this bathroom. Why are they staring at me? Just another courtroom. What a pity! I don't mind being reminded of where I am supposed to stay at night and how the key to my apartment is to be found. I've got a great many keys in my pockets but they seem to fraternise with alien doors, drawers and cupboards. I am no thief, no criminal, no assassin. So I fish them out of my pockets and throw them away as I trudge along my path illumined with a few torches. They guide me on my way but they don't remind me of where my bed is located despite my yawns and erotic yearnings. They guide me towards tables and pianos and often I lie down on those horizontal surfaces, shutting my eyes and blocking my ears with my thumbs. Only in bed however can I sleep and think about women.

A FRENCH LEFT-WING HISTORIAN: There is no denying that Lenin committed errors and initiated a chain reaction which ended up in Stalin's trials and the genocide of the thirties. But Lenin was a pioneer and had to grope his way along a dark corridor of history illuminated by the flickering light of the French Revolution from which he had drawn a few fruitful lessons. Thanks to the French Revolution, which was indeed the only antecedent of the Russian Revolution in human history, Lenin had some inkling of the problems he was to encounter en route for communism. He unflinchingly advanced into new areas of human thought, treading the virgin lands of human history. Sometimes he did not know where he was and what had to be done in order to improve the living conditions of workmen and peasants. He was often rash and impetuous. However, he had no alternative but to apply the basic principle of Napoleon's strategy: *'on s'engage et puis on voit'*. His goal was magnificent and no sacrifice was big enough for its attainment. In the period of the Civil War one could hardly tell a friend from an enemy and no wonder that an overdose of Lenin's medicine destroyed not

only the staunchest enemies of the Revolution but also those who would have helped it in the long run, fettering Stalin's activities and segregating the tyrant in the little world of his own persecution mania. With reservations one might say that Lenin accomplished his task and handed his legacy on to Trotsky who, being an honest man and consequently unversed in the science of trickery and domestic intrigue, was outwitted by Stalin and banished first to the South of the Soviet Union and then to Mexico. Through no fault of Lenin's, this legacy was diverted from its purpose and unscrupulously exploited for very mundane political ends by a clique of bootlickers who gathered around Stalin and for almost thirty years faithfully carried out the latter's cruel and demented orders. Until the advent of the Russian Revolution, communism was nothing but a collection of lofty ideas and ideals; Lenin endowed these abstract entities with a tangible, harmonious and beautiful shape. His relics are credited with miraculous powers and his books and slogans continue to inspire the working class in Asia and Europe. Besides, the communist movement swept into its orbit a great many outstanding European artists: Louis Aragon, Romain Rolland, Yves Montand, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Prévert, Pablo Picasso, Luigi Nono, Federico Fellini, Lucino Visconti. Leninism was part and parcel of their personalities; their works and artistic achievements would have been different, or perhaps non-existent, had they lived outside the communist orbit and died before the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. Even such a reactionary as Winston Churchill had to bow to facts and acknowledge that our modern society was far from perfect and just. 'Democracy is the worst of political systems, with the exception of all others,' he wrote. The shortcomings of democracy are obvious even to those who are ready to defend it at all cost. Is there really no other solution to our problems? Is there no deliverance from misery and poverty?

THE OLD COMMUNIST: At the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, held in June 1917, the Menshevik leader stated that, without an alliance with the bourgeoisie, the Revolution would be doomed. He declared that there was no political party in Russia capable of assuming the reins of government alone. Lenin, who was present at the congress, rose from his seat and exclaimed, 'There is such a Party!' These words came like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky.

LENIN'S LAWYER: I don't know where I walk or sprawl and what my final destination is, although everybody in my ever-shifting neighbourhood regards the Last Judgement as the final act of human tragedy. Apparently there will be no other judgements afterwards. I may content myself with the thought that there have been many judgements before and after my death so that I have got enough money to sustain myself and my children. I don't see them

every day but I find their footprints here and there, in the mud and in the snow. Perhaps I am precluded from seeing their eyes on account of some error I committed on earth or during my holidays on the moon. Perhaps they have got my key. I hope they sit with their mother every evening by the fire and at the dinner table. My wife used to cook wonderfully and might have surpassed herself from time to time, but for the shortage of ingredients.

A FRENCH LEFT-WING INTELLECTUAL: There must exist a political system more akin to our sense of justice and beauty. Human thought cannot be stunted in its progress towards perfection. Stalin, Brezhnev and other Soviet ideologists distorted Lenin's teaching and discredited communism in the eyes of workmen and intellectuals. The industrial and agricultural failures to which the Soviet Union accustomed us in the course of her history cast doubt on the viability of a planned economy. On the other hand, distracted by gadgets and commercial television, Western workers have forgotten their rightful claims and aspirations, becoming more bourgeois than their employers.

A FRENCH RIGHT-WING INTELLECTUAL: Disappointed by the Soviet Union, you pinned your hopes on China, admiring backyard steel furnaces, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and Mao Tse-tung's odes. Disappointed by Maoism, you pinned your hopes on Cuba, admiring Havana cigars. What will you do next? Will you pin your hopes on the Martians?

LENIN'S LAWYER: We're pleading not guilty. My client has killed nobody. He should be given a medal—the Iron Cross or the Hero of the Soviet Union. 'He was the most earthly of all who have walked this earth of men,' said the poet Mayakovsky. My client lived very modestly, sleeping on an iron bedstead in a room devoid of carpets and old Japanese prints. He invariably gave away the food which peasants sent to him during the famine. He ate one potato a day and drank two glasses of water.

STRUVE: Lenin's principal *Einstellung*—to use the new popular German psychological term—was hatred and thirst for destruction. The philosophy of Marx was akin to that *Einstellung*. The doctrine of the class war—relentless, merciless, culminating in the final extermination of the enemy—proved congenial to Lenin's emotional attitude towards reality. He hated not only the Tsar and the bureaucracy, not only lawlessness and the arbitrary rule of the police, but also their antitheses—the 'bourgeoisie' and the 'liberals'. His hatred had something repulsive: it was almost animal and at the same time abstract, cold—like Lenin himself.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Have you any evidence for this statement? Even if you produce evidence in support of your theories, your remarks won't be taken into consideration by this

court. You're clearly biased. You were my client's enemy. When a fellow socialist warned my client that his verbal attacks on your person could incite some worker to kill you, my client responded, 'He ought to be killed.' You can't be objective about your potential murderer. Besides, your accusation is ill-founded. My client was tender-hearted and very emotional. In Paris he attended *La Dame aux camélias* and dissolved into tears as Sarah Bernhardt breathed her last breath in the arms of Alfredo Germont.

MAXIM GORKY: I have never met anyone in Russia, the country where the inevitability of suffering is preached as the general road to salvation, nor do I know of anyone who hated, loathed and despised all unhappiness, grief and suffering as Lenin did.

THE DIRECTOR OF A CHILD WELFARE CENTRE: Only once in his whole life did Lenin throw a tantrum. He grew indignant with a father who said his healthy child could walk unaided. Lenin got off his bicycle to help the child up a steep hill and said wrathfully, 'People like you shouldn't be allowed to have children at all.'

LENIN'S LAWYER: As for my client's contribution to prosperity and progress, there can be no doubt that the USSR demonstrated in practice that socialism can work even in a backward country, and the Soviet single-party system has put before all the highly industrialised countries one possible solution to the conflict between economic planning and political liberty. Absolute freedom of private enterprise is incompatible with the demands of the average citizen for freedom from want and freedom from fear.

A SOVIET ECONOMIST: The achievement of rational planning, full employment, universal economic security—

A WITNESS FOR THE DEFENCE: In the Soviet Union you needn't be afraid of a man with a gun. When I was in the forest, a man with a gun appeared, but instead of taking away my firewood he helped me to gather some more.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Do we need a further illustration of the metamorphosis in the structure of the state? Power is now used to protect the masses of the population.

LENIN:

I was in the midst of my enemies.

They awakened and rose up against me.

They insulted and mocked me. How they laughed!

They pursued me across forests and rivers.

They attempted to drown me in their sea.

They wounded me in the lungs.

I spilt blood but went on.

I mixed with strangers, they tasted my sweetness.

They tasted my blood, they tasted my body.

They drank in every single word I uttered.

I was life to them, they were death to me.

I bore up beneath them.

They wore me like a garment.

They took me off, they threw me away.

I am in everything, I bear the skies.

I am the foundation, I support the earth.

I am the Light that shines forth.

I am the life of the world.

The world is but my death.

I am the milk that is in all trees.

I am the milk that is in all female breasts.

VOLODYA: You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!

LENIN: All my life I've compared myself to him.

A FORMER SECRETARY OF LENIN'S: On Friday, August 30, 1918 Lenin was shot twice. Although his lungs were pierced, he refused help and walked to the car on his own. Only those marked by God can escape from such wounds. He reminded me of a famous European painting, *The Deposition of Christ From the Cross*. He was crucified by priests, pontiffs, the rich—in short, by counter-revolutionaries.

LENIN'S LAWYER: I was enjoined to become his lawyer and to accompany him as far as The Last Judgement Palace. On our way I protect him from his detractors and murderers. They kill him all the same and I keep extracting their bullets from his heart. His heart bleeds a lot and I collect this liquid as well as the bullets with a view to opening The Retribution Museum. Everybody knows and fears the retribution of God. The unborn and the dead are also vengeful, spiteful.

A COSMONAUT: Why not sell him to the Selenites? If they don't buy him, we'll just bury his body in one of the craters. The Moon is sufficiently far from the earth, isn't it?

AN ASTRONOMER: He might take it into his head to propagate Marxism on our satellite and establish contact with the working-class movement.

THE OLD COMMUNIST: And then he'll amalgamate the disconnected Marxist circles and form an organisation bound by common objects and methods of struggle.

THE ASTRONOMER: What if he instigates the Selenites to overthrow the Grand Lunar? What if the Bolsheviks blow up our beautiful satellite?

A SOVIET HISTORIAN: There's no reason to believe that Lenin would blow up the Moon after his takeover. In September 1917, on the eve of the military coup, he said that the Bolsheviks would preserve what he called the 'apparatus of the Russian state' which carried out a great deal of accounting and registering work: banks, syndicates, etc. 'This apparatus cannot and should not be smashed. We'll simply remove it from its subjection to the capitalists. We'll cut it from their threads of influence, we'll subordinate it to the proletarian soviets.' So what would happen if we buried our former leader on the Moon? The military coup, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the Civil War, famine, War Communism, collective farms, Stalin's trials, a war with earthlings, Khrushchev and de-Stalinisation, the Thaw, The Great Cosmic Wall, an era of stagnation, Gorbachev, the collapse of communism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, famine, an era of stagnation?

A SPANISH INTELLECTUAL: I have no sympathy with the communists, but I think the collapse of the Soviet Union will end up in a worldwide catastrophe. The two super-powers used to create a quasi-mathematical balance which guaranteed a 'cold peace' founded mostly on the fear of a nuclear war. This peace was marred by a few local conflicts and the Cuban crisis which, for all its horror-movie suspense, only demonstrated the impossibility of a new world war. The Soviet Union didn't challenge a US naval blockade of Cuba because the Soviet generals, however intolerant and narrow-minded, couldn't bring themselves to unleash the destruction of the earth. Now the blessed era of the 'cold peace' is over and we'd better request political asylum on Venus.

A DANISH FILM-DIRECTOR: The Soviet Union acted as a check upon America's delusions of grandeur. Now Americans impose uniformity upon the world: fast food, Hollywood. The power of money should be counterbalanced.

THE RUSSIAN MINISTER OF FINANCE: By what?

THE DANISH FILM-DIRECTOR: By right and wrong ideas, by gratuitous enthusiasm, by beauty.

LENIN'S LAWYER: I hope Paradise is in the shape of a bed on which I shall be allowed to stretch out and forget my bruises. I don't need anything else in my apartment except two or three women. I am often asked what Hell looks like by my earthly relatives who resort to the services of mediums and trouble my brain with their silly inquiries. What is the point of buying a nice bed and a warm blanket if you risk being awakened by your nephews and their wives? They are worse than the alarm clock I owned in Moscow, and they cannot be

silenced. I press all the buttons I manage to lay my hands on, but I still hear their voices. I would not hear their voices in Paradise, would I? How should I know what Hell looks like? People don't care about the places they live in and go to museums only during their business trips and holidays. I wish I were allowed to visit Paradise as a tourist and avail myself of its picture galleries. How odd that Rembrandt should be exhibited in the Garden of Eden.

A SUFI: If offered this world with its delights, the next with its heaven and the Universe with its sufferings, we should leave the world and its delights for hedonists, the next world and its heaven for the faithful and choose the sufferings. We should be happy if we don't get the desired object so that we may be liberated from all ties and attachments. We should be as fully satisfied with our modest possessions—a blanket, a threadbare garment—as others might be with the whole world.

A RUSSIAN INTELLECTUAL: The doctrine of asceticism can be successfully preached in a prosperous land where a few people predisposed to an austere individual salvation are sure to benefit from it. The inhabitants of the former Soviet Union are forced into asceticism by numerous shortages and lack of money. Their hunger doesn't lead them to God.

AN ART CRITIC: Wouldn't you agree that suffering is propitious to the creation of literary and musical masterpieces? Achmatova, Mandelstam, Shostakovich—

THE RUSSIAN INTELLECTUAL: Achmatova and Mandelstam wrote a lot of masterpieces before the Revolution and their post-revolutionary sufferings only distracted them from their work. The greater part of Shostakovich's music speaks about death, not about the KGB and Stalin.

A SOVIETOLOGIST: Don't you think the Russians are prone to suffering?

THE RUSSIAN INTELLECTUAL: They are used to it.

THE SOVIETOLOGIST: Anyway they have little prospect of 'overtaking the USA in the production of meat, milk and butter,' to quote Nikita Khrushchev. The Russians are lazy and averse to risk. People like that can hardly hope to build a strong economy and a stable democracy.

THE RUSSIAN INTELLECTUAL: These psychological features are not inherent in the Russian character. They have been acquired by our people during the Soviet rule and are bound to disappear with the adoption of a free-market policy.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Another staircase. Lenin awaits me at the bottom. He even waves his arms, stirring and swiping the air that swirls and murmurs something as I slide down on my knees. It is too late to dodge him and hide behind a pile of logs or under a writing desk.

As soon as he spots a writing desk among some ruins, in the darkness, he sits down and takes a fountain pen out of his pocket. The more he writes the harder my task grows. So I interfere and push him away from the writing desk. His armchair bumps against a wall and rolls back, screeching like the brakes of my old car that my wife inherited after my funeral. And Lenin resumes his revolutionary work. Now and then he stamps his foot and I hear the destructive inertia of the Russian crowd. Buildings and monuments fall down with resignation and a cloud of dust rises higher and higher, making archangels cough and swear. Lenin continues to write feverishly, nodding his head to emphasise the rhythm of the words; and the words begin to flare. A fire consumes the writing desk and the room where he sits. He crawls out of the ashes and implores me to save his life. He is my client and I am supposed to defend him to the best of my ability; I should rather sentence him to death. I am not allowed to do it. There are public prosecutors in every city we go through and they sentence him to death round the clock. And the sentence is always carried out despite the letters of pardon the Almighty receives in His residence. Who writes these letters of pardon? Lenin, of course. Our prison yards are covered with his corpses and birds of prey fly above them in ellipses. They don't dare touch those corpses of his. Is something wrong with the smell?

A RUSSIAN POET: I'll recite the poem entitled *A Report from Twenty-Fifth Century Russia*.

*Our present Russia is just and happy.
Nowadays no one dies of hunger.
We have forgotten the word 'anger'
And even its synonyms. Nowadays thunder*

*Sounds like the Jupiter Symphony.
Our schoolboys never play soldiers.
Psychiatrists have vanquished our phobias.
We do not fear death. Its tyranny*

*Is a thing of the past. Of course
Sometimes, somewhere, someone
Does have a fear of death
And thus spoils the fun.
He's shot in the Lubianka.*

A STUDENT: The Lubianka? In the twenty-fifth century?

AN OLD MUSCOVITE: Before the Revolution, this ochre stone building housed the All-Russia Insurance Company.

THE STUDENT: The headquarters of the KGB? Again? In the twenty-fifth century?

LENIN'S LAWYER: Why doesn't he calm down and seek a peaceful occupation? Why not take up gardening again? I used to admire his garden, especially the confident whispering of the cascade. He is afraid of microphones. A cascade? What do they call these things on earth? Never mind. I shall never live on earth again. In the earth, hopefully. Inside it, within it. It is pretty cold outside.

ANDREY PETROVICH: There were many student circles. 'A pernicious trend,' as Yeltsin's secret police described it. There was a leader. Revolutionary minded, energetic, well-read, he expounded his views with great force and conviction. He was kept under special surveillance by the Gendarmerie and the Moscow University authorities.

THE STUDENT: Who was this leader? Where's he now? Why didn't they arrest him?

ANDREY PETROVICH: Yeltsin's government filled the Moscow University Chairs only with reactionary professors, and student organisations were severely persecuted. All student circles and societies, even mutual aid societies, were suspected of pursuing subversive objects. Students who gave utterance to opinions of an oppositional nature were confined to the punishment cells at the University. This police persecution evoked sharp protests.

THE STUDENT: When was it? The younger generation?

ANDREY PETROVICH: In the late nineties. Throughout the twenty-first century.

THE FRENCH LEFT-WING INTELLECTUAL: What happened in the twenty-second century? Did a delirious crowd of students throng Moscow? Everything develops at a snail's pace in Russia. In 1968 we were in the streets before anybody knew what the whole thing was about. *On s'engage et puis on voit.*

ANDREY PETROVICH: In the twenty-second century, The Grand Duke Nicholas was crowned in Moscow. In the twenty-third century, Tsar Alexander IV was killed by a revolutionary and, sixty years after, his great-grandson abdicated on a spaceship from Venus to Jupiter.

THE MONARCHIST: The enemies of Orthodox Christianity, opponents of a united, firm and politically sound form of government, began their destructive work towards the close of the twenty-third century. Urban populations and dwellers in industrialised centres, comprised in the main of workers, were deluded by the massive barrages of propaganda,

promising utopian equality and absolute liberty. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing political structure through demonstrations, strikes and acts of terrorism. The upper strata of society had long before departed from the Church and traditional faith. Their utter moral bankruptcy notwithstanding, aristocrats and the intelligentsia dreamt of wielding absolute power in the land and longed for the Tsar's abdication.

THE STUDENT: Who was the leader of the revolutionary movement? Lenin? Trotsky?

THE RUSSIAN HISTORIAN: Trotsky was a staunch advocate of permanent revolution and therefore continued his fight against capitalism and monarchy in the Hereafter. By 1937 he was calling for a new revolution in the USSR to restore power to the workers. He called for another revolution in the twenty-fourth century and was fatally wounded with an alpine axe in 2640.

THE RUSSIAN POET:

I can't change anything.

My voice is no tool

But only a string on which

My fears and torments play.

My hands clutch at straws.

Whatever I say or build,

Sharks will use their jaws

And poets will starve to death.

Snatched from Hell by the crowd,

Here come Hitler, Macbeth.

Stalin is knocking his pipe out.

ANDREY PETROVICH: Poets are the conscience of the Russian people. They still recite their poetry on Pushkin Square, by the tombs of Achmatova and Pasternak.

LENIN'S LAWYER: I wish I could only travel in the woods, avoiding staircases and swamps. And the mausoleum, and Red Square. I don't mind making detours, provided they are necessary and salutary. I often break my legs and drown in the course of my wanderings. I would not mind staying in the same apartment, however long eternity can torture my flesh and spirit. I should rather lie in the same bed and watch my nightmares instead of their television programmes and Lenin's squabbles. But I am still unable to find a bed, let alone my own sheets and pillows. And Lenin has a sarcophagus and a wife. Is it fair? Should I defend myself in their Courts of Justice? Should I pray and crawl on my hands and knees?

THE STUDENT: Is Stalin alive too?

ANDREY PETROVICH: Nobody dies. Nobody is ever born.

THE STUDENT: History is created by heroes. They watch and wait for the right moment. Tolstoy was wrong.

GUSTAVE LE BON: As soon as you join a crowd you lose your name, your face, your memory, your family. You dissolve in a collective personality which has its own distinct psychology. Crowds don't reason. Crowds feel invincible. Crowds demand action and aspire to be manipulated by a supposedly superior being whose power they fear and whose dogmas they are unable to discuss, which by no means prevents them from spreading these dogmas. As a matter of fact, they can hardly wait to spread them all over the world. Crowds are always in a state of expectancy which renders suggestion easy. What do they expect? A shout, a song, a word. Liberty! Democracy! Homeland! *Heimat*! Foreigners! Happiness! Peace! Death! Enemies! Blood! Death! Reiterated words. The crowds readily respond to fanatics using grandiose and vague images. They regard as enemies the people by whom they are not accepted. Enthusiastic crowds are the same everywhere, as if geography had been done away with. Communism, Nazism. Lenin and Hitler erected a monument to crowds at the expense of the individual. And crowds erected a monument to Lenin.

THE STUDENT: Lenin created the Soviet Union in his image. If it wasn't for him, Russia could have been another France or Germany. Or another Russia. The Communist party was different. There was a multi-party system within the Russian Communist party. Lenin imposed his will, his one-party system, his one-man system, his one-man show. Tolstoy was wrong—the masses follow heroes. France was the spitting image of Napoleon. The Third Reich—

ANDREY PETROVICH: But for your humble servant, the Hereafter might have been different.

LENIN'S LAWYER: I study his life. The more I study it, the less eager I am to defend him against public prosecutors and God. I see a finger that points at him and condemns him with no right of appeal. I try to divert this finger from its goal. Such is my task and duty; such is my punishment. I don't complain and try to preserve my dignity and sense of humour. I bear myself like a soldier. I cannot help screaming now and then, but the echo of my screams resounds so violently that I block my ears and vow to keep silence as long as possible. Yesterday I broke my vow and screamed until midnight, pressing my thumbs against my ears.

THE STUDENT: Don't sell his body! Destroy it!

ANDREY PETROVICH: (*to the student*) Will you murder Vladimir Ilich with an alpine axe?

AN OLD WOMAN: (*pointing her finger at Lenin*) He is Raskolnikov.

THE STUDENT: Lenin is not an old woman!

ANDREY PETROVICH: Isn't he? Look at him!

THE STUDENT: He is just Lenin. Old Lenin, dead Lenin.

ANDREY PETROVICH: It's too late to kill him. After death there can be no killing.

THE STUDENT: Shall we kill him in the past? In 1917? In Switzerland?

ANDREY PETROVICH: Why not kill him in his childhood?

THE STUDENT: A stillborn child!

ANDREY PETROVICH: Have you got a driving licence? He used to ride a bicycle in Paris.

THE STUDENT: Just one murder.

ANDREY PETROVICH: And you'll be a benefactor of humanity.

THE STUDENT: That wouldn't be murder. People are murdered in the present, not in the past. And if you murder a criminal in the past, you save the future from communism, fascism, Nazism.

A GYNAECOLOGIST: Shall we talk to his mother? She could just swallow a box of contraceptives. Or have an abortion.

THE STUDENT: Why did she fall in love with his father? He wasn't handsome, was he? Like father like son.

ANDREY PETROVICH: His father was elevated to the rank of nobility.

THE STUDENT: Why did his grandmother fall in love with his grandfather?

ANDREY PETROVICH: She didn't. But her parents thought—

LENIN'S LAWYER: During the trials I say that the Tsar's government was corrupt and autocratic. I speak about the First World War, about Russian losses and the exhaustion of Russian troops. They were badly equipped, badly led and underfed. So the Tsar's government was overthrown. What does it have to do with Lenin? He was in Switzerland when the February Revolution flared up and swept over the country, razing a few monuments. I still trip over their heads and arms on my way to The Last Judgement Palace. I say a lot of nonsense during his trials. I raise my voice and the name of Rasputin resounds under the vault of this or that palace. The jury block their ears and tiptoe out of the room. Lenin laughs and jumps for joy. Then the public prosecutor gets up and the jury come back, bowing rhythmically. The sentence is passed and Lenin executed. I pick up my attaché case and head

for another courtroom or another prison. Life is a prison, somebody said. Death is a prison too.

THE CHAIRMAN: What are we going to do with the body? Shall we bury it? Shall we burn it and scatter the ashes over the Black Sea? Shall we sell it to an American museum?

THE OLD COMMUNIST: American workers should be given an opportunity to see the founder of the first socialist state in the universe. In comparison with European workers, our American friends have a poor political education and don't know that the Communist party is the only guardian of their interests. They should become more class-conscious, more united. In spite of the recession, the capitalist class is reaping a rich harvest of profits. And the burden of the losses is thrown upon the poor. American workmen don't know they are poor and oppressed. As soon as they see Lenin on Time Square, as soon as they touch him and hear him—

ANDREY PETROVICH: You seem to forget that Lenin is mute.

THE OLD COMMUNIST: The extraordinary power of conviction, the simplicity and clarity of argument, the brief and easily understandable sentences, the absence of affection, of dizzying gestures and theatrical phrases aiming for effect, the irresistible force of logic—

ANDREY PETROVICH: Are you deaf?

THE CHAIRMAN: Will they pay us 27,000,000 dollars for a mute mummy?

THE BUSINESSMAN: Usually a talking puppet is more expensive than a mute one.

THE CHAIRMAN: Was the potential buyer aware of Lenin's dumbness when he made his offer?

A RUSSIAN COMMERCIAL TRAVELLER: Perhaps he can say *something*—

THE CHAIRMAN: What?

THE RUSSIAN COMMERCIAL TRAVELLER: Just a few words. 'No, the Revolution is not at an end, it's still going on. We shouldn't lay down our arms but use them more vigorously!' That would be enough.

ANDREY PETROVICH: He can't even say, 'Mama'.

THE STUDENT: He is worse than a parrot!

THE CHAIRMAN: Can he produce a sound? Any sound at all?

THE RUSSIAN COMMERCIAL TRAVELLER: A scream. The scream of an oppressed worker. The scream of an oppressed Russian worker.

ANDREY PETROVICH: Ask him!

THE RUSSIAN COMMERCIAL TRAVELLER: (*to Lenin*) Can you scream?

THE CATHOLIC PRIEST: Let him finish his repentance!

LENIN'S LAWYER: They often forget there were many revolutions in Russia. There was a revolution in February 1917. There was a revolution in October 1917. There was a revolution in 1905. When I affirm that Lenin was abroad during the Revolution, I count on their ignorance and indifference. They think the Russians are submissive, lazy and incapable of revolt. There was only one revolution, they think. A military coup, rather. A military coup orchestrated by a few people, Lenin included. Others drank or slept or wallowed in erotic delights. 'Some people marched or stole around St Petersburg, others slept and Lenin was in Switzerland,' I say in a thunderous voice. They nod their agreement and sign another death verdict. What am I doing in these courtrooms? 'During the Revolution Lenin was in St Petersburg,' an officer said last year. The officer was Russian. He was executed on Lenin's order in 1918. What did I say? 'The appearance at Court of Gregory Rasputin, and the influence he exercised there, mark the beginning of the decay of Russian society and the loss of prestige for the throne and for the person of the Tsar himself.' That is what I said to the officer, but he knew I was speaking about the February Revolution. 'I applauded the murder of Rasputin,' he said. Immediately the jury broke into hysterical applause. 'What about the October Revolution?' he asked. 'There was a democracy in Russia before the communist takeover,' he continued. 'And the war? And the defeats of the Russian army?' I countered. At that point Churchill came into the room. 'Surely to no nation has fate been more malignant than to Russia,' he said. 'Her ship went down in sight of port,' he continued. 'She had actually weathered the storm when all was cast away. Despair and Tyranny usurped command at the very moment when the task was done. With victory in her grasp she fell upon the earth, devoured alive, like Herod of old, by worms.' Thus he spoke and once again the jury broke into hysterical applause. 'Lenin is a worm,' said the public prosecutor. 'Lenin is an ogre,' said the officer. 'It is my courtroom and my trial,' said Kafka, appearing in the doorway. I may never see Kafka again, but I still remember his smile. He probably awaits me in The Last Judgement Castle.

THE ORTHODOX PRIEST: *(to American people)* Christians! All rise against the rule of the Red Antichrist. A multimillionaire wants to buy the body of the Antichrist in the hope of increasing his riches. You should oppose this commercial deal with all your might. Don't listen to those who affirm that Lenin is dead! Don't listen to those who argue that he belongs to history and may therefore be exhibited in a museum! Lenin is alive. The Antichrist is always alive. By looking at his body you will make peace with him. And there is no peace between Christ and Satan. His body radiates evil and destruction. Minute particles of his body will be diffused through your homeland. Lenin is worse than a nuclear power station. His

body is a slow-action hydrogen bomb. And he always acts quickly. By the authority vested in me from God I bless all arms directed against the Red Antichrist. By the authority vested in me from God I absolve all those who will lay down their lives as insurgents or solitary avengers. Cast aside all fear in your opposition to the Antichrist and his stooges.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Eternity is unpredictable. Anything can happen within its walls; anybody can lumber into your area. I remember every word the intruders say on these occasions, although sometimes I don't understand what they talk about and why they are so long-winded. They stand around me and talk for ages. No wonder I suffer from insomnia.

AN AMERICAN SENATOR: Despite more than seventy years without practice, the Russians plunged into the fray of open democracy. With the hard-liners eclipsed, the prospects for accelerating the move to a market economy are looking more promising than ever. Huge and small companies, which have dashed into Russia to fill niches in everything from restaurants to retailing, are encouraged and supported. But we are not going to trade with the Russians in human flesh, whether alive or not. And we are not going to extend our hospitality to a criminal, to a gangster—a dour reminder of Al Capone and his epoch. Do you know that Bolshevik funding was derived from criminal activity, mostly from hold-ups, euphemistically known as 'expropriations'? The Bolsheviks robbed post offices, railroad stations, trains and banks. Lenin supervised and often directed these robberies—from Paris where he ran a counterfeiting operation, turning out three-rouble notes, and from Munich where he was engaged in gun-running. Lenin's death had a perceptible impact in lowering the crime rate in the Soviet Union. Now it is again on the increase. Organised crime is so active in Moscow and other cities that the word 'Mafia' has become commonplace in Russian patois. Lenin must have a hand in it. You can see his hand in everything the Russians have done over the last eighty years. Fellow Americans, do you want to become like the Russians? Do you want your country to become the Soviet Union? Slush and mud, the air smelling of bad cigarettes and disinfectant, people huddling in their inevitable queues to buy what little is in the stores. Is that what you want to see around you? Drunkards huddling in doorways and subway stations, drunkards reeking of vodka and urine, drunkards prostrate in hallways and on sidewalks or weaving along the street—drunkards everywhere. Is that what you want? We shall not fall into the communist trap. God bless America and the American way!

LENIN'S LAWYER: Is this man Kafka? He neither looks nor smiles like Kafka. He does not smile at all. He is not Lenin either. He asks me if I speak Latin. Everybody speaks Latin in these latitudes, I answer with a grin. I hope it is a grin my face exhibits and not a smile. 'Are you acquainted with William of Occam?' he asks, paying no attention to my grin.

'Not personally,' I answer, my grin fading away. I am bored already. But I am not bored to death; I am bored to eternal life. He disregards my boredom and launches into an interminable quotation: '*Ergo ipsa re destructa potest poni ipsa notitia intuitiva, et ita notitia intuitiva secundum se et necessario non plus est existentis quam non existentis*—' 'What do you mean?' I ask. Why do I ask these questions? 'We can have an intuitive knowledge of non-existent things or events,' he answers. 'God makes us feel what is not. So the Revolution did not happen. I felt it, but it did not happen. It did not happen,' he repeats, nodding his head and stamping his foot. I wish I could use this argument in the courtrooms. 'How did you feel it?' I ask. 'Did you perish in a concentration camp?' 'My mother was wrong,' he answers. 'The Revolution did not happen.' He nods again and departs. Yet I feel his presence.

A VISITOR TO THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE WARRIOR IN MOSCOW: The church was overcrowded. From the choirs poured for the last time the wonderful, joyous chants of Easter. So familiar and customary to the ear—yet how conscientiously and intensely they were sung! 'May God arise and His enemies be scattered.' How clearly resounded these words! How clearly and purposefully! As if stamped out of metal!

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE FIRST POTENTIAL BUYER: I collect sculptures. Lenin's corpse is the most famous sculpture in Europe.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Is God caring and merciful, as my grandmother used to sing? Many citizens of Hell hold the opposite view and shut their doors whenever they seem to hear God's footfalls. I don't shut my doors. I have no doors to shut. I open the doors of God's detractors. I enable them to welcome God in their abodes. I have got a great many keys in my jacket and trousers. So I open other people's doors and praise God as eloquently as I can. In a sense, I am God's lawyer. Out of prudence, I never voice my doubts about His existence and benevolence. Not even in the woods do I dare talk to myself sincerely. I often bump my head against the microphones that dangle from Christmas trees like exotic fruit.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE FOURTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I am the director of the biggest movie-museum in the United States. We'd love to have the hero of Eisenstein's *October*. Actually the movie made Lenin into a star.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE FIFTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I am a confirmed bachelor. I feel very lonely in the evenings. I invite nobody to my house because I hate human voices. People talk too much and they move around. And I hate dogs and cats. And birds.

LENIN'S LAWYER: How can I explain the terror? At the last trial I said the terror was a direct consequence of the allied military intervention that threatened not only the Bolsheviks but Russia herself. 'The terror did not start after the Revolution,' I pointed out. 'There was no violence against political opponents,' I said. 'By that time, they were already dead and buried. In the earth. The death sentence was abolished at the end of November 1917. There was nobody to kill. The streets of Moscow were empty.' I remember those streets and the dogs running around. The communist terror must also have started on the first day of the Creation, even before God said, 'Let there be light.' God never said, 'Let there be light.' Communists imprisoned God in His villa and threatened Him with a revolver. Adam was a communist and a disciple of Lenin's. Eve often gathers firewood in our area. Yesterday I asked an old communist to help her out. And I said, 'In the Soviet Union, Madam, you needn't be afraid of a man with a gun.' Another witness for the defence.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE EIGHTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I am a professor. I teach various diseases to my students: cirrhosis of the liver, prostate cancer, hardening of the arteries, the passing of gallstones. I often cut the dead open in their presence to illustrate my theories. There is nothing in the world to beat this mummy as an illustration of the red disease.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Lenin again. I hoped I had got rid of him at last. He moves his hand before my eyes, as if I were blind or dead, and then guides me to a corpse hidden in a huge bathroom. Whom did he murder? God? Satan? An ordinary Russian citizen? Do I have to justify this new murder? I bend over the corpse without touching it. The face seems familiar. Did he murder one of my relatives? 'It's the Civil War,' says Lenin, clutching my chin. 'I had to do it.' We drag the corpse to the nearest garden and bury it beside a rose bush. Is God watching us? I am supposed to defend Lenin against his accusers. I prefer to bury his victims, to hide them in the bowels of the earth. I have got no more arguments at my disposal. My words would not save his life. Luckily for us, I have got a spade. Luckily for us, the earth is soft and obedient.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE TENTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I'd like to share my apartment with the man who thought humanity could be happy.

LENIN'S LAWYER: The Earth understands everything. I often press my body against her surface and embrace her like a lover. And I kiss her warmly like a son or a daughter. I wish I could be buried in her bosom, for ever. The Earth is my mother but I don't wish to be reborn. No resurrection, please. Let us reserve this ritual for the faithful. Just bury me and go

away. Don't come back, never. First bury me and then depart. Don't forget to bury me. I cannot sleep on the surface of the Earth. Am I on the surface of the Earth? Isn't Jupiter more akin to our notion of Hell? Jupiter or Saturn or Pluto. It is not the Moon, though—I know the landscapes of the Moon. I shall ask them to take me away from here. I don't wish to be buried on Pluto. I shall ask them to give me a lift and drive me to the Earth. Can't I be buried where I was born and persecuted? Don't I deserve it?

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE ELEVENTH POTENTIAL BUYER: We'll test our new 'retrogressive truth drug' on him. Too many letters of his have been destroyed. Too many compromising documents have been burnt. Too many witnesses have been eliminated.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE TWELFTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I find him beautiful. Cruelty *is* beautiful.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE THIRTEEN POTENTIAL BUYER: The hairs of his beard must have miraculous powers. Like the horn of the rhinoceros. I'll sell them one by one. Many people will be cured.

LENIN'S LAWYER: At the next trial I shall make use of Determinism. Leibniz is an ideal witness for the defence. Lenin and his murders were woven into the texture of the universe on the very first day of the Creation. By Satan, of course. God weaves flowers into the hair of our concubines; Satan weaves murders into the texture of our history. That is what I shall say at the next trial. Lenin should have been executed on the very first day of the Creation. But he was allowed to be born. It is too late now. Why should we execute anybody on the last day of the Creation? On the day of the Destruction?

TROTSKY: We must judge him. I propose an open court. The public prosecutor will unfold the picture of his life: peasant policy, labour, nationalities, culture, the two wars. The proceedings of the trial will be broadcast worldwide by radio and television.

ANDREY PETROVICH: In 1918 you favoured a spectacular trial of the Tsar and couched your suggestion in the same terms. Have you got stuck in your time-lift? Or have you turned your coat?

AN OFFICER: *(writing a letter)* The friends sleep no longer and hope that the long-awaited hour has come. The revolt of our communists menaces Yeltsin ever more seriously. We occupied the telephone exchange, the chief telegraph office, the railway stations and the bridges. Yeltsin's army does not resist effectively. Be attentive to all outside movement, wait and hope. Above all, be prudent! Prior to being defeated, Yeltsin's government represents for you a real danger. Be ready at all hours, day and night. Make a sketch of the hall where the

auction is being held and don't fall asleep. From now on, you had better not sleep between 2 and 3 a.m. Answer in a few words but don't forget that these words must contain exhaustive information about the building. Where is your bed? Do you sleep in your sarcophagus? Don't sleep! We are longing for your information. We are very close to your new dwelling place. If you open the window and lean out, you will see us standing on the opposite side of the street. Don't open the window! They may fire and kill you. Hand your reply to the soldier responsible for cleaning your room. He is our go-between. How does he clean your room? Do you have any complaints?

One who is prepared to die for you.

A KGB officer.

ANDREY PETROVICH: This officer wrote a similar letter to the Tsar on June 20, 1918. The Bolsheviks conceived and almost carried out a spurious rescue operation which was to supply them with a valuable pretext for shooting His Imperial Majesty.

A JOURNALIST: (*writing an article*) A conspiracy was discovered, having for its object the wresting of the tyrant from the hands of our Trade Association by armed force. In view of this fact the Presidium of the Moscow Regional Council decided to shoot the corpse of Vladimir Ilich Lenin. The decision was carried out on July 16.

KOSTYA: Does he really have to go through the sufferings of *all* his victims?

LENIN'S LAWYER: Besides, the Marquis de Sade vindicated murders and consequently murderers. I should not mention his name at the trial, but I cannot help thinking of this individual in connection with Lenin and his revolution. Did Lenin read the Marquis de Sade? Lenin wasn't even a sadist, somebody said. Was he a masochist? Only a masochist can endure what he endures in the Hereafter. Did he hope there would be no trials after death? Or did he trust my eloquence to the point of becoming irresponsible and cruel? Did he hope I would save him from the gallows? There are many gallows in the Hereafter. I often mistake them for trees, but the bodies dangling from them and swinging like drunkards in the West Wind are tangible proof to the contrary. I am obliged to carry a ladder wherever I go or run. I prop the ladder against a gallows, climb on it and untie all the knots. I am a lawyer and my duty dictates my behaviour. I put the bodies on grass and they begin moving and breathing. The grass is black. The bodies are black, carbonised. What is moving? The wind? Does Shelley move it? I saw Shelley last week. He gave a Japanese fan to his wife as a birthday present. And she gave him an electric fan. As a Christmas present. Is Lenin Frankenstein?

LENIN: I read and answered the officer's letter. I gave him the information he had been asking for. I wrote him that all the windows were closed, sealed and painted white and that I

couldn't open any of them. On June 22 some workers inspected the windows in my bedroom and the next day, to my surprise and joy, one of the double windows was removed and a ventilation pane opened. I was badly in need of fresh air. I took a deep breath and smiled. I saw my smile in an oval mirror. My smile cheered me a lot. Shortly afterwards I received another letter urging me to keep my spirits up. The officer promised to let me know a detailed plan of operations by June 30. 'Be on the alert for a signal,' he wrote. What signal? A knocking on the door, a knocking on the roof? A drunken song, a whistle, a sound of running water, a creaking floorboard? The mewing of a cat? I did not sleep that night—every noise seemed to be the signal I was waiting for. 'As soon as you hear the signal,' he wrote, 'you should barricade the door leading to the hall and descend from the open window by means of a rope the soldier will tie to your bed.' I waited for the soldier to come; nobody came. A cat was mewing under the open window. The waiting and uncertainty were most excruciating. A sentry walking under the window was told to watch my movements. I spent another anxious night, fully dressed and on the alert. Nothing happened. A week later I was awakened and ordered to dress and follow my visitors. I asked for their credentials; they threatened to resort to force. I dressed and they pushed me out of the room. We went along a corridor and reached a door. A car was standing in front of the door. I was pushed into the car and we drove away. Once out of town the car swerved into the woods and stopped. I was ordered to leave the car. I obeyed the order and was shot in the back.

THE CHAIRMAN: (*to a potential buyer*) Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE TWENTY-SIXTH POTENTIAL BUYER: We'll put him on display in the window of our funeral parlour. Our clients will be tempted to speed up their diseases at the sight of a well-preserved corpse. They will think they are immortal. They will think life is more comfortable in the Hereafter.

THE CHAIRMAN: (*to a potential buyer*) Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I am Antigone.

LENIN'S LAWYER: Everybody needs Lenin. Even I need him, lest I lose my job. He can be instrumental in bringing about my salvation or at least my final irrevocable burial at the Vagan'kovskoe cemetery, beside my mother and father. Kerensky needs him to avert the danger of a monarchist counter-revolution. 'And if the Bolsheviks attempt a military coup,' he thinks, 'I'll crush them once and for all. Thanks to their vandalous ways I'll prove I'm no Bolshevik.' That is what he thinks. Kerensky needs Lenin to prove he is no Lenin. Kerensky drives around in an American automobile. Now and then he gives me a lift and we cross a number of black-and-white landscapes. He wants me to defend him against historians. 'They

puncture my tyres,' he complains. 'There are many Russian revolutions. Next time I'll be victorious.' That is what he thinks. And Lenin laughs in the woods.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE FORTIETH POTENTIAL BUYER: What sweetness! What a marvellous smell! When St Nicholas de Bari was buried in a marble tomb, from his head there gushed forth an oil spring that was salutary for many sufferers. Look at this oil in the sarcophagus! A pool of oil!

LENIN'S LAWYER: I was a lawyer. I defended many people who were ultimately sentenced to death. I remember saying, 'I wish I could defend my client, but his crime is so obvious and overwhelming that I'd rather become a witness for the prosecution.' I said it several times and I was not sentenced to death. I am in Moscow again, in the city of my birth and death and eternity. The streets are empty and dirty. The gun shots resound everywhere.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE FIFTY-FIRST POTENTIAL BUYER: Sister Francesca found a cross in the heart of Sister Chiara de Montefalco. Her heart was bigger than an ordinary heart. It was bigger than a child's head. 'Jesus Christ has been crucified in my heart,' she used to say. I wonder what Lenin's heart may conceal.

ANDREY PETROVICH: Probably a hammer and a sickle. Or just a kitchen knife.

THE FIFTY-FIRST POTENTIAL BUYER: Sister Francesca also found the whip used by the tormentors of Jesus Christ.

ANDREY PETROVICH: There must be a whip in Lenin's large intestine.

THE FIFTY-SECOND POTENTIAL BUYER: Sister Francesca also found the crown of thorns, the three nails, the spear.

DERRIDA: I can't bear the political Right and its 'manic triumphalism' over the collapse of communism—a dogmatic discourse, bidding for dominance, incapable of recognising that the horizons of capitalism and liberalism have never been as dark, threatening and threatened. The emancipatory promise of Marxism is to be worked out in a new concept of justice. A messianism without religion, a messianic without messianism—

THE ORTHODOX PRIEST: And we believe, humbly, prayerfully and sincerely, that we will live to see the day when the All-Merciful Lord will forgive Russia her sins and bestow His grace upon her once more. We pray for the return of Holy Russia, when the entire nation will give praise to the Almighty and glorify those countless loyal sons and daughters who gave their lives in service and unflinching loyalty to the Church and her Anointed. For where there is persecution, there is true, living faith and a wonderful future for the Church of

Christ. When Russia rises again from the dead, her Faith strengthened by the blood of her martyrs, the Russian people will once again be masters of their own destiny and will in freedom decide and plan their fate. And it is our firm conviction that history will repeat itself and the people will elect to be governed by an Orthodox Christian Tsar, anointed by and ruling in harmony with the Holy Russian Orthodox Church.

THE RUSSIAN POET:

Time is nothing
But an interstice
Between two lines,
Two stanzas,
Two golden mines
Of inspiration.

I am no prophet, no seer.
Like anybody else,
I've got a vague idea
About the future.
I hope I am wrong
In my predictions.

Nobody's strong enough to bear
The weight of forebodings.

My poems
Skirt happy endings.
From now onward
I'll stop halfway
And the world will prosper.

APPENDIX I

I would not single this day out from the vista of days and nights which open and shut upon me as I trudge along my road. They resemble each other to such an extent that often I confuse daytime with its nocturnal counterpart and vice versa. I am also liable to confuse days with weeks, minutes with seconds and so on and so forth. This expression is rather common in the Hereafter, within the bounds of eternity. 'And so on and so forth.' Sounds better than 'etc'. It is longer. And so on and so forth. Eternity seems to be enclosed within it. Eternity in its entirety.

There are television sets along my path. They hang on Christmas trees and twinkle through the rows of bushes that whip my ankles and calves to remind me of my motherland. They look alike and the film they show is repeated over and over again. It is a French film. A man sits in a bar and asks the barman the same question, 'What am I doing here?' He drinks cognac and stares at the barman and at the cameraman. I don't drink. Only Lenin drinks in the Hereafter and sways like a wind-buffeted birch tree whenever he leaves his sarcophagus and attempts to walk along his path. Once, in St Petersburg, he pretended to be drunk in order to escape from two policemen. Ever since he has been drinking vodka and cursing his wives. His wives come and go, his curses remain. He curses me too. And I remain, in spite of my suicides.

I think I am in Hell, and the souls I come across in the depths of my swamps and jungles only confirm my hypothesis. Some of them hope, however, that we are in Paradise or at least in Purgatory the landscapes of which they claim to have seen on postcards and photographs. Their voices carry no conviction and they cough so atrociously that I never bother to talk them out of their illusions.

What am I doing here? Who am I? What am I? Some say I am Lenin's soul. I do not care. I am walking towards God. But God is far away and Lenin is near, quite near. I wish I were God's soul, His long-distance soul. His short-distance soul, rather.

Others say I am Lenin's lawyer. Perhaps one could not find a better lawyer than one's soul, provided it has been saved. Have I been saved? In Russian the soul is feminine. Am I a woman? Am I a hermaphrodite?

Within the walls of eternity, space behaves like a wayward woman. It extends and also contracts, withering before my bewildered eyes and trickling through the crevices in my walls. Sometimes I seem to hold the whole of Russia in the palm of my hand, but shortly afterwards everything disappears and I remain stark naked in the middle of nowhere.

What do I know about Russia? What does anybody know about Russia? It is a sphinx that may pounce upon you at any moment, becoming a tiger or simply a wolf. A Russian wolf. Such is the verdict of the West. In my opinion, Russia is a cub that dreams of becoming a puppy. A puppy of God. But space is liable to expand in the wrong direction and the distance between God and Russia grows exuberantly. A lot of people usurp this intermediary space. Lenin is of their number.

I also aspire to snuggle on the lap of God and I think I am going in the right direction now. Yesterday I went in the opposite direction and did not find anything except a corpse lying on grass. It wasn't God, was it? Had He been killed by Satan's *apparatchiks* during his customary sojourn in Hell? Nietzsche took advantage of this ambiguity and proclaimed that God was no more. He sat by the corpse, shouting, 'God is dead, God is dead.' And then he cried. I also cried. I was thinking of Russia and of those who still live there. The children of my children. They are still dying in Moscow, near Pushkin Square. I wish I could send them a few dollars.

I touched the corpse and even stroked its face. Relics bestow their favours upon pilgrims and passers-by alike. I was a mere passer-by, but I froze in my tracks, running the risk of being late for my appointment with God, and bent over the corpse that might turn out to be a criminal, a dictator. Was it a blunder? Did I waste my time and energy? Will I be rewarded for my pains and intuition? It is clear that I am late for my appointment. Tomorrow I shall set out on my journey earlier than usual. And I shall go in the same direction. Perhaps I shall meet another corpse.

What if God lives on Pluto or Saturn? I may have walked as far as Saturn to meet Him and discuss the problem of life and death with Him. I can walk along rainbows, comets and suchlike. They are the motorways of the universe. Many souls drive along them, honking and swearing as an absent-minded passer-by gets in the way. Why did I bequeath my car to my wife? Did I think there was no life after death? I liked rainbows and would leave my house every time I saw one beyond my window. I wanted to enjoy them in the open air; I needed the accompaniment of birds. Did I think rainbows were nothing more than an adornment, a gratuitous embellishment of the sky? Didn't I realise they were an umbilical cord linking us with our Creator?

There are only three colours around me and these colours depend neither on weather nor on Time. The space surrounding my feet is always black; the sky beckoning to my soul is always grey; the blood is always red. Have rainbows lost their festive attire? Are they in mourning? Whom did Lenin assassinate this afternoon?

How can I find God in the darkness? I saw some torches last week; they illumined my path. Not once did I trip over roots and columns. Why didn't God utter the word 'light' today? Did He forget this word? Shall I remind Him of this word? How? Does God speak English? What a pity I have got no matches. What a pity I have never smoked.

Perhaps it is too early for light. I vowed to wake up earlier today. Did I wake up yesterday? But yesterday I saw some torches. Am I blind? Stalin went blind recently. Am I Stalin's soul? Do I dwell in Stalin's body? Is it my new incarnation, my last refuge? The ways of human souls are unfathomable. Flowers are ignorant of the vase in which they will be put and of the room they are destined to adorn.

Am I inhabited by a demon? Now and then I don't recognise my words. Somebody else speaks through my mouth. Am I the mouthpiece of Satan? Am I Satan's prophet? My mouth opens on its own and I cannot shut it. My jaws and my hands have grown weak and are no match for my mouth.

I am getting nowhere. I might just as well sit on the same stump and pray day and night, waiting for archangels to sing me a melodious lullaby. I wish Lenin would not laugh so often. His laughter and curses drown out my prayers.

God does not hear me. I wish I could give Him my hand and feel His fingers amidst my fingers. My hand, its tremor and warmth, might tell Him more about my love than my prayers and letters. Has He received any of my letters? Have they been intercepted or censored by the secret police?

I have to cope with all sorts of impediments. My ink dries up before I manage to scribble my name at the bottom of the last page. God does not know whose letters He receives in His heavenly abode. How many people have been transferred to Paradise because of my linguistic efforts?

The quantity of uttered and written words is so enormous that we can hardly breathe, let alone walk in the open air. The air is cluttered, obstructed by words. The air is closed, so to speak. We are always walking in the woods, in a jungle of words. They are thick, gelatinous. Words, words, words. Some of them are in the shape of the objects they denote. These word-drawn figures remind me of the modernist poems I read in my youth. Was I ever young? Within the confines of eternity one is always old; and old men talk a lot. They murmur their demands and ideas day and night; they suffer from insomnia. Words, words, words. Yet they are the foundation of prayers. Even silent prayers swarm with words.

I wish God could see my eyes. Even without tears they are eloquent and pathetic.

God does not seem to understand what I am trying to impart to Him, otherwise His breath would already have cooled my burning cheeks. I am weary, thirsty and hungry. Kerensky has driven off to St Petersburg and I have to cover the distance between Heaven and Hell on my own. And I am not a young soul any more. My legs may be likened to stumps, not to blooming trees.

What am I to do? Demons flatly refuse to let me know God's telephone number and address. At close range God would hear me and understand my meaning. Alas, I cannot take full advantage of my voice which was beautiful enough to woo my Tibetan terrier from her basket, from her cushions and bones. She wobbled into my room whenever I needed her company. I don't need Lenin's company, do I? Yet he comes, even if he hears nothing. And my dog does not come any more. She must live in Paradise now. Is it the same Paradise? Do all domestic animals live in Paradise? Does their posthumous fate depend on the behaviour of their owners? Would Lenin's dog live in Paradise? Do we contaminate our pets?

Is my voice still beautiful and persuasive? Or is it a question of acoustics? In Hell screams and curses resound everywhere, notwithstanding distances and the intensity of original sounds. Should I attract God's attention by cursing Him? I shall have plenty of time to cajole Him into forgiveness afterwards. We have an eternity before us. The main thing is to make Him listen to what I say.

Of course I am greatly handicapped by an almost complete lack of data with regard to God's nature. My grandmother used to assure me that God is kind, generous, all-embracing and all-forgiving. 'He is an altogether delightful person,' she used to whisper, leaning over my bed. She thought I should visualise God as a human being. She thought I would like Him better in human shape.

Once I saw God's photograph in a magazine and was so impressed by His majesty that I fell in love with Him on the spot. For the first time in my life I experienced the feeling of spiritual love and what may be called 'elevation of mind'. A few days later my grandmother told me I had seen the photograph of a famous actor playing the part of God in some drama or other. I was disappointed, but I continued to love God in spite of my disappointment which expressed itself fully in my hatred for the actor. Ever since I have thought about God all the time. I wonder why I am in Hell.

Our charwoman, who was zealous and purblind, threw the photograph away, together with other old magazines I was so keen on. God remained in my heart. As a child, I often saw God sitting on my bedside cabinet, His legs and arms crossed. Sometimes He leaned over my bed, His glance penetrating my sleep.

I am Russian and therefore cannot live without God. Art and food will never replace God in my life. A marked characteristic of the Russian people from their baptism under Prince Vladimir right up to the twentieth century was always a love of God. The vast expanse of Russia glows with the golden domes of His churches. Thus stars glow and twinkle in the heavens. In these churches the lives of the Russians begin and mature.

Does God hear me? Where are His microphones? Do they only record my blasphemies?

Did I blaspheme against God in my lifetime? My memory bears witness to the terrible deeds of Russian Antichrists. There were many of them, not only Lenin, Stalin and Dzerzhinsky. The senseless, barbaric, absurd destruction of churches—of those shrines which are dearest to the Russian heart—remains incomprehensible. Over half a century of rule by the atheistic government hundreds and thousands of churches, erected to God and prayed in over the ages, have irretrievably perished. Did I take part in their destruction?

What are these words I utter? I would couch the same idea in different words. I am afraid of God's power and bend my knees before His majestic silhouette.

What am I supposed to say now, at this point? Why doesn't God help me speak? Why doesn't He help me think? Why doesn't He stir the ingredients of thoughts in my head until they blend into something distinct and worthy of being told aloud? And if I have no potential thoughts, put some into my brain, my Lord! Not too many, please. I am exhausted. Should I plead guilty? What am I supposed to do at this point?

I remember one of my grandmother's songs:

God assists elderly women.

In His bounty He relieves them

Of the burden of years,

Of the burden of tears.

I am forsaken by everybody, dispossessed of everything. Even Lenin forsook me; and my dog. Why doesn't God pity me? Why did He pity my grandmother? Because she believed in Him? Because she was an old woman? I am also an old woman, in a way. She was surrounded by her children and grandchildren. And she had three dogs to keep her company. And those dogs were lying on her bed, whenever she was asleep. She slept and snored. I can snore but I am deprived of sleep, by a decree of God. She slept all the time. Upon awakening she talked to me about God, and I listened to her words and songs. I might have played with other children, outdoors or indoors; I might have played soccer or chess. I stood beside my

grandmother's rocking chair and listened to what she imparted to me about God's life and generosity. Isn't that enough? I still cannot play chess.

The traffic has become so awful. And they drive like crazy. Kerensky, Beria, lorry drivers, all of them. There are also bicycles in the streets. Where is Lenin? Has he been run over? Is he watching television? There is nothing on television tonight. There is no cable TV in our area, no video cassettes. There are a few video cassettes in our shop located on the main street, but we are not entitled to enter this shop. There are guards by the entrance and they carry guns in their pockets. Only foreigners do shopping in Hell; only the inhabitants of Paradise have dollars.

I shall put on my favourite tie tonight. Where is my favourite mirror? Did I brush my teeth this morning? Did I comb my hair yesterday? I do everything once a week, once an eternity. How handsome I am, even without my tie. Very handsome. I need no mirror to see I am handsome and kind. And very generous, like God. Is God coming at last?

But women wear no ties, do they? And what about hermaphrodites?

When is He coming? Perhaps You got lost in my dining room. Anybody here? Where are You? Why do I feel God's presence? I always feel God's presence. Perhaps You live here without my knowing it.

Another night. Nobody looks at me; somebody touches my face and chest. I should not be ashamed of myself, should I? So many years. So many nights and days and mornings. I must wash my hands next Tuesday because God is coming on Wednesday.

Does God have a heart? Is He humane?

Ring the bell three or four times, my Lord. If I don't open the door, knock on it as strongly as You can. You are strong, aren't you? You move the wind and stars. You say something about your powers in The Book of Job. You mention leviathans. You move them too. Why don't you move me? Am I heavier than leviathans? Can You move Yourself? Do come and ring my bell!

If this doesn't work, throw a pebble at my window, a cobblestone. I'll hear You, I swear! I've heard so many things in my life. Besides, I am very fond of music. Do you like Wagner? *Götterdämmerung* in particular? I'll sing You the final aria of Brunhilde. I have a wonderful piano in my room. Not far from my bed. Nothing is far from my bed except You. I shall not be able to open the door.

Another eternity, another swamp, another staircase. What am I doing here? I remember everything. I remember the staircases and swamps, many of them; and the wheelchairs. And God, and my duty. I have to talk as long as I live; as long as I am dead. Until they bury me at

last in the bowels of the earth. For good. One burial is not enough; one death cannot kill us. Even Lenin cannot kill us. Souls are immortal. Even God is powerless to defend us against eternity.

I don't want Him to see me in such a state. Don't come, my Lord! Talk to me. You can talk to Your servant from a distance, can't You? You can send me a cassette, if You like. I might have a Walkman under my pillow. The point is I have no pillow. Do I have a bed? Am I lying or standing? Or flying? Do leviathans fly or crawl?

Anybody there? Am I talking to myself?

I hear You all right. I hear Your footfalls, Your respiration. Why do You have to breathe? Are You alive too? Can't You die for ever? Do You suffer? Tell me everything. Speak louder, please! I am hard of hearing.

APPENDIX II

*Windows are an invitation
Which we accept but seldom
Because, in this world of ours,
We're not very fond of the Hereafter.*

*Life can become unbearable, though,
And a window opens on its own.*

*Whether we accept the invitation or not,
There's no escape from our lot.
We die and enter other worlds
And another window opens.*

How many windows are there in my universe? I jump out of them and fall on a thick mattress. Tosca will never die, for all her jumps and suicides. She still bows to the audience. Why can't You punish me? Why can't You invent an adequate punishment? You are less inventive than the Bolsheviks, aren't You? Your punishments don't match my crimes. My novel is entitled *The Crime*. Or *Crimes*. I am Lenin or half Dostoevsky.

I am Lenin, am I not? Half, double. A double Lenin, please! Am I a drink? They drink me and fall down.

I am also a poet, an English poet. *Pendant mes moments perdus*. I have just given you proof of my knowledge of French. Why do you need this proof? Do you think I collaborate with foreigners? Do you think I am a spy? Who are you? Why are you spying on me? Why are you dancing around me? Are you going to eat me? Don't eat me, please! I am not edible. I am not drinkable. Vultures refuse to eat me. Jackals refuse to drink me. So I have no alternative but to eat my own flesh and drink my own blood. I do, in the evenings. When I have nothing else to do. I don't understand why they find me unpalatable. I eat myself and grow out of myself. I cannot die. At least I cannot die by starvation.

I talk and talk and talk, hoping to empty myself and die of emptiness. There are still some words left at the bottom of my stomach. There are always some words at the bottom of my stomach and in my intestines. My intestines are infinite, my words eternal.

And then my words close in upon me and start tickling and pricking my body. My words are as sharp as razors. They cut my body into pieces. They cut my throat. My bathroom is full of blood. My bodies are piled up in my bathtub. My words float around in my blood and plunge into the caverns of my bodies.

What did Chuang Tzu tell me last night? 'Snares are employed to catch hares, but when the hares are got, men forget the snares. Words are employed to convey ideas, but when the ideas are apprehended, men forget the words. I would give all the tea in China to talk to such a man who has forgotten the words.' That is what he told me in my bathroom.

I have not forgotten my words. I have forgotten my ideas. I have not forgotten my snares. I still catch hares. I have got millions of hares in my house. They are piled up on my writing desk.

Don't whine, comrades! We are bound to win, for we are right. And they are wrong, whoever they are. So they are bound to be defeated. And they *are* defeated, whoever they are. Whoever *we* are. They are defeated, but they don't whine over their defeat, and so we defeat them once again. They still don't whine, notwithstanding our victory. 'Somebody must whine,' I say. So we begin to whine. Whoever we are. The world is too silent without whining. The universe is too empty without tears. Thales maintains that tears are the original substance out of which all others are formed. 'The earth rests on tears,' he says. And whining is at the root of all music. That is why I like Shostakovich.

My wife betrays me every day. She goes out and strips her clothes off. A passer-by takes her in his arms. They go to the woods. Or they do it in my room. They seem to work in a factory. I cannot help admiring the regular rhythm of their movements. The production of steel would increase enormously if I succeeded in diverting their energy from sex to industry.

What are these people doing here? 'We have freed ourselves from the influence of the treacherous and cowardly Liberals,' they shout. Well and good. What next? 'Who are you?' I

ask. 'We have won for ourselves hegemony in the democratic revolution,' they shout. 'I know what you are here for,' I shout. 'You want to lift my body into the air and carry it shoulder-high as far as St Petersburg.' 'That's right,' they shout. 'Don't do it,' I shout. 'I suffer from vertigo.' 'You suffer from syphilis, not from vertigo,' they shout. 'You've built a new Tower of Babel and you must climb up on it to hang a banner on the vane.' 'I can't,' I shout. 'Everything would be going round me long before I got half-way.' 'You must,' they shout. So I am given a banner and obediently I climb up. Ladies wave their handkerchiefs and the cries of 'hurrah' are echoed down in the street. Then the crowd breaks into a shriek of terror and I fall down.

The Revolution again. I thought I had got rid of it for good. Where is my soul now? In the hands of the Bolsheviks? Have I fallen into their hands? Stalin strokes my cheeks and sings me a lullaby. I die and he puts me in the mausoleum. People bend over my face and kiss me on the lips. Their vodka-stinking breath is thick and slippery like jelly. My wives jump onto their backs. And they gallop around me. And my father bets thirty thousand dollars on those horses. And they gallop faster and faster. And Stalin takes a whip out of his pocket. And he brandishes the whip above my head. And the horses detach themselves from the marble floor and begin to fly. And I remember that I am an English poet.

I cannot write poetry any more. What can I write? I wrote an anonymous letter last night. And I sent it to myself. 'Your wife betrays you,' I said in the letter. And I described her betrayals in minute detail. 'Your benefactor,' I signed it. And I received the letter. And I read it. And I tore it up. I did not believe my benefactor. I don't believe anybody. Why should my wife betray me? I am an ideal husband. I excel all others in the ability to determine the main link in the chain of tasks that confront the Party.

I wrote another letter. I addressed it to the chief of the Police Department. 'Lenin was observed to be in communication with politically unreliable persons, some of whom now have proceedings pending against them on the charge of committing offences against the state.' That is what I wrote in my anonymous letter. 'Your best informer,' I signed it. Lenin is a dangerous individual.

I track myself down. I open a trap, run down a ladder, bump against a wall and listen to my own footsteps that try to catch up with me. My footsteps descend the stairs and I begin to run again. I hear my own voice. 'Halt!' I shout. But I don't stop. Halt! Halt! Halt! resounds under

the vault. I clutch my own hand. I don't stop. I wrench my hand from my hand and continue to run.

I run on and on. Space swims like a kite in the current of my breath.

I chase the darkness away by wandering up and down with two candelabra in my hands.

Only along this road can the proletariat liberate itself from its dependence upon the chauvinist bourgeoisie and, in one form or another, more or less rapidly, take decisive steps on the road to the real freedom of nations and Socialism.

There are many old words in my head. They are very old. They are grey-haired and full of wrinkles. I extract them from my head and put them on my couch. They contract and wither before my very eyes. They compress into the shape of small mothballs.

My words cough a lot. They are ill. A skeleton holds a whip, a tottering skeleton covered with dirt. He cracks his whip and they march forward. My words, my adopted children.

Monopolist capitalism. Parasitic or decaying capitalism. Moribund capitalism.

I try to bring my mind back to the problem of personal religious salvation which must be dealt with in view of my impending suicide.

I have already brought my mind back to several spots. I remember balancing my mind in the palms of my hands as if it were my newborn child whom I was lulling to sleep.

Assuming that one is to be born again...when the time comes. Why postpone this breakthrough till some 'happier moment'? There is no such thing...neither within time, nor beyond time...neither in the land of the living nor in the land of Salvador Dali's pliable watches...

Why not extinguish all the stars and thereby put an end to the unbearable contemplation of future calamities?

Where is my wife? Her clothes are here, on my bed. She is not in my bed. Is it my bed? Whose bed is it? Stalin's? What is he doing in my bed? Haven't they removed him from the mausoleum?

On the whole, in spite of a host of drawbacks, this is after all a step towards a rupture with the social-chauvinists.

The social-chauvinists stand in the middle of the room and I go away from them until I bump against the wall.

I remember climbing my Tower of Babel on Jacob's ladder that unfolded itself with the solemnity of a scroll.

I try to forget myself by looking all the time at other people. The point is I recognise myself in other people. They are nothing but mirrors in human shape. We walk together around the mausoleum. Sometimes I stop walking and they carry me out.

I walked into a bar and ordered the Broth of Oblivion. After draining my glass I left the bar and was immediately placed in front of a huge mirror, the Mirror of the Wicked, Nieh-ching-t'ai, set up in the Court of the first Yama-King. In this mirror I saw all the crimes I had committed.

I don't recognise my voice. The voice I hear pretends to be mine. It is not. It comes from outside and I am not outside. I am inside.

Shostakovich's last quartet is a long, funereal tunnel. Its air is suffocating, its ground squashy. It reminds me, among other things, of Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* in the course of which a few men squelch and stagger through the mud of a no-man's land.

My mother must be dead by now. She used to come rather often. She slept in my bed. I put blankets on her sleeping body, four or five blankets. She was smothered in blankets. Did I smother her? I heard some screams, many screams, smothered screams. Where did they issue from? I don't know. I scream myself. I scream around 5 p.m.

Is he really my lawyer? He says so. I don't need lawyers. I need executioners at this stage of eternity. I have got two axes in my chest of drawers. I cannot manipulate them myself. And he is paralysed. He speaks but he does not move. I wish he were mute and agile.

Do you love me? Why don't you answer? Sex is of no importance. We have a lot in common. Spiritual affinities. *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. I used to love you when you were alive. And I love your skeleton. Your skeleton is elegant. Where do you buy all these clothes? Dollars, dollars, dollars. Let us go out and sit on a stump. Let us invite my lawyer to dinner. He promised to kill me tomorrow morning.

Is the world better now, without me? They see the universe in terms of money. For once, I am not guilty. On the contrary. They are so stupid. Even I am more intelligent. The future is stupid, the past is wise. Everything is useless. Everything is pointless.

A grave was dug and I was buried in it. Some days later the earth on the grave began to rise because I was still in the land of the living. But a middle-aged woman poured some boiling water on my grave and seized a pestle shouting, 'What is dead should stay dead!' She kept beating the ground until my breath forsook me and I yielded up the ghost. Next day, as the ghost returned and the earth rose again, the woman hit me on the head with an iron bar. 'What is dead should stay dead!' she shouted.

The present grave-like stillness in the world must not deceive us. The earth is charged with revolution. The suffering caused by the high cost of living engenders a revolutionary spirit everywhere. The ruling classes, the bourgeoisie with its servitors, the governments, are moving into a blind alley from which they can never extricate themselves without tremendous upheavals.

History flutters around my skull. I remain immobile and history circles around my skull. History traces vicious circles on the ceiling. Like a moth attracted by light. Everybody is always attracted by light.

Why can't I live normally, naturally? To speak perfectly I have to put words away. To act perfectly I have to remain immobile. And everything will go around me.

I put my words away, but they return and pester me. I lock my door. They squeeze in through the peephole and I cannot remain immobile. I have the fidgets.

Do you think I am still in the land of the living? Well, in another land of the living. Abroad, so to speak. Not in Paris, not in Switzerland. On another planet perhaps. Nothing to do with the earth. I cannot fly on this planet.

This up-and-down, life-and-death pendulum creates a semblance of life.

I am full of holes. Tubes are inserted into my body. An octopus-like apparatus. A new soul is blown in through these tubes.

This planet is a huge poem. A bad one, a bad Russian poem. I am hungry. The human body *is* eternal. The human soul is perishable. My soul died in exile. I did not attend the funeral. I like neither funerals nor cemeteries. I prefer mausoleums. I prefer dead bodies to dead souls. I prefer blood to light. When you kill a soul, a ray of light issues from it.

Whenever my thought-rays hit the atmosphere of the earth, they collide with the molecules of the air. Our disconsolate, agitated, jittery universe.

Something rolling...water...waves. Rats leave the sinking ship. I am staying. I am not a rat. Am I a cat? What am I going to eat?

God must be sensitive to the music radiating from my violin. Its sobs and throbs seem to carry me through the air, as far as His castle. Am I a part of Chagall's painting?

The endless sprawl of my brainwaves is bound to reach the last page, the last line, the last sign, the last sigh.

Does God have a free hand to torture me before the advent of the Last Judgement? Tonight I repudiated all I had stood for in 1917. The preservation of my personality does not count any more. I said to myself, 'Count me out.' I deducted myself from myself.

Don't switch me off! I promise to be obedient and nice. Don't touch my umbilical cord! Why are you tampering with my fuses?

I swear not to undermine the tsarist regime in Russia. I swear to inform against revolutionaries. I swear to forget Marx and read Schopenhauer every day. I swear to defend the Winter Palace against the Bolsheviks. I swear to murder Lenin at the first opportunity. I swear to repay the damage I have done to Russia. How? By selling my body. I swear not to leave Switzerland in 1917. I swear to murder my parents before my birth so that humanity might be spared a great deal of trouble and suffering. I swear to believe in God. I swear to keep myself away from the Earth and from the Moon. I swear to become a poet and build an ivory tower in Alakayevka.

I am an old dog wailing his heart out on the streets. God has thrown me off the scent.

Suddenly bang, and I am right where I started.

God stood confused and convinced of the weakness and speciousness of His logic.

Humanity continues to march to the beat of the drum down Cemetery Road. Why can't they walk in silence? Why do they have to march to the beat of the drum? Why don't they stop? Do they really have to go so far? What is there at the horizon? Another mausoleum?

The Body, being severed from the Soul, rests for some time in the mausoleum which is a perfect alembic. But if the fire is increased and well-tempered, the Soul gradually descends in drops and saturates and moistens the Body. And a plant grows out of the Body, the Tree of Life. I can't find it. I can't feel it. Is *this* my punishment? Why do mausoleums sprout like mushrooms? Are they mushrooms?

I have eaten two mushrooms. I hope they are poisonous.

My body is an icicle. I hang from a roof. I sound like Papageno's aria *Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen*.

I trip over my bones scattered all along the corridor.

I sprout out of my own mummy. The weather sprouts my limbs. I spread my foliage around the mausoleum.

I woke up suddenly and looked around. I stroked my head and its familiar relief reassured me. No bumps had altered it in the night. Nobody had clouted me on the head either with a fist or with a walking stick. There must be a shortage of walking sticks, I told myself.

So I was loved and idolised again. I looked at my hand, striving to recall who had stroked my hair a few minutes before. Was it myself or some admirer of mine? A woman?

Nice to be at home! Cosy. Why should I go out? What awaits me outdoors? The same chaos. The world is old, isn't it? God must be old too, by now. Tired of storytelling. Is the Almighty a good writer? Is He a good poet? Far inferior to Shakespeare, in my opinion.

I wonder if one can fall in love. With a human being, I mean. Not with an angel or God. Am I married?

Whose clothes are these? They smell beautiful. They are not mine. I cannot put them on. They slip away from my hands.

Singers and sportsmen. Nobody else. Nothing but singing, jumping, running, swimming, skating.

It is cold in here. A hollow body. I saw a painting last week. It was entitled *A Hollow Body*. It represented a human body without bones, tendons. Water was flowing through its veins instead of blood. The skin was transparent of course. *The Invisible Man* would have been a more appropriate title, in my opinion. There was nothing on the canvas. Was it a canvas? Not a trace of paint. How did I know it was a human body? Because of the title perhaps. Was it *A Human Body*? Wasn't it rather *A Human Soul*? Something invisible, yet...How should I say? Tangible...the canvas was tangible. Was it a canvas? Was it a painting? I touched it to make sure the thing existed. It did. Is it still in existence? The soul is immortal.

Everything is eternal, if one takes memory into account. People have short memories. There is such a thing as cosmic memory, I presume. Call it history, if you wish. An invisible history. Yet it does exist somewhere. In here perhaps.

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Whose voice is this? Doesn't matter really. It is the words that count.

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There are many shops around here. Wonderful clothes! Wonderful!

United States Universal Marketing will immediately notify you when you win any prize of \$100,000,000,000 or more. In addition, you receive a complete list of winning numbers after every five weeks so that you can carefully check how you are doing. Your prize money will be confidentially paid directly to you anywhere in the Universe. Upon expiry of your subscription you will receive a final itemised statement of your winnings.

Today I bought myself a tie.

I bought myself another tie.

I bought myself a cashmere coat. And a cashmere jacket.

No less than 125,000,000 staff members are deployed around the Universe for the companies of the ZUKLR Holding Group. We fly only EZAOU.

We regard our highly-qualified men and women as our most valuable resource, a resource which yields top results for our business partners and investors—day by day, hour by hour, second by second.

After all, it is always worth investing Time and also Space in deciding where your assets will work best for you.

ZUKLR Holding is one of the world's leading financial services groups. Our Jupiter headquarters, combined with our companies' presence in all important universe markets, offers the investor the best possible options.

I cannot keep money in my boots, can I?

Why should you hide money under the floorboards in your bedroom? Are you so anxious to raise the living standards of mice and rats?

Special rates for the weekend. A wide choice of fine personal spaceships. From the very sensible to the absolutely extravagant. So the next time you need to get away from your unfaithful wife, or get back to your faithful wife, call US. Or ask your travel agent for details.

I followed the advice and I asked my travel agent for details. When I finally left his office, I carried a pile of leaflets in my hands and on my head. Soon I began to lose them. A street urchin picked up the Andromeda leaflet and immediately flew off.

If you've looked around recently, you'll know that you could easily pay \$5,000 for just one suitcase. Furito are able to offer you a whole set. Four pieces which give you everything you're likely to need. What about taking your wife with you? Just put her into our largest suitcase 'YUGZ'! She is faithful to you, isn't she? Unfaithful? All the more reason to take her with you!

The taste of success and ecstasy since 2395.

The taste of love since the Big Bang.

The latest witch's brew to reduce sensitivity during love-making and help avoid premature ejaculation.

After your flight, relax with a professional massage in the privacy of your hotel room, apartment or house. Our masseuses come from Venus.

I order her to strip and fling her on the bed. I strap her down to each bedpost so that she lies spread-eagled on her back, showing everything. When she is totally helpless, I torment her. I flog her, I cut her and watch her body become translucent. I kill her, I resurrect her, I kiss her wounds. But I refuse to make love to her. My subordinates file in and have her one after the other.

Quiet music. Friendly atmosphere. Sauna. The Milky Way therapy.

An informal lecture on the latest technique of transplanting hair is given on 78603-4129758673423064734 each evening after 6.30. It is tape-recorded to avoid embarrassment for men who want to know about having their existing hair redistributed to hide male pattern baldness. The lecture can be telephoned from your own home. Don't talk—just listen.

I love her!

Star-dust developer. Asserted by a leading sexologist to be the only tested electronic appliance that proved successful for the enlargement of the male organ.

Tomorrow we are invited to dinner.

The day after tomorrow we shall pay a visit to her grandfather.

She is my mermaid!

I cannot dive.

I cannot swim.

My body was buffeted by the wind. Suddenly, as I crossed a red bridge, I dropped into a lake ten thousand fathoms deep. I felt no pain but my body became narrow and small and was no longer the same. When I stopped falling my eyes were closed and would not open, and in my ears I heard what seemed to be the sound of the voices of my father and mother.

Is that my little skylark twittering out there?

I cannot fly.

KUBRDF. Our new watch inspired by the purest Saturnine elegance. Do you have a bed? You must have one, otherwise you wouldn't hear our voice. Our potential customers listen to our velvety voice in their beds, often confusing it with the voice of their sweet dreams. You have always dreamt about a watch like that, haven't you? Why don't you have it then? You have a bed and you need one of our watches to know how long you have remained in your bed. You shouldn't stay in your bed for ever. There are other pleasures in store for you. Your life is a dream, but you can have this dream everywhere: on Saturn, on Andromeda, on the Moon. Our watch will guide your step. Our watch will tell how long your pleasures last. Do you know the French expression '*faire durer le plaisir*'? Do you know French at all? Even Lenin had a smattering of French.

So take your old watch, crush it under your heel—let it go to Hell!—and visit us in our new shop. Our watches are manufactured in the finest jeweller's tradition. These solid gold masterpieces will measure your eternity. Dream-like, decidedly contemporary. A visual and a musical homage to the metaphysics of Time.

Is it my house? I bought this house in the last century. Did I? How do I know it is *my* house? Do I recognise it? Do I recognise the furniture? Where does this vase come from? And this armchair? Is it a rocking chair? Is it a cradle?

Sleep my dear, sleep my dear!

It is pointless to hear

What I'm saying. Words are mere

Sounds.

It is my bed. When did I buy it? When did I sleep in it? When did I dream in it? What did I dream about? Never mind, never mind.

Do I recognise the walls? Walls are the same everywhere.

It is my window over there. Is it my window? Looks like my window.

The first kiss. 'I saw you as a child that you are.' He tells her about his first wife. 'You know, Nadezhda...' The first love-making. Umbilical cord. There's nothing in the shops. How to get hard currency? She suggests they should let a French television team come and film him in the mausoleum. They organize some private night-time séances with champagne and dancers from the Beriozka. She argues that the life in Russia is devoid of luxury even if one has a million dollars. The texture of life doesn't allow luxury. No garages for the car, no restaurants. If you venture outside Moscow... She dreams of moving to California. They have good Japanese restaurants there. He remembers that there was a question of his body being sold to Americans. 'But I'm not a prostitute. I shouldn't sell my body.' She has her arguments. 'If your dignity doesn't suffer... And you're always dignified. And millions of workmen will be able to see you. They'll be inspired by you.' She doesn't hear him, so he notes down his thoughts. But he can't tell her spontaneously what he feels. She tells him she's going to have a

baby. He's happy but thinks that the child might interfere with the revolutionary work. She procures an abortion. She never was pregnant: a lie to further his attachment to her.

Lenin's New Testament

He suspects he's being influenced in his writing of his new testament by God: his soul has been stolen. He partly repents and recants. He describes his American life. His wife betrays him in his presence. Her lover doesn't know that Lenin hears and even sees them. When he accuses her she says he is a murderer. No pure evil or good. A Chinese balance.

The Kingdom of the sea. The New Atlantis by Bacon. A.P. talks about it.

Thomas More doesn't look like himself. Perhaps he slept badly the night before. Sleeping pills. He doesn't remember who he is. Perhaps they had switched off his memory. Because he's a dangerous character? Stalin? Perhaps Stalin did it. (Deep-freezer.)

Appendix I. L. is exhibited in Munich, in the tavern where Hitler was making his propaganda speeches. The interview of the Mayor of Munich.

Appendix II. L. is in Paris. An article.

Appendix III. L.'s testament.

Lilia's friend says that she loves L. only because he's famous and she's fond of heroes. And it's shic. She says there are nobody to love now. All dissidents have disappeared—abroad or dead.

Lilia says she loves L. because his crimes are humane. The man murders, then repents; error is human. Money is awful.

In his testimony L. is afraid that the words he writes are not his. God. He's spied upon.

1 chapter. The speaker presents the news from Hell. He says that the authorities of Hell recognize they made mistakes in the past. (French book on Hell.) He says he must show what happens in Moscow. (The putsch.) The glasnost oblige. Our life in Hell can change too. The inhabitants of Hell watch the putsch on the T.V.—one year afterwards. They think it is en direct. They look for Stalin.

Author's note. Lenin and Thomas More read The Turning Point. I read The History of Utopias.

In the chapter 'Moulin Rouge' L. accuses Lilia of having passed herself off as his daughter. 'So what?' she says. 'I felt you didn't love me any more. My stratagem. Anyway, for a man who loves, his beloved represents everything and everybody: his mother, his sister...'

The living never let their brains out, for fear of losing them in the crowd of ghosts.

As he peered through her long, seaweed-like hair he saw his brain talking to his former mistress or rather to her voice. They cuddled up in a corner of the room and were engaged in a mutual striptease. 'We're being spied upon,' his brain murmured into the voice's ear. 'Really?' said the voice, looking around; and the both disappeared under a floorboard.

FRANCIS: History repeats itself. People repeat themselves. I repeat myself. Only yesterday I talked to my wife about the vicious circles of the universe. (*Shouting*) (*He picks up the newspaper. Looking at the front page*) Again. At the beginning of the twentieth century somebody withdrew from social life only because a mare was called a genius on the radio. How often would I have committed suicide if I had paid more attention to words? (*Looking at the paper*) And pictures... (*A piece of pop music is played full blast.*) The stuff they play on the radio nowadays. All day long. (*Standing up*) I've got no radio. (*A sportsman runs onto the stage and circles round Francis.*) (*The sportsman gives a few jumps and runs away. Francis sits down again and presses his hands against his ears. The music stops.*) How wonderful I've still my hands! (*Pause.*)

PAUL: Let us not discuss eternal problems. Soul, body, immortality... They are eternal, aren't they?

FRANCIS:

FRANCIS: In my house?

PAUL: Do you remember the poem by... what's his name? It goes:

Windows are an invitation
Which we accept but seldom
Because, in this world of ours,
We're not very fond of the Hereafter.

A beautiful poem.

FRANCIS: Personally, I've never been tempted by open windows or revolvers. I'm not a suicidal type.

FRANCIS: Life is wonderful. In spite of repetitions.

PAUL: Everybody thinks so. And then life becomes unbearable.

Life may become unbearable though
And the windows open on their own...

FRANCIS: Sorry, I should have opened... Do you think it's stuffy in here? I didn't air...

PAUL: Don't treat me like a visitor, for Heaven's sake. Or else offer me a drink. I used to like cognac.

FRANCIS: You didn't introduce yourself...

PAUL: I can't. Forgot my name and even my sign of zodiac.

FRANCIS: Are you amnesic or something? But you remember poems...

PAUL: The whole place is a huge poem. A bad one. (Pause.) I'm hungry. Human body *is* eternal. They were right to condemn Origen for his heresy.

FRANCIS: I don't seem to...

PAUL: You remember, don't you? One of the Fathers. Origen. Incidentally, what about *your* name? Never mind. We'll christen you later on. Origen maintained that, at the resurrection, our bodies would be transformed into ethereal substances. Not material, mind you. Impalpable. Like the air or... a thought, a feeling... Do you feel anything?

FRANCIS: I'm cold.

PAUL:

FRANCIS: I still am.

PAUL: Is she down here? Your wife?

FRANCIS: We live together.

PAUL: Down here?

FRANCIS: 'Down'?

PAUL: Do you think we're in Paradise or what? In Purgatory, at best. You must have died last week. I slept in this room a fortnight ago. Do you go out at all? Are you sociable? (Laughing) Dead men are social animals, you know.

FRANCIS: Dead?

PAUL: Do you think we're still in the land of the living? Well, in another land of the living, then. Abroad, so to speak. On another planet, perhaps... Nothing to do with the earth...

And he smokes cheap cigarettes into the bargain.

Don't do it in my presence! Spare me the sight of my youth!

Perhaps I'll defend you tomorrow. Or the day after tomorrow.

And don't play football with street urchins!

he was in the habit of trusting his hallucinations far more than real life. And, in return for his unwavering faith and support, his hallucinations would invariably become real life—in the long run.

'You wished to abolish money, if I'm not mistaken. You thought that an ideal society might and must do without it, reverting to the blissful era of 'natural existence'. I prefer bartering to buying and selling, you wrote. Business was done by barter before money was

invented, your proclaimed from rostrums. Intellectuals and non-manual workers bargained away furniture and family heirlooms in the hopeless struggle to stay alive... Half of Russia was on the roads or railways, carrying or trundling objects... You enjoyed in the sight. You hated money. I don't remember...' The visitor produced a box of pills out of his pocket and swallowed the box, without bothering to open it. 'You contaminated my brain with your lapses of memory,' he said reproachfully. 'Was it you? I mean, that episode... You found a gold coin, kicked it... 'Where's she?' Roger was swivelling his eyes in all directions. 'She hasn't come yet. Did she go shopping? Is she taking shower?'

'Cleanliness is next to goodness. Would you play something for him, dear lady?

To explain the word 'kulak' in the preface.

The mausoleum heaved a sigh as Lenin stormed out of it, tripped over a corpse, fell, scrambled up and glanced around, hesitant and perspiring.

'You're running a fever,' said the envoy. 'Have you got a handkerchief? A herb tea—'

'Where's Satan?'

'Everywhere. Like God.'

'Why don't they bump into each other? Is He also on Red Square?'

'Of course. He's standing in the middle of it. He's always in the middle of everything.'

'We might just as well stay in the mausoleum.'

'We might.'

'Who's he calling on the telephone? What do you think?' asked Lenin.

Is he talking about Andrey Petrovich? I should concentrate on their words to follow the thread of their discussions. There are so many cables on Red Square, around the mausoleum.

'You've asked him to call you a taxi.'

That's right. Lenin has asked Andrey Petrovich to call him a taxi.

'God. He's ringing up God,' said Lenin.

'Is that so easy? Do you know His telephone number?' asked the envoy.

Does Lenin know His telephone number?

'Zinoviev and Kamenev let the cat out of the bag, but it didn't work,' said Lenin.

What is he talking about?

'Do you want a paper handkerchief?' asked the envoy.

He is running a fever.

'A few days before the Revolution they expressed their disapproval of our plan in a newspaper, but it didn't work.'

'A camomile tea?' suggested the envoy.

'They disapproved of my plan for armed uprising and betrayed the Bolsheviks. But even with a week's clear warning from such an unimpeachable—'

'Where are you going?'

Not to God's Castle, I'm sure.

'The Provisional Government didn't budge and made no adequate preparations for its own defence. Can you hear anything?' Lenin lay down and applied his ear to the cobblestones. 'I can't hear the tanks,' he said at last.

'Can you hear our footsteps?' asked the envoy. 'Do you know Debussy's *prélude Les pas sur la neige*?'

Can they hear my footsteps?

'We're light, I suppose.' Lenin lifted his foot and weighed it in his hand.

'Are we?'

I am light. The slimming course.

'The dead are lighter than the living. Much, much lighter.' Lenin lifted his foot level with the envoy's face and almost lost his balance.

'What's your weight?' asked the envoy.

'There are no scales in the mausoleum.'

'Do you also believe that one's weight depends on the number of one's sins?'

'Who believes it?'

I do.

'Lots of people.'

'So you repent—' Lenin lowered his foot and burst into a coughing fit.

'Some repent, others run and swim. Even weightless people are heavy.'

I swam. And I prayed of course.

Jogging and jerking across Red Square, a huge placard came into view. Lenin put on a pair of glasses. The placard reached the mausoleum and moved through the door.

'Another one,' said Lenin.

'They've been brought alive by the warmth of human hands,' said the envoy. 'Too many people—'

'Another one. Is it a congress?'

'The mausoleum is never empty.'

A crowd of placards proceeded towards the mausoleum.

'Terrific!' said Lenin. 'We're adults, aren't we? Why should we write and think at God's dictation? Why should He always read our notebooks? Why should we share with Him our flats? Our life is short, but we are free to do whatever we desire! A moment of freedom is longer than the eternity of slavery! We're immortal, whereas the Fathers of the Church die in their infancy.'

Two police officers appeared on Red Square. Lenin lowered his voice. 'Can you fly?' he asked.

'What about you?' asked the envoy.

'Can *they* fly? We'd better stay where we are. Otherwise they'll suspect us of being Bolsheviks.'

'Where are you going?' asked the first policeman.

'We're immobile,' answered Lenin.

'You're in the open air.'

'Taking a stroll. I was ill.'

'Good for your health, what?'

'I don't smoke either.'

'Show me your papers!'

Lenin took out his passport and handed it to the policeman.

'Ivanov.'

'The doctors think that within a month I'll be able to resume my activities.'

I hope not. I wish I could strike him down with paralysis.

'What's your profession?'

'I am a concert pianist.'

'According to your passport, you're the founder of Bolshevism and of the first socialist state in the world.'

'I am a concert pianist.'

'We've got a piano at the police station. What composers do you like?'

'Beethoven, Chopin, Verdi, Shostakovich.'

I shall give him 'Oedipus Rex' as a birthday present. I like Stravinsky.

'Were you born in Simbirsk?'

'In Munich.'

'Are you German?'

'Yes.'

'A German spy?'

'No.'

'Have you got German marks?'

'No.'

'Is Ivanov a common name in Germany?'

'Yes. Like Feodorov, Vassily Feodorov.'

'Is it your beard?'

'Of course.'

'Come with us!'

'I can't. I'm ill, I'm drunk. I can't walk. I can't stand.'

Lenin sat down on the cobblestones.

'I'll carry you on my back.'

'We'll both carry you on our backs,' said the second policeman.

'I'm very heavy.'

'He's very heavy,' certified the envoy.

*He is very heavy, although I have never carried him either on my back or in my arms.
He wades through our swamps on his own.*

'Have you already carried him on your back?' The second policeman touched the envoy on the spine.

'He has,' said Lenin, lying down on the cobblestones.

'Now he reminds me of somebody I saw many years ago—in my childhood,' said the first policeman.

'Your school memories?' asked the second policeman.

'An excursion or something. I never saw him standing or walking.'

'Bedridden? A relative?'

'My maternal grandfather.' The first policeman began to rummage in his pockets.

'Is this man your grandfather?' asked the envoy, pointing to Lenin with his shoe.

'Does he look like me?'

'The spitting image!' The envoy traced a circle around his own head.

'My grandfather was Polish. He died in 1932. I saw this body once before. It was lying down.'

'In a morgue? In a mortuary? In a tomb?' asked the second policeman.

'It was dead.'

'So he's your grandfather,' said the envoy.

'Did you die in 1932?' The first policeman prodded Lenin with his shoe.

'Yes,' said Lenin.

'You can't be both dead and drunk. The dead don't drink.'

'But drunkards die very often,' said Lenin.

'The dead drink a lot. They don't get drunk,' corrected the envoy.

Lenin rose to his feet.

'He's not my grandfather!'

Lenin lay down again.

'Did your grandfather lie on cobblestones?' asked the second policeman.

'In a bed.'

'Let's take him to the police station. We'll put him down in our cot.'

Do they really have a cot? How far is their police station?

'What is it? An identification parade?' asked the envoy.

'He's not my grandfather!'

'Why?' asked Lenin.

'My grandfather's surname wasn't Ivanov.'

'The name is of no importance,' said the envoy. 'Shall we find out instead to which category of sinners this man belongs? Let's take him to *our* headquarters. If vermin eat him, he is gluttonous. If demons sodomise him on *their* bed, he is slothful. If our bankers pour molten gold down his throat, he is avaricious.'

I ate the penis of Don Juan and two tomatoes. You're a lecher! they cried.

'And if he's an assassin?' asked the second policeman.

'In this case he's not my grandfather,' said the first policeman.

'Who am I then?' asked Lenin.

'Lenin. Vladimir Ilich Lenin. You escaped from the mausoleum but couldn't go too far,' said the first policeman.

So they recognised him at the very outset of their encounter. Another trick of theirs. What are they doing? Robbers! They are soul snatchers!

'Why couldn't I?' Lenin rose to his feet.

'Because you're drunk.'

'Shall we run a test for alcohol?' asked the second policeman.

'He wasn't driving a car,' said the envoy.

'He's lying on Red Square, near the mausoleum. We can arrest him for vagrancy and for the profanation of the sacred corpse,' said the policemen in unison.

'I admit that I am Lenin,' said Lenin. 'But I am *not* in the mausoleum now. So I can't profane my own corpse by lying near the empty mausoleum.'

'The mausoleum is sacred anyway,' said the first policeman. 'We won't allow a drunkard to lie near it. You did it on purpose.'

'You could have fallen near the conservatory,' said the second policeman. 'Your insult was premeditated.'

'Why do you carry a forged passport?' asked the first policeman.

'I thought I might be arrested by the police of the Tsar.'

'For lying dead drunk near the mausoleum?'

'The mausoleum was built after the Revolution,' said the envoy.

'You're Soviet citizens, aren't you?' asked Lenin.

'We're dead,' said the first policeman.

'But you respect me, don't you? Otherwise you wouldn't try to arrest me.'

'We don't respect criminals and drunkards.'

'And you killed everybody,' said the second policeman.

'I didn't kill *you*, did I?'

'You did. And you killed my grandfather.'

'He didn't kill *me*,' said the envoy.

What about me? Was I killed by Lenin or Stalin?

'Are you alive?' asked the second policeman.

'No,' answered the envoy, tapping on his dead lungs.

'So he killed you. He killed everybody.'

'Nobody's alive,' said the first policeman.

Lenin began to run and covered a considerable distance without looking back at his pursuers. When he did look back he found that nobody was pursuing him, not even his shadow, inexplicably swallowed by the moon. All of a sudden he felt an emptiness inside his ego and realised that his soul had remained with the policemen who kept it as a hostage and were likely to kill it if he did not give himself up.

A tank was rolling up the avenue towards Satan's headquarters. A man lay down in its path.

He must be dead, that hero. Only the dead are capable of sacrificing their lives.

Three KGB officers jumped out of three windows and whipped out their guns.

'I'm going to Satan's headquarters,' said Lenin. 'You're his allies, aren't you? Let's go together and put God to flight. You'll protect me on the way.'

'We don't care about Satan. We're ordered to arrest Yeltsin and his ministers.'

'He's spending the weekend out of town. At his dacha.'

'At Archangelskoye. A short drive from Moscow.'

'He sold this dacha in February,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'In February?'

'Dollars?'

'Where's he now?'

'Somewhere abroad,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'Last night he was at Archangelskoye.'

'How much?'

'What year is it?'

'1992,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'It's the 19th of August 1991.'

'Did he sell his dacha to the Japanese?'

'Our calendar—'

'Who offered you this calendar? God?' asked Lenin.

'Or to our businessmen?'

'Tell us what happened last year.'

'On the 19th of August.'

'You didn't shoot Yeltsin,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'He made unexpected movements and left places where he was staying at unscheduled times. He had been warned by factions within the KGB. Some of your agents betrayed the Communist Party.'

'None of us betrayed the Communist Party.'

'27,000,000 dollars?'

'We're one year late.'

'One year and five days,' said Andrey Petrovich.

'And what about God?' asked Lenin. 'Does He still have His dacha in the Garden of Eden?'

'He sold this dacha twenty centuries ago to St Peter,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'And the envoy you met in the mausoleum reported the news dating back to the same period—to the

descent of Jesus Christ into Hades. Ever since the whole of Creation has been under our control.'

'How much?'

'Under *our* control.'

'Was the envoy twenty centuries late?'

'God has a monopoly on Time. It's His private property. He manipulates it as He pleases.'

'I addressed the crowd,' said Lenin. 'Was I born twenty centuries ago?'

'Like Eisenstein, God uses the "montage of attractions" in which arbitrarily chosen images, independent of the action, are presented not in chronological order but in such a way as to create the maximum psychological impact. Stalin and Beria were most impressed by our movie.'

'Lenin and Jesus Christ?'

'Together?'

'Speaking from an armoured car?'

'And Yeltsin,' said Andrey Petrovich. 'The same goes for human beings: your heart may live in the era of Pushkin and your brain—'

'Do I live in different times?' Lenin cast a look at his toes.

'And what about his soul?' asked the first KGB officer.

'Have you stolen it?' asked the second KGB officer. 'I am afraid they have awak'd, and 'tis not done.'

'Have you sold it to Satan?' asked the third KGB officer.

Andrey Petrovich grinned from ear to ear.

THE JOURNALIST: Do you understand it now?

LENIN: I hope so.

THE JOURNALIST: Can you tell us what the structure of the universe looks like? Can you draw it?

THE JOURNALIST: Why? Are the authorities of the Hereafter afraid of your sincerity?

VOLODYA: Not in the least!

THE JOURNALIST: Who's this man? A KGB agent?

LENIN: Volodya is my guardian angel.

VOLODYA: Yes, I look after him and all that belongs to him. Please proceed.

THE JOURNALIST: You acknowledge now that the Tsar and his family were killed on your orders. What about Anastassia? Was she also killed or did she survive and escape to the West? Are you acquainted with the woman who claimed to be Anastassia but was rejected by the Russian aristocracy?

LENIN: The only women I'm acquainted with in the Hereafter are my wife, her mother and her grandmother. My own mother also visits me from time to time. I don't think she was killed. Do *you* think I killed my mother?

THE JOURNALIST: Wasn't she killed by Stalin or Beria? What did *you* die of?

VOLODYA: Please answer the question. You're not forbidden to give interviews to foreign journalists.

LENIN: I was sentenced to death. For my sins.

VOLODYA: It took us more than an hour to do his make-up.

THE JOURNALIST: Do you fear another death?

LENIN: I don't.

THE JOURNALIST: Do you think your present life is eternal? Have you become immortal at last?

LENIN: Everybody is immortal.

THE JOURNALIST: Do you fear immortality?

VOLODYA: Borges did.

THE JOURNALIST: Have you read Borges's works? Do you admire him?

LENIN: I was a poor reader in my lifetime. Did we burn his books after the Revolution? Were they prohibited in the country of Soviets? Did Hitler burn them? He continues to burn books in the Hereafter.

THE JOURNALIST: Does he?

VOLODYA: Lenin did.

THE JOURNALIST: We also make sculptures out of stones. And these sculptures represent our figures and faces.

VOLODYA: Like Father like sons.

LENIN: Does this stone bear any resemblance to humans? Do you like my mausoleum garden?

THE JOURNALIST: It's very beautiful.

LENIN: Perhaps I am already this stone. Perhaps this garden is located in the future. We live in parallel times.

THE JOURNALIST: Did you see Hitler in his bunker just before his death? What did he die of?

LENIN: Of sadness. He still lives in his bunker. He's still losing the war.

THE JOURNALIST: Did you attend the meetings of the Nazi party in Munich? Did you participate in the Putsch of November 1923?

LENIN: No. I was still alive.

THE JOURNALIST: It was rumoured you were in a coma.

LENIN: I was ill. I was going through a tunnel. There was a light at the end of it. And music. I heard music.

THE JOURNALIST: What music did you hear?

LENIN: A funeral march. I don't remember.

THE JOURNALIST: What's your best memory?

LENIN: This garden. This future garden. The memory of the future.

THE JOURNALIST: And your worst memory?

VOLODYA: His birth.

THE JOURNALIST: Do you remember your birth? In his autobiographical book, Tolstoy describes—

LENIN: Do I look like Tolstoy?

THE JOURNALIST: I don't think so.

LENIN: We both wear a beard.

THE JOURNALIST: Would you be pleased to find yourself Tolstoy in your next incarnation?

LENIN: I should hate to become Ivan Ilich. I was Ivan Ilich once.

VOLODYA: Do you understand now why he prefers stones?

VOLODYA: Yet your heavenly Father feedeth them.

THE JOURNALIST: In recent years a few Russians were awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. Do you begrudge them this honour? Would *you* like to receive a Nobel Prize?

VOLODYA: His wife needs money.

LENIN: I married a wonderful woman.

THE JOURNALIST: Congratulations! Is she dead?

LENIN: She's alive, alive. Very young too!

VOLODYA: And appetising.

LENIN: Very young and appetising. Love is a marvellous feeling. I love her. I love her soul, I love her cruelty. I love her whims and her mother wit. I love her practical ideas.

VOLODYA: And her practical jokes.

LENIN: And her practical jokes. My life has become a poem in her company.

THE JOURNALIST: Do you think love can save the world?

LENIN: Nothing can save the world.

THE JOURNALIST: Is love more powerful and efficient than revolutions?

LENIN: It's less noisy—

VOLODYA: I beg to differ!

LENIN: Love reminds me of *Für Elise* and Chopin's nocturnes. Revolutions sound like the *Eighth Symphony*.

THE JOURNALIST: The *Ninth Symphony*, you mean. *An die Freude*. *Ode to Joy*.

LENIN: The Eighth Symphony.

THE JOURNALIST: By Beethoven?

LENIN: By Shostakovich.

THE JOURNALIST: In a conversation with the police inspector, Raskolnikov ventured the opinion that great men were often sad and melancholic. Would you agree with him?

LENIN: Everybody must be sad and melancholic. Isn't it the most natural state of mind?

THE JOURNALIST: Schopenhauer said optimism was a mockery. Do you agree with him?

LENIN: Are there optimists in the world?

THE JOURNALIST: Are there optimists in the underworld?

VOLODYA: Many.

THE JOURNALIST: Would you say God is an optimist?

VOLODYA: He created the world and man. And women.

LENIN: It was a long time ago. I also created something—the Revolution.

THE JOURNALIST: And a new man—the man of the future. Have you caught sight of him?

LENIN: Are you talking about Hitler? You often talk about Hitler. He doesn't like me.

THE CHAIRMAN: (*to a potential buyer*) Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE SECOND POTENTIAL BUYER: My daughter is seventeen. And she still plays with dolls. If I buy her this life-sized doll, she'll be disgusted and never play with dolls again. It's time for her to marry and have *real* children.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE THIRD POTENTIAL BUYER: My wife is a necrophiliac. And it's her birthday soon. She'll be fifty next month.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE SIXTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I've been robbed several times. He'll keep thieves at bay. He's better than a watchdog, isn't he? He's better than a scarecrow.

THE CHAIRMAN: *(to a potential buyer)* Why do you wish to acquire Lenin's body?

THE SEVENTH POTENTIAL BUYER: I'll put him in the middle of my orchard. He's better than a scarecrow. I have a beautiful orchard in California.

I see a beautiful lady walking towards me. 'I'm the kindest person you can possibly meet in the whole universe,' I tell her. 'Do you think there's life on other planets, in other galaxies? Never mind. I will take on any ET, if necessary. Anyway you're not likely to moon around Mars in the near future.' She listens to my soliloquy and then departs without saying a word. And I trip over stones. Is she Mary Magdalene? I wish I could warm your frostbitten body in the flames of the fire burning within my volcano-like bosom. Off with this dress! Well, unbutton your dress, faster, faster. Have you never removed your clothes before? Do you sleep fully dressed? That's a good girl. Put it on the armchair opposite. Why are you staring at me?

Is, 5. 8-10

Ps, 71. 4.

Is, 41. 11

Dan, 2. 44.

Cor II, 8. 14-15.

Cor I, 1. 19-20

page 391, Matt 13. 42.

page 283 Chrysostom X, 300.

Ap., 4. 11.

Job, 38. 25-27.

John the Evangelist, 8. 7.

(Before the Russian Priest at the very end of the auction.)

DERRIDA: I can't bear the political Right and its 'manic triumphalism' over the collapse of communism—a dogmatic discourse, bidding for dominance, incapable of recognising that the horizons of capitalism and liberalism have never been as dark, threatening and threatened. The emancipatory promise of Marxism is to be worked out in a new concept of justice. A messianism without religion, a messianic without messianism—

(The second paragraph of 5. They went out of the shop...)

Athene appeared from nowhere and took possession of the area by planting an olive-tree by a church. 'Do you remember what Heracles did when driving Geryon's cattle through Liguria?' she asked. 'You're not supposed to forget Greek myths. Marx said that the Ancient Greeks offered a range of cultural and philosophical achievements unequalled anywhere else in the history of mankind.'

Lenin racked his brains for several hours. 'Heracles killed the Hydra of Imperialism,' he said at last.

'Anyway Eurystheus wouldn't count that Labour as duly accomplished because Iolaus had supplied the firebrands.' Athene roared with laughter. 'I'm talking about the Tenth Labour. Two sons of Poseidon named Ialebion and Dercynus tried to steal the cattle from him.'

'From whom? From a kulak?'

'Heracles killed them of course. But at one stage of his battle with Ligurian forces he ran out of arrows and knelt down, wounded and exhausted. What was more, he could find no stones to throw at the enemy. And he cried, Heracles cried bitter tears. "There, there, don't cry," said Zeus, my father. He overshadowed the earth with a cloud from which a shower of stones hailed down. And with those stones Heracles put the Ligurians to flight. You should kneel down and pray to my father. And don't forget to cry. You should cry until the tears roll down your breast.'

ANDREY PETROVICH: It's not called the KGB any longer. They restored the very first name of the organisation: 'The Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage'.

THE STUDENT: Why?

ANDREY PETROVICH: In honour of Dzerzhinsky perhaps. He created it.

THE STUDENT: And his statue? Did they erect a new statue? We toppled it.

ANDREY PETROVICH: The new statue? Did you topple it? When?

THE STUDENT: I was on the square, in the crowd. We toppled it. We daubed it with paint. I kicked it on the skull.

BERIA: I saw it on television.

ANDREY PETROVICH: *(to the student)* Did *you* see it on television?

THE STUDENT: I *was* there. I kicked him on the skull.

ANDREY PETROVICH: Was it a twenty-fifth century television set? A four-dimensional image?

The envoy pointed towards a crowd gathering before the mausoleum.

LENIN'S LAWYER: I don't wish to be reminded of my motherland, and I would have forgotten it a long time ago had my clients been of a different origin. They are all Russian. I am Russian too. Why? What error did I commit in the bowels of the earth? On Petrovsky Square, brilliantly lit with arc lamps, a squad of Soviet soldiers are kept always in readiness to receive victims from the great prison. No time is wasted. Some sailors have contracted the execution habit. They volunteer for the service and cannot sleep unless they have shot someone dead. I cannot sleep either. I hear the words and see Petrovsky Square, the arc lamps, the squad of soldiers. I never killed anyone; I defended everybody. Those whom I defended were killed. I was enjoined not to obstruct the wheels of justice. Somebody lives here but I don't know who it is. An executed criminal? I am sure the person living here is a man, otherwise I would already have made the acquaintance of this person. If this person were a woman, I mean. I would have ferreted this woman out. But I feel this person is a man. Men don't use the same perfumes. Is it a question of smell or sound? Sometimes I hear his footfalls. Do they progress in any direction? They do. In my direction. They get closer and closer. Out of curiosity I would already have opened a door if there had been any door to open in my area. Does he intend to kill me, avenging himself on an innocent bystander? Is it my fault that his family was not notified of his pending execution? His family was not even notified of his funeral, if any. Is it my fault? I can notify his family now, if that is what he wants me to do. Another letter or a telephone call. Will it make any difference? His family

were probably executed in the same manner, in another courtyard. Was he notified of their execution?

I was not even a lawyer in those days. They needed no lawyers. Why didn't they shoot me in the nape of the neck? Is it my fault that I was not executed? Their motto was, 'Better execute ten innocent people than spare one who is guilty.' Perhaps I was the twelfth person on their list, in their files. And I was innocent. An innocent bystander.

I was enjoined to become Lenin's lawyer and the order has not been countermanded yet. So I am supposed to defend him to the best of my ability. By defending Lenin I shall defend myself. Against God's wrath. I will not defend myself any longer. It is a waste of time. I will defend *him*. 'Lenin was an innocent bystander. He had no idea what was going on in the Lubianka's cells and cellars. On squares, in courtyards. In parks and gardens. In woods, on beaches. I repeat, Lenin was an innocent bystander. And I will do my utmost to prove it.' The mightier my proofs, the quicker I shall be transferred to Paradise.

Where does Lenin live? I must talk to him. I cannot devise the style of his defence without his participation and advice. He was pestering me yesterday, running like a dog by my side. Is Lenin a new incarnation of my dog? I spurned and kicked him. I would not have done so had I known for sure he was my dog. I did not need him yesterday. I mean Lenin, not my dog. I need him today. Where is he? Did he take offence and move to another area of the Hereafter? Did he find another lawyer?

He cannot be far away from where I crawl. I don't know where his prison is located, but I am sure it is not far away from my prison. Nothing is far from my prison except God.

An hour ago I saw Lenin's wife. I saw her face in the penumbra and quickened my step, eager to pump information out of her. 'Where's your husband?' I was about to ask her. 'Why have you left him alone?' She was not alone. She was walking arm in arm with a living man and I turned away, hesitant and confused. What should I do? I asked myself. I answered the question by hiding behind an oak tree. I decided to follow them and elucidate the mystery of their relationship. Was that mystery a wide-open secret, *le secret de Polichinelle*, as the French would put it? Perhaps the whole Hereafter was gossiping about Lenin's wife and her betrayals. I did not know anything. Being Lenin's lawyer, I had to know everything about this love affair. Lenin was likely to murder her lover. Not out of jealousy but because her lover was a human being. Lenin cannot tolerate human beings, dead or alive. He has to remove them from his sight by killing or otherwise destroying them. I thought it would be easier to get Lenin off the hook this time, on account of the nature of his murder. Crime passionnel, as the French define it. I began at once to rehearse my speech:

'My client has been faithful to his wife ever since he saw her in the mausoleum. He looks neither at local prostitutes nor at the lewd posters hanging in his bathroom. The photograph of his late wife Nadezhda Krupskaya no longer appeals to his senses. Yet he used to touch and kiss her photograph a great deal in the night, when his neighbours shouted suggestively in their room. My client is jealous. I'm not denying the truth of it. I also am jealous by nature. Why should I share with others what belongs to me alone? Why should you share with others what belongs to you alone? Why should we allow our mistresses to desire and court other men? It would be perverse, wouldn't it? And we are normal dead men, wise and dignified.'

And then I shall turn to his wife and speak to her in the presence of the jury. 'Do you mind my asking you a personal question?' I shall say to her. All questions are personal, I presume. 'Why do you prefer other men? Don't you realise whom you're married to? Why then did you walk arm and arm with a stranger, a foreigner? Is he more charming and, to use a modern word, sexy? He is younger, no doubt. He is alive, into the bargain. He's got no wrinkles either on his face or his belly. But he'll never become Lenin or Stalin. He'll never found the first socialist state in the world. He'll never kill anybody. He is a mediocre onlooker. A run-of-the-mill passer-by. An innocent bystander. All throughout his earthly existence he'll stay at the corner of a side street and passively watch a minute particle of Time, without stamping his personality on it. He has none anyway. His only achievement lies in the fact that he is still alive. No disease has got the better of him yet. He is alive. What is life, dear members of the jury? Life is a transient state, compared in a great many poems to a bunch of roses withering in the backstage room of a famous actress. I knew quite a few actresses in my lifetime. My bathroom was covered with their photographs. They loved roses and the way I distributed them in their backstage rooms. Those rooms looked like tombs.'

Lenin is nowhere to be found. Had he been buried I would have violated his tomb and brought his body back to life in order to save it from the gallows or the electric chair or Petrovsky Square. But he was still on the loose, to use an expression rather common in the Hereafter, and I could not waste my time awaiting the arrival of gravediggers.

So I followed hard on his wife's heels, hoping she would bring me to his hut. As his wife was not alone, she went to the nearest woods and stripped to the skin, expecting her lover to take advantage of her generosity. He did and she began to howl, making the most of Hell's acoustics. Lenin did not appear on the scene of the crime. Perhaps he did not recognise his wife's voice. He heard it without a doubt. But, for some reason, he did not recognise it.

Perhaps he was screaming or writing yet another masterpiece. Perhaps he was stamping his foot.

What is more, God has not crossed Lenin off the Creation. And He continues to tolerate this name on earth. And the body that corresponds to the name, however roughly. A nice lesson in democracy.

Should I defend this name against historians and ordinary Russian citizens? Lenin. Shall I shout it once more? Just in case. Lenin! His name is but a part of his substance. Will my partial defence release me from Satan's hold? I doubt it. I need Lenin's body to get my body out of here.

I wrote him a letter last Sunday:

Does God visit you often in your hut? Tell Him about my torments. But don't give in to intimidation!

I have a book for you. Not for Satan, not for God. For you. Lenin. Is it your name or have you changed it once more? Have you taken another pseudonym? Do you fear God will find you and torture you in His Hell? Do you think God needs your name to find you and pin you down? Do you think God uses directories?

I have a book for you. It is no directory. It is entitled, Conditions of the Working Class in England. Do you want to read it? Come here. I have other books in my bushes. The Destiny of Capitalism in Russia, An Outline of Our Post-Reform Social Economy. Amidst my bushes you will study the theoretical side of peasant husbandry. In my valleys and meadows you will test your conclusions by practical experience, by direct contact with peasant life, by conversing with peasants themselves. And I shall listen to your conversations and record them in my notebooks. I might need these notes during the forthcoming trials. Do come and pay me a visit! I promise to tell you something about your wife, about the way she spends her leisure hours outdoors. I am collecting as much information as I can on your wife's behaviour in my woods. Do you think she walks there alone? Do you think she walks there in my company, talking about you and your achievements? Do you think she walks there in the company of a nun, looking for the white mushrooms you were so fond of in your youth?

Come quickly! You will solve all my problems and push me over to the dinner table. You are strong, aren't you? I should have oiled the wheels a few years ago. Am I supposed to get as far as Paradise in this rusty wheelchair? And what about the roots and ruins?

Did they put me in Lenin's wheelchair? There is no writing desk before me. Was his chair driven away from his desk by a gust of wind? Did the same wind propel him to the confines of the Hereafter? Out of my reach? Or was it another wind, another force, another devil? Did Lenin die at last, bequeathing me his wheelchair and misery? How shall I liberate my soul from slavery without Lenin's trials? You don't save a corpse from death, do you? You should save it from life.

I don't mind being reminded of where I am supposed to stay at night and how the key to my apartment is to be found. I've got a great many keys in my pockets but they seem to fraternise with alien doors, drawers and cupboards. I am no thief, no criminal, no assassin. So I fish them out of my pockets and throw them away as I trudge along my path illumined with a few torches. They guide me on my way, but they don't remind me of where my bed is located despite my yawns and erotic yearnings. They guide me towards tables and pianos and often I lie down on those horizontal surfaces, shutting my eyes and blocking my ears with my thumbs. Only in bed however can I sleep and think of women.

I don't know where I walk or sprawl and what my final destination is, although everybody in my ever-shifting neighbourhood regards the Last Judgement as the final act of human tragedy. Apparently there will be no other judgements afterwards. I may content myself with the thought that there have been many judgements before and after my death so that I have got enough money to sustain myself and my children. I don't see them every day but I find their footprints here and there, in the mud and in the snow. Perhaps I am precluded from seeing their eyes on account of some error I committed on earth or during my holidays on the moon. Perhaps they have got my key. I hope they sit with their mother every evening by the fire and at the dinner table. My wife used to cook wonderfully and might have surpassed herself from time to time, but for the shortage of ingredients.

There are television sets along my path. They hang on Christmas trees and twinkle through the rows of bushes that whip my ankles and calves to remind me of my motherland. I don't wish to be reminded of my motherland and I would have forgotten it a long time ago, had my clients been of a different origin. They are all Russian. I am Russian too. What error did I commit in the bowels of the earth? I still remember my unborn travelling companions. Some of them were Russian. There were a few Englishmen among us.

The television sets look alike and the film they show is repeated over and over again. It is a French film. A man sits in a bar and asks the barman the same question, 'What am I doing here?' He drinks cognac and stares either at the barman or at the cameraman. I don't

drink. Only Lenin drinks in the Hereafter and sways like a wind-buffeted birch tree whenever he leaves his sarcophagus and attempts to walk along his path. Once, in St Petersburg, he pretended to be drunk in order to escape from two policemen. Ever since he has been drinking vodka and cursing his wives. His wives come and go, his curses remain. He curses me too. And I remain, in spite of my suicides.

I was enjoined to become his lawyer and to accompany him as far as The Last Judgement Palace. On our way I protect him from his detractors and murderers. They kill him all the same and I keep extracting their bullets from his heart. His heart bleeds a lot and I collect this liquid as well as the bullets with a view to opening The Retribution Museum. Everybody knows and fears the retribution of God. The unborn and the dead are also vengeful, spiteful.

I wish I could only travel in the woods, avoiding staircases and swamps. And the mausoleum. And Red Square. I don't mind making detours provided they are necessary and salutary. I often break my legs and drown in the course of my wanderings. I would not mind staying in the same apartment, however long Eternity can torture my flesh and spirit. I should rather lie in the same bed and watch my nightmares instead of their television programmes and Lenin's squabbles. But I am still unable to find a bed, let alone my own sheets and pillows. And Lenin has a sarcophagus and a wife. Is it fair? Should I defend myself in their Courts of Justice? Should I pray and crawl on my hands and knees?

I think I am in Hell, and the people I come across in the depths of my swamps and jungles only confirm my hypothesis. Some of them hope, however, that we are in Paradise or at least in Purgatory whose landscapes they claim to have seen on postcards and photographs. Their voices carry no conviction and they cough so atrociously that I never bother to talk them out of their illusions. As to myself, I hope Paradise is in the shape of a bed on which I shall be allowed to stretch out and forget my bruises. I don't need anything else in my apartment except two or three women.

I am often asked what Hell looks like by my earthly relatives who resort to the services of mediums and trouble my brain with their silly inquiries. What is the point of buying a nice bed and a warm blanket if you risk being awakened by your nephews and their wives? They are worse than the alarm clock I owned in Moscow, and they cannot be silenced. I press all the buttons I manage to lay my hands on, but I still hear their voices. I would not hear their voices in Paradise, would I?

How should I know what Hell looks like? People don't care about the places they live in and go to museums only during their business trips and holidays. I wish I were allowed to

visit Paradise as a tourist and avail myself of its picture galleries. How odd that Rembrandt should be exhibited in the Garden of Eden.

Another staircase. Lenin awaits me at the bottom. He even waves his arms, stirring and swiping the air that swirls and murmurs something as I slide down on my knees. It is too late to dodge him and hide behind a pile of logs or under a writing desk. As soon as he spots a writing desk among some ruins, in the darkness, he sits down and takes a fountain pen out of his pocket. The more he writes the harder my task grows. So I interfere and push him away from the writing desk. His armchair bumps against a wall and rolls back, screeching like the brakes of my old car that my wife inherited after my funeral. And Lenin resumes his revolutionary work.

Now and then he stamps his foot and I hear the destructive inertia of the Russian crowd. Buildings and monuments fall down with resignation and a cloud of dust rises higher and higher, making archangels cough and swear. Lenin continues to write feverishly, nodding his head to emphasise the rhythm of the words. And the words begin to flare. A fire consumes the writing desk and the room where he sits. He crawls out of the ashes and implores me to save his life.

He is my client and I am supposed to defend him to the best of my ability. I should rather sentence him to death. I am not allowed to do it. There are public prosecutors in every city we go through and they sentence him to death round the clock. And the sentence is always carried out despite the letters of pardon the Almighty receives in his residence. Who writes these letters of pardon? Lenin, of course. Our prison yards are covered with his corpses and birds of prey fly above them in ellipses. They don't dare touch those corpses of his. Is something wrong with the smell?

I study his life. The more I study it the less eager I am to defend him against the public prosecutors and God. I see a finger that points at him and condemns him with no right of appeal. I try to divert this finger from its goal. Such is my task and duty. Such is my punishment. I don't complain and try to preserve my dignity and sense of humour. I bear myself like a soldier. I cannot help screaming now and then, but the echo of my screams resounds so violently that I block my ears and vow to keep silence as long as possible. Yesterday I broke my vow and screamed until midnight, pressing my thumbs against my ears.

During the trials I say that the Tsar's government was corrupt and autocratic. I speak about the First World War, about Russian losses and the exhaustion of Russian troops. They were badly equipped, badly led and underfed. So the Tsar's government was overthrown. What does it have to do with Lenin? He was in Switzerland when the February Revolution

flared up and swept over the country, razing a few monuments. I still trip over their heads and arms on my way to The Last Judgement Palace.

I say a lot of nonsense during his trials. I raise my voice and the name of Rasputin resounds under the vault of this or that palace. The jury block their ears and tiptoe out of the room. Lenin laughs and jumps for joy. Then the public prosecutor gets up and the jury come back, bowing rhythmically. The sentence is passed and Lenin executed. I pick up my attaché case and head for another courtroom or another prison. Life is a prison, somebody said. Death is a prison too.

They often forget there were many revolutions in Russia. There was a revolution in February 1917. There was a revolution in October 1917. There was a revolution in 1905. When I affirm that Lenin was abroad during the Revolution, I count on their ignorance and indifference. They think the Russians are submissive, lazy and incapable of revolt. There was only one revolution, they think. A military coup, rather. A military coup orchestrated by a few people, Lenin included. Others drank or slept or wallowed in erotic delights. Some people marched or stole around St Petersburg, others slept and Lenin was in Switzerland, I say in a thunderous voice. They nod their agreement and sign another death verdict. What am I doing in these courtrooms?

During the Revolution Lenin was in St Petersburg, an officer said last year. The officer was Russian. He was executed on Lenin's order in 1918. What did I say? The appearance at Court of Gregory Rasputin, and the influence he exercised there, mark the beginning of the decay of Russian society and the loss of prestige for the throne and for the person of the Tsar himself. That is what I said to the officer, but he knew I was speaking about the February Revolution. I applauded the murder of Rasputin, he said. Immediately the jury broke into hysterical applause. What about the October Revolution? he asked. There was a democracy in Russia before the communist take-over, he continued. And the war? And the defeats of the Russian army? I countered. At that point, Churchill came into the room. Surely to no nation has fate been more malignant than to Russia, he said. Her ship went down in sight of port, he continued. She had actually weathered the storm when all was cast away. Despair and Tyranny usurped command at the very moment when the task was done. With victory in her grasp she fell upon the earth, devoured alive, like Herod of old, by worms.

Thus he spoke and once again the jury broke into hysterical applause. Lenin is a worm, said the public prosecutor. Lenin is an ogre, said the officer. It is my courtroom and my trial, said Kafka, appearing in the doorway. What are you doing here?

Eternity is unpredictable. Anything can happen within its walls. Anybody can lumber into your area. I remember every word the intruders say on these occasions, although sometimes I don't understand what they talk about and why they are so long-winded. They stand around me and talk for ages. No wonder I suffer from insomnia.

I may never see Kafka again, but I still remember his smile. He probably awaits me in The Last Judgement Castle.

Is this man Kafka? He neither looks nor smiles like Kafka. He does not smile at all. He is not Lenin either. He asks me if I speak Latin. Everybody speaks Latin in these latitudes, I answer with a grin. I hope it is a grin my face exhibits and not a smile. Are you acquainted with William of Occam? he asks, paying no attention to my grin. Not personally, I answer, my grin fading away. I am bored already. But I am not bored to death. I am bored to eternal life, so to speak. He disregards my boredom and launches into an interminable quotation: Ergo ipsa re destructa potest poni ipsa notitia intuitiva, et ita notitia intuitiva secundum se et necessario non plus est existentis quam non existentis - What do you mean? I ask. Why do I ask these questions? We can have an intuitive knowledge of non-existent things or events, he answers. God makes us feel what is not. So the Revolution didn't happen. I felt it, but it didn't happen. It didn't happen, he repeats, nodding his head and stamping his foot. I wish I could use this argument in the courtrooms. How did you feel it? I ask. Did you perish in a concentration camp? My mother was wrong, he answers. The Revolution didn't happen. He nods again and departs. Yet I feel his presence.

Within the walls of Eternity, space behaves like a wayward woman. It extends and also contracts, withering before my bewildered eyes and trickling through the crevices in my walls. Sometimes I seem to hold the whole of Russia in the palm of my hand, but shortly afterwards everything disappears and I remain stark naked in the middle of nowhere.

What do I know about Russia? What does anybody know about Russia? It is a sphinx that may pounce upon you at any moment, becoming a tiger or simply a wolf. A Russian wolf. Such is the verdict of the West. In my opinion, Russia is a cub that dreams of becoming a puppy. A puppy of God. But space is liable to expand in the wrong direction and the distance between God and Russia grows exuberantly. A lot of people usurp this intermediary space. Lenin is of their number.

I also aspire to snuggle on the lap of God and I think I am going in the right direction now. Yesterday I went in the opposite direction and did not find anything except a corpse lying on grass. It wasn't God, was it? Had He been killed by Satan's apparatchiks during his customary sojourn in Hell? Nietzsche took advantage of this ambiguity and proclaimed that

God was no more. He sat by the corpse, shouting, God is dead, God is dead. And then he cried. I also cried. I was thinking of Russia and of those who still live there. The children of my children. They are still dying in Moscow, near Pushkin Square. I wish I could send them a few dollars.

I touched the corpse and even stroked its face. Relics bestow their favours upon pilgrims and passers-by alike. I was a mere passer-by, but I froze in my tracks, running the risk of being late for my appointment with God, and bent over a corpse that might turn out to be a criminal, a dictator. Was it a blunder? Did I waste my time and energy? Will I be rewarded for my pains and intuition? It is clear that I am late for my appointment. Tomorrow I shall set out on my journey earlier than usual. And I shall go in the same direction. Perhaps I shall meet another corpse.

Why do I look for God and not for Satan? Is God caring and merciful, as my grandmother used to sing? Many citizens of Hell hold the opposite view and shut their doors whenever they seem to hear God's footfalls. I don't shut my doors. I have no doors to shut. I open the doors of God's detractors. I enable them to welcome God in their abodes. I have got a great many keys in my jacket and trousers. So I open other people's doors and praise God as eloquently as I can. In a sense, I am God's lawyer. Out of prudence, I never voice my doubts about His existence and benevolence. Not even in the woods do I dare talk to myself sincerely. I often bump my head against the microphones that dangle from Christmas trees like exotic fruit.

Lenin again. I hoped I had got rid of him at last. He moves his hand before my eyes, as if I were blind or dead, and then guides me to a corpse hidden in a huge bathroom. Whom did he murder? God? Satan? An ordinary Russian citizen? Do I have to justify this new murder? I bend over the corpse without touching it. The face seems familiar. Did he murder one of my relatives? It's the Civil War, says Lenin, clutching my chin. I had to do it.

We drag the corpse to the nearest garden and bury it beside a rose bush. Is God watching us? I am supposed to defend Lenin against his accusers. I prefer to bury his victims, to hide them in the bowels of the earth. I've got no more arguments at my disposal. My words would not save his life. Luckily for us, I have got a spade. Luckily for us, the earth is soft and obedient.

The earth understands everything. I often press my body against her surface and embrace her like a lover. And I kiss her warmly like a son or a daughter. I wish I could be buried in her bosom. For ever. The earth is my mother but I don't wish to be reborn. No resurrection, please. Let us reserve this ritual for the faithful. Just bury me and go away.

Don't come back. Never. First bury me and then depart. Don't forget to bury me. I cannot sleep on the surface of the earth.

Am I on the surface of the Earth? Isn't Jupiter more akin to our notion of Hell? Jupiter or Saturn or Pluto. It is not the Moon, though. I know the landscapes of the Moon. I shall ask them to take me away from here. I don't wish to be buried on Pluto. I shall ask them to give me a lift and drive me to the Earth. Can't I be buried where I was born and persecuted? Don't I deserve it?

What if God lives on Pluto or Saturn? I may have walked as far as Saturn to meet Him and discuss the problem of life and death with Him. Can I walk in the air? I can walk along rainbows, comets and suchlike. They are the motorways of the universe. Many people drive along them, honking and swearing as an absent-minded passer-by gets in the way. Why did I bequeath my car to my wife? Did I think there was no life after death? I liked rainbows and would leave my house every time I saw one beyond my window. I wanted to enjoy them in the open air, I needed the accompaniment of birds. Did I think rainbows were nothing more than an adornment, a gratuitous embellishment of the sky? Didn't I realise they were an umbilical cord linking us with our Creator?

There are only three colours around me and these colours depend neither on weather nor on Time. The space surrounding my feet is always black, the sky beckoning to my soul is always grey, the blood is always red. Have rainbows lost their festive attire? Are they in mourning? Whom did Lenin assassinate this afternoon?

At the next trial, I shall make use of Determinism. Leibniz is an ideal witness for the defence. Lenin and his murders were woven into the texture of the universe on the very first day of the Creation. By Satan, of course. God weaves flowers into the hair of our concubines, Satan weaves murders into the texture of our history. That is what I shall say at the next trial. Lenin should have been executed on the very first day of the Creation. But he was allowed to be born. It is too late now. Why should we execute people on the last day of the Creation? On the day of the Destruction?

Besides, the Marquis de Sade vindicated murders and consequently murderers. I should not mention his name at the trial, but I cannot help thinking about this individual in connection with Lenin and his revolution. Did Lenin read the Marquis de Sade? Lenin wasn't even a sadist, somebody said. Was he a masochist? Only a masochist can endure what he endures in the Hereafter. Did he hope there would be no trials after death? Or did he trust my eloquence to the point of becoming irresponsible and cruel? Did he hope I would save him from the gallows?

There are many gallows in the Hereafter. I often mistake them for trees, but the bodies dangling from them and swinging like drunkards in the West Wind are tangible proof to the contrary. I am obliged to carry a ladder wherever I go or run. I prop the ladder against a gallows, climb on it and untie all the knots. I am a lawyer and my duty dictates my behaviour. I put the bodies on grass and they begin moving and breathing. Unless I am mistaken. The grass is black. The bodies are black, carbonised. What is moving? The wind? Does Shelley move it? I saw Shelley last week. He gave a Japanese fan to his wife as a birthday present. And she gave him an electric fan. As a Christmas present. Is Lenin Frankenstein?

How can I explain the terror? At the last trial I said the terror was a direct consequence of the allied military intervention that threatened not only the Bolsheviks but Russia herself. The terror did not start after the Revolution, I pointed out. There was no violence against political opponents, I said. By that time, they were already dead and buried. In the earth. The death sentence was abolished at the end of November 1917, I said. There was nobody to kill. The streets of Moscow were empty. I remember those streets and the dogs running around. The communist terror must have also started on the first day of the Creation, even before God said, Let there be light. God never said, Let there be light. Communists imprisoned God in His villa and threatened Him with a revolver. Adam was a communist and a disciple of Lenin's.

Eve often gathers firewood in our area. Yesterday I asked an old communist to help her out. And I said, 'In the Soviet Union, Madam, you needn't be afraid of a man with a gun.' Another witness for the defence.

How can I find God in the darkness? I saw some torches last week. They illumined my path. Not once did I trip over roots and columns. Why didn't God utter the word 'light' today? Did He forget this word? Shall I remind Him of this word? How? Does God speak English? What a pity I've got no matches. What a pity I have never smoked.

Perhaps it is too early for light. I vowed to wake up earlier today. Did I wake up yesterday? But yesterday I saw some torches. Am I blind? Stalin went blind recently. Am I Josef Stalin? Is it my new incarnation, the last refuge of my soul? The ways of human souls are unfathomable. Flowers are ignorant of the vase in which they will be put and of the room they are destined to adorn.

Under cover of these souls, demons operate, especially such as used to dwell in them when they were in life, and who had driven them, in fact, to the fate which had at last carried them off. For there is hardly a human being who is unattended by a demon. Unattended? A strange word. An unknown word. Am I inhabited by a demon? Now and then I don't recognise

my words. Somebody else speaks through my mouth. Am I the mouthpiece of Satan? Am I Satan's prophet? My mouth opens on its own and I cannot shut it. My jaws and my hands have grown weak and are no match for my mouth. Only Lenin can help me. And he does. And I remain silent for years and years.

Everybody needs Lenin. Even I need him, lest I lose my job. He can be instrumental in bringing about my salvation or at least my final irrevocable burial at the Vagankovskoe cemetery, beside my mother and father. Kerensky needs him to avert the danger of a monarchist counter-revolution. And if the Bolsheviks attempt a military coup, he thinks, I'll crush them once and for all. Thanks to their vandalous ways I'll prove I'm no Bolshevik. That is what he thinks. Kerensky needs Lenin to prove he is no Lenin. Kerensky drives around in an American automobile. Now and then he gives me a lift and we cross a number of black-and-white landscapes. He wants me to defend him against historians. They puncture my tyres, he complains. There are many Russian revolutions. Next time I'll be victorious. That is what he thinks. And Lenin laughs in the woods.

I am getting nowhere. I might just as well sit on the same stump and pray day and night, waiting for archangels to sing me a melodious lullaby. I wish Lenin wouldn't laugh so often. His laughter and curses drown out my prayers.

God does not hear me. I wish I could give Him my hand and feel His fingers amidst my fingers. My hand, its tremor and warmth, might tell Him more about my love than my prayers and letters. Has He received any of my letters? Have they been intercepted or censored by the secret police?

I have to cope with all sorts of impediments. My ink dries up before I manage to scribble my name at the bottom of the last page. God does not know whose letters He receives in His heavenly abode. How many people have been transferred to Paradise because of my linguistic efforts?

I wish God could see my eyes. Even without tears they are eloquent and pathetic.

God does not seem to understand what I am trying to impart to Him, otherwise His breath would have already cooled my burning cheeks. I am weary, thirsty and hungry. Kerensky has driven off to St Petersburg and I have to cover the distance between Heaven and Hell on my own. And I am not a young man any more. My legs may be likened to stumps, not to blooming trees.

Once a month I see my last mistress behind a rose bush. Her lips and body still have an irresistible appeal for my senses and for the rest of my substance. So I deviate from my itinerary and run towards her, jumping over roots and stones. Her body smells like a rose and

I kiss it madly, passionately, eternally. Let us call it body, for decency's sake. My ululating soul sounds like a good-natured invitation to a dance and we dance for a while on the lawn of our garden. It is our garden, isn't it? Our private Garden of Eden. And then she leaps into an abyss and I remain in company with Lenin. Why does she come for a few minutes only? To mock my solitude? To distract me from my salvation?

What am I to do? Demons flatly refuse to let me know God's telephone number and address. At close range God would hear me and understand my meaning. Alas, I cannot take full advantage of my voice, which was beautiful enough to woo my Tibetan terrier from her basket, from her cushions and bones. She wobbled into my room whenever I needed her company. I don't need Lenin's company, do I? Yet he comes, even if he hears nothing. And my dog does not come any more. She must live in Paradise now. Is it the same Paradise? Do all domestic animals live in Paradise? Does their posthumous fate depend on the behaviour of their owners? Would Lenin's dog live in Paradise? Do we contaminate our pets?

Is my voice still beautiful and persuasive? Or is it a question of acoustics? In Hell screams and curses resound everywhere, notwithstanding distances and the intensity of original sounds. Should I attract God's attention by cursing Him? I shall have plenty of time to cajole Him into forgiveness afterwards. We have an eternity before us. The main thing is to make Him listen to what I say.

Of course I am greatly handicapped by an almost complete lack of data in regard to God's nature. My grandmother used to assure me through her songs that God is kind, generous, all-embracing, all-forgiving. He is an altogether delightful person, she used to whisper, leaning over my bed. She thought I should visualise God as a human being. She thought I would like Him better in human shape.

Once I saw God's photograph in a magazine and was so impressed by His majesty that I fell in love with Him on the spot. For the first time in my life I experienced the feeling of spiritual love and what may be called 'elevation of mind'. A few days later my grandmother told me I had seen the photograph of a famous actor playing the part of God in some drama or other. I was disappointed. But I continued to love God in spite of my disappointment which expressed itself fully in my hatred for the actor. Ever since I have thought about God all the time. I wonder why I am in Hell. Because I was a lawyer in the Soviet Union?

Our charwoman, who was zealous and purblind, threw the photograph away, together with other old magazines I was so keen on. God remained in my heart. As a child, I often saw God sitting on my bedside cabinet, His legs and arms crossed. Sometimes He leaned over my bed, His glance penetrating my sleep.

I am Russian and therefore cannot live without God. Art and food will never replace God in my life. A marked characteristic of the Russian people from their baptism under Prince Vladimir right up to the twentieth century was always a love of God. The vast expanse of Russia glows with the golden domes of His churches. Thus stars glow and twinkle in the heavens. In these churches, the lives of Russians begin and mature.

Does God hear me? Where are His microphones? Do they only record my blasphemies?

Did I blaspheme against God in my lifetime? My memory bears witness to the terrible deeds of Russian Antichrists. There were many of them, not only Lenin, Stalin and Dzerzhinsky. The senseless, barbaric, absurd destruction of churches - of those shrines which are dearest to the Russian heart - remains incomprehensible. Over half a century of rule by the atheistic government hundreds and thousands of churches, erected to God and prayed in over the ages, have irretrievably perished. Did I take part in their destruction?

What are these words I utter? I would couch the same idea in different words. I am afraid of God's power and bend my knees before His majestic silhouette. What happened in Russia? I was a lawyer. I defended many people who were ultimately sentenced to death. What had they done? I remember saying, I wish I could defend my client, but his crime is so obvious and overwhelming that I'd rather become a witness for the prosecution. I said it several times and I was not sentenced to death. I am still alive, in spite of my recent funeral. My wife inherited my old car and all the documents. I hope she has burnt them.

How often do I moon around the streets in search of a suitable companion? I am in Moscow again, in the city of my birth and death and eternity. The streets are empty and dirty. The gun shots resound everywhere. I see a beautiful lady walking towards me. I'm the kindest person you can possibly meet in the whole universe, I tell her. Do you think there's life on other planets, in other galaxies? Never mind. I will take on any ET, if necessary. Anyway you're not likely to moon around Mars in the near future.

She listens to my soliloquy and then departs without saying a word. And I trip over stones. Is she Mary Magdalene?

I wish I could warm your frost-bitten body in the flames of the fire burning within my volcano-like bosom. Off with this dress! Well, unbutton your dress, faster, faster. Have you never removed your clothes before? Do you sleep fully dressed? That's a good girl. Put it on the armchair opposite. Why are you staring at me?

My hallucinations. Why don't they leave me in peace? I stop in the middle of nowhere and daydream until a car screeches to a halt by my side. Beria calls out to me. He knows my name. So I'll never forget it.

On Petrovsky Square, brilliantly lit with arc lamps, a squad of Soviet soldiers are kept always in readiness to receive victims from the great prison. No time is wasted. Anyone who does not place himself willingly on the place of execution and range himself according to order in the ranks of those about to be executed is simply dragged there. Some sailors have contracted the execution habit. They volunteer for the service and cannot sleep unless they have shot someone dead.

I cannot sleep either. My hallucinations, my daydreams, my nightmares. I hear the words and see Petrovsky Square, the arc lamps, the squad of soldiers. I never killed anyone. I defended everybody. Those whom I defended were killed. I was enjoined not to obstruct the wheels of justice.

Somebody lives here. But I don't know who it is. An executed criminal? I am sure the person living here is a man, otherwise I would have already made the acquaintance of this person. I mean, if this person were a woman. I would have ferreted this woman out. But I feel this person is a man. Men don't use the same perfumes. Is it a question of smell or sound? Sometimes I hear his footfalls. Do they progress in any direction? They do. In my direction. They get closer and closer. Out of curiosity I would have already opened a door if there had been any door to open in my area. Does he intend to kill me, avenging himself on an innocent bystander? Is it my fault that his family was not notified of his pending execution? His family was not even notified of his funeral, if any. Is it my fault? I can notify his family now, if that is what he wants me to do. Another letter or a telephone call. Will it make any difference? His family were probably executed in the same manner, in another courtyard. Was he notified of their execution?

The executioner led the naked victim into the courtyard and ordered him to lie flat on the ground. Then with a shot in the nape of the neck he dispatched the victim. The dead are not ashamed of their nakedness.

When the number of victims became too large for the courtyard to hold, fresh victims were placed on top of the previous ones. I was not even a lawyer in those days. They needed no lawyers. Why didn't they shoot me in the nape of the neck? Is it my fault that I was not executed? Their motto was, Better execute ten innocent people than spare one who is guilty. Perhaps I was the twelfth person on their list, in their files. And I was innocent. An innocent bystander.

What am I supposed to say now? At this point? Why doesn't God help me speak? Why doesn't He help me think? Why doesn't He stir the ingredients of thoughts in my head until they blend into something distinct and worthy of being told aloud? And if I have no potential

thoughts, put some into my brain, my Lord! Not too many, please. I am exhausted. Should I plead guilty? What am I supposed to do at this point?

I was enjoined to become Lenin's lawyer and the order has not been countermanded yet. So I am supposed to defend him to the best of my ability. By defending Lenin I shall defend myself. Against God's wrath. I will not defend myself any longer. It is a waste of time. I will defend him. Instead of saying, I was an innocent bystander, I shall say, Lenin was an innocent bystander. He had no idea what was going on in the Lubianka's cells and cellars. On squares, in courtyards. In parks and gardens. In woods, on beaches. I repeat, Lenin was an innocent bystander. And I will do my utmost to prove it. The mightier my proofs, the quicker I shall be transferred to Paradise.

Where does Lenin live? I must talk to him. I cannot devise the style of his defence without his participation and advice. He was pestering me yesterday, running like a dog by my side. Is Lenin a new incarnation of my dog? I spurned and kicked him. I would not have done so, had I known for sure he was my dog. I did not need him yesterday. I mean Lenin, not my dog. I need him today. I need both of them today, Lenin and my dog. Where is he? Did he take offence and move to another area of the Hereafter? Did he find another lawyer?

He cannot be far away from where I crawl. I don't know where his prison is located, but I am sure it is not far away from my prison. Nothing is far from my prison, except God.

I remember one of my grandmother's songs:

*God assists elderly women.
In His bounty He relieves them
Of the burden of years,
Of the burden of tears.*

What about elderly men? I am a centenarian invalid forsaken by everybody, dispossessed of everything. Even Lenin forsook me. And my dog. Why doesn't God pity me? Why did He pity my grandmother? Because she believed in Him or what? She was surrounded by her children and grandchildren. And she had three dogs to keep her company. And those dogs were lying on her bed, whenever she was asleep. She slept and snored. I can snore but I am deprived of sleep. By a decree of God. She slept all the time. Upon awakening she talked to me about God. And I listened to her words and songs. I might have played with other children. Outdoors or indoors. I might have played soccer or chess. I stood beside my

grandmother's rocking chair and listened to what she imparted to me about God's life and generosity. Isn't that enough? I still cannot play chess.

The traffic has become so awful. And they drive like crazy. Kerensky, Beria, lorry drivers. All of them. There are also bicycles in the streets. Where is Lenin? Has he been run over? Is he watching television? There is nothing on television tonight. There is no cable TV in our area, no video cassettes. There are a few video cassettes in our shop located on the main street, but we are not entitled to enter this shop. There are guards by the entrance and they carry guns in their pockets. Only foreigners do shopping in Hell. Only the inhabitants of Paradise have dollars.

An hour ago I saw Lenin's wife. I saw her face in the penumbra and quickened my step, eager to pump information out of her. Where's your husband? I was about to ask her. Why have you left him alone? She was not alone. She was walking arm in arm with a living man and I turned away, hesitant and confused. What should I do? I asked myself. I answered the question by hiding behind an oak tree. I decided to follow them and elucidate the mystery of their relationship. Was that mystery a wide-open secret, le secret de Polichinelle, as the French would put it? Perhaps the whole Hereafter was gossiping about Lenin's wife and her betrayals. I did not know anything. Being Lenin's lawyer, I had to know everything about this love affair. Lenin was likely to murder her lover. Not out of jealousy but because her lover was a human being. Lenin cannot tolerate human beings, dead or alive. He has to remove them from his sight by killing or otherwise destroying them. I thought it would be easier to get Lenin off the hook this time, on account of the nature of his murder. Crime passionnel, as the French define it. I began at once to rehearse my speech:

'My client has been faithful to his wife ever since he saw her in the mausoleum. He looks neither at local prostitutes nor at the lewd posters hanging in his bathroom. The photograph of his late wife Nadezhda Krupskaya no longer appeals to his senses. And yet he used to touch and kiss her photograph a great deal in the night, when his neighbours shouted suggestively in their room.

'My client is jealous. I'm not denying the truth of it. I also am jealous by nature. Why should I share with others what belongs to me alone? Why should you share with others what belongs to you alone? Why should we allow our mistresses to desire and court other men? It would be perverse, wouldn't it? And we are normal dead men, wise and dignified.'

And then I shall turn to his wife and speak to her in the presence of the jury. Do you mind my asking you a personal question? I shall say to her. All questions are personal, I presume. Why do you prefer other men? Don't you realize whom you're married to? Why then

did you walk arm and arm with a stranger, a foreigner? Is he more charming and, to use a modern word, sexy? He's younger, no doubt. He's alive, into the bargain. He's got no wrinkles either on his face or his belly. But he'll never become Lenin or Stalin. He'll never found the first socialist state in the world. He'll never kill anybody. He's a mediocre onlooker. A run-of-the-mill passer-by. An innocent bystander. All throughout his earthly existence he'll stay at the corner of a side street and passively watch a minute particle of Time, without stamping his personality on it. He has none anyway. His only achievement lies in the fact that he's still alive. No disease has got the better of him yet. He's alive. What is life, dear members of the jury? Life is a transient state, compared in a great many poems to a bunch of roses withering in the backstage room of a famous actress. I knew quite a few actresses in my lifetime. My bathroom was covered with their photographs. They loved roses and the way I distributed them in their backstage rooms. Those rooms looked like tombs.

Lenin is nowhere to be found. Had he been buried I would have violated his tomb and brought his body back to life in order to save it from the gallows or the electric chair or Petrovsky square. But he was still on the loose, to use an expression rather common in the Hereafter, and I could not waste my time awaiting the arrival of gravediggers.

So I followed hard on his wife's heels, hoping she would bring me to his hut. As his wife was not alone, she went to the nearest woods and stripped to the skin, expecting her lover to take advantage of her generosity. He did and she began to howl, making the most of Hell's acoustics. Lenin did not appear on the scene of the crime. Perhaps he did not recognize his wife's voice. He heard it without a doubt. But, for some reason, he did not recognize it. Perhaps he was screaming or writing yet another masterpiece. Perhaps he was stamping his foot.

Where is he? Only his name is around here, in my red desert. I shout his name to attract his attention and to prove to God that I have not forgotten my duty. I also shout the name of God to prove that I have not forgotten Him and His mercy. Is it the right name I shout? The right and only name of God? How many names does God have? How many times has He been baptised? Kabbalists warn the living about the destructive power of God's secret name, but the inhabitants of Hell have nothing to lose, like workmen and prisoners. We have nothing to lose except our chains. I've got no chains either. My hands and my feet can move without being obstructed on their way. On their way to what? To Lenin or to the Bible. It is not my fault that there is no Bible in Hell. Why this censorship? God is far more democratic than Satan, it seems. Hell is described pretty often in the Bible. For instance, And shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Lenin's wife was howling,

not wailing. Besides, there is no fire in my area. It is cold in here and I would give anything to sit for two or three hours by the fire in my earthly house. All the same, God is more democratic and tolerant. He has not crossed His name off the Bible. The name of Satan, I mean. How many names does He have? Satan, the Devil, Lucifer. And so on and so forth.

What is more, God has not crossed Lenin off the Creation. And He continues to tolerate this name on earth. And the body that corresponds to the name, however roughly. A nice lesson in democracy.

Should I defend this name against historians and ordinary Russian citizens? Lenin. Shall I shout it once more? Just in case. Lenin! His name is but a part of his substance. Will my partial defence release me from Satan's hold? I doubt it. I need Lenin's body to get my body out of here.

I wrote him a letter last Sunday. I feel like talking tonight, I wrote. Let us have a little chat. Let us have dinner, first. I am starving. Dinner by candlelight. Do you like foie gras and oysters? If you don't come within two hours I will partake of them myself.

Why didn't you come? Did you take offence and leave for Switzerland?

I kicked you because I thought you were my dog. I love my dog very much. But dogs should be kicked now and then, otherwise they stop obeying their owners. I am not your owner. God is our owner. I am your friend. I am going to help you. Don't trust God. He is the public prosecutor. Don't tell Him anything about your supposed crimes. We are pleading 'not guilty'. Does God visit you often in your hut? Tell Him about my torments. But don't give in to intimidation!

He did not come. Monday and Tuesday brought no relief, no salvation. Nobody even tried to bury me. I am not Lenin, am I? Why don't you bury me?

They buried me once. The dead sleep in their coffins, don't they? Why can't I sleep? Why do stars hang overhead? Are they microphones?

God did not come either. God is not a gravedigger, is He? Is He a body snatcher? He comes to our cemeteries and brings us back to life. He performed a similar feat many years ago. That man, by the name of Lazarus, served as a guinea pig. And now an army of Lazaruses walk around the earth, tripping over Time. But for God, I would have slept and dreamed. But for Lenin, I would not have become a Soviet lawyer. I continued my letter.

I have a book for you. Not for Satan, not for God. For you. Lenin. Is it your name or have you changed it once more? Have you taken another pseudonym? Do you fear God will find you and torture you in His Hell? Do you think God needs your name to find you and pin you down? Do you think God uses directories?

I have a book for you. It is no directory. It is entitled, Conditions of the Working Class in England. Do you want to read it? Come here, then. I have other books in my bushes. The Destiny of Capitalism in Russia, An Outline of Our Post-Reform Social Economy. Amidst my bushes you will study the theoretical side of peasant husbandry. In my valleys and meadows you will test your conclusions by practical experience, by direct contact with peasant life, by conversing with peasants themselves. And I shall listen to your conversations and record them in my notebooks. I might need these notes during the forthcoming trials. Do come and pay me a visit! I promise to tell you something about your wife, about the way she spends her leisure hours outdoors. I am collecting as much information as I can on your wife's behaviour in my woods. Do you think she walks there alone? Do you think she walks there in my company, talking about you and your achievements? Do you think she walks there in the company of a nun, looking for the white mushrooms you were so fond of in your youth?

Come quickly! You will solve all my problems and push me over to the dinner table. You are strong, aren't you? I should have oiled the wheels a few years ago. Am I supposed to get as far as Paradise in this rusty wheelchair? And what about the roots and ruins?

Did they put me in Lenin's wheelchair? There is no writing desk before me. Was his chair driven away from his desk by a gust of wind? Did the same wind propel him to the confines of the Hereafter? Out of my reach? Or was it another wind, another force, another devil? Did Lenin die at last, bequeathing me his wheelchair and misery? How shall I liberate my soul from slavery without Lenin's trials? You don't save a corpse from death, do you? You should save it from life.

She put her hand around my neck and kissed me on the shoulder and on the dimple that adorns my left cheek. Or was it my right cheek? Wait a second. It is on the left-hand side. I have a sort of cavity on the left-hand side of my face. Did she kiss me on the mouth? She did. I am sure she did. I still remember the taste of her lipstick and the smell of tobacco. I don't smoke. She smoked a lot. Often she puffed smoke into my face. Who was she? One of my mistresses. Or my wife perhaps. Not Lenin's wife, mind you. I never court my clients' wives or mistresses.

She was beautiful on that occasion. On what occasion? On many occasions. A tête-à-tête dinner. In my bed. She had no time to wheel me over to the dinner table. We had no time. Everything happened so quickly! And slowly.

What is this youngster doing in my cave? Is he my servant? Why doesn't he push me over to my writing desk? Not very helpful, is he? Tell me about yourself, if you don't mind. Perhaps I'll defend you tomorrow. Or the day after tomorrow. Who are you? Are you a

robber? Where is my blanket? Did you take my blanket? Why did you take my blanket? I am freezing. Is it a winter-tale or what? Are you Shakespeare?

And he smokes cheap cigarettes into the bargain. Have you ever tried a cigar? I'll fix you up with a job and you'll be able to afford cigars and cognac almost every evening. You don't accept money from old ladies, do you? How much do they pay you? No. You are too proud for that. I would resent being regarded as a gigolo, if I were you. So I'll fix you up with a job.

You have too much time on your hands. You go dancing pretty often. You dance with girls and they snuggle up to you. And you snuggle together. And they kiss you on your dimples. Don't do it in my presence! Spare me the sight of my youth!

I shall put on my favourite tie tonight. Where is my favourite mirror? Did I brush my teeth this morning? Did I comb my hair yesterday? I do everything once a week, once an eternity. How handsome I am. Even without my tie. Very handsome. I need no mirror to see I am handsome and kind. And very generous. Like God. Is God coming at last?

When is he coming? Perhaps You got lost in my dining room. Anybody here? Where are You? Why do I feel God's presence? I always feel God's presence. Perhaps You live here without my knowing it. I might kick You down with my wheels. They are so big and heavy.

Another night. Nobody looks at me. Somebody touches my face and my chest. I should not be ashamed of myself, should I? So many years. So many nights and days and mornings. I must wash my hands next Tuesday. Because God is coming on Wednesday. Will you help me brush my teeth? You're kind and generous, aren't you? And you're my servant, aren't you? Buy me a sandwich, please. Ham and salad. Some salad. Vitamins. Those who eat vitamins live very long and are never hospitalised.

Don't forget a bottle of mineral water. I must eliminate. What should I eliminate? Lenin? Satan? Life? Death? Eternity? You'll tell me everything. You are intelligent, aren't you? Did you read the books I'd given you as a birthday present? When is your birthday? Are you Lenin? Are you God? Are you myself? I'll give you a toothbrush this time. It is your gums I am concerned with. Gums are important. They warned me about my gums on television. They also warned me about you. You're a murderer, they said. I paid no attention to their warnings. I love you, whoever you are. Don't leave me, please. I am not asking you to stay by my bed round the clock. Young people must have 'fun' now and then. Well, go to the pictures! Enjoy yourself in public libraries! Reading broadens one's mind, you know. But don't hang around parks and byways! And don't play football with street urchins!

Didn't your grandmother enjoin you to assist elderly men, relieving them of the burden of years and tears? Didn't she? She must have. Well, I am not exactly an elderly man. I am dead. All the more reason to help me in my daily routine. I am helpless. Not like a child. Like a doll. A doll forsaken by a versatile child. Don't leave me.

The old are respected, the dead worshipped. Many people come and look at them. You have come too. Why don't you worship me? Am I not dead enough to awaken a respectful feeling in your bosom? I don't know where this kind of feeling usually lodges, but I hope it might be near your heart. Does God have a heart? Is He humane?

Ring the bell three or four times, my Lord. If I don't open the door, knock on it as strongly as You can. You are strong, aren't you? You move the wind and stars. You say something about your powers in The Book of Job. You mention leviathans. You move them too. Why don't you move me? Am I heavier than leviathans? Can You move Yourself? Do come and ring my bell!

If this doesn't work, throw a pebble at my window. A cobble-stone. I'll hear You, I swear! I've heard so many things in my life. Besides, I am very fond of music. Do you like Wagner? Götterdämmerung in particular? I'll sing You the final aria of Brunhilde. I have a wonderful piano in my room. Not far from my bed. Nothing is far from my bed, except You. I shall not be able to open the door.

Another eternity. Another swamp. Another staircase. What am I doing here? I remember everything. I remember the staircases and swamps. Many of them. And the wheelchairs. And God. And my duty. I have to talk as long as I live. As long as I am dead. Until they bury me at last. In the bowels of the earth. For good. One burial is not enough. One death cannot kill us. Even Lenin cannot kill us. Even God is powerless to defend us against Eternity.

I don't want Him to see me in such a state. Don't come, my Lord! Talk to me. You can talk to Your servant from a distance, can't You? You can send me a cassette, if You like. I might have a walkman under my pillow. The point is that I have no pillow. Do I have a bed? Am I lying? Or standing? Or flying? Do leviathans fly or crawl?

Anybody there? Am I talking to myself? I am not.

I hear You all right. I hear Your footfalls, I hear Your respiration. Why do You have to breathe? Are You alive too? Can't You die for ever? Do You suffer? Tell me everything. Don't strain Your voice. Whisper! Whisper! I have sharp ears.

THE LAST DAY

Windows are an invitation
Which we accept but seldom
Because, in this world of ours,
We're not very fond of the Hereafter.

Life can become unbearable, though,
And a window opens on its own.

Whether we accept the invitation or not,
There's no escape from our lot.
We die and enter other worlds
And another window opens.

How many windows are there in my universe? I jump out of them and fall on a thick mattress. Tosca will never die, for all her jumps and suicides. She still bows to the audience. Why can't You punish me? Why can't You invent an adequate punishment? You are less inventive than the Bolsheviks, aren't you? Your punishments don't match my crimes. My novel is entitled *The Crime*. Or *Crimes*. I am Lenin. Or half Dostoevsky.

I am Lenin, am I not? Half. Double. A double Lenin, please! Am I a drink? They drink me and fall down.

I am also a poet, an English poet. *Pendant mes moments perdus*. I've just given you proof of my knowledge of French. Why do you need this proof? Do you think I collaborate with foreigners? Do you think I am a spy? Who are you? Why are you spying on me? Why are you dancing around me? Are you going to eat me? Don't eat me, please! I am not eatable. I am not drinkable. Vultures refuse to eat me. Jackals refuse to drink me. So I have no alternative but to eat my own flesh and drink my own blood. I do. In the evenings. When I have nothing else to do. I don't understand why they find me unpalatable. I eat myself and grow out of myself. I cannot die. At least I cannot die by starvation.

I talk and talk and talk, hoping to empty myself and die of emptiness. Words compose my contours, my portraits in the distance, but there are still some words left at the bottom of my stomach. There are always some words at the bottom of my stomach and in my intestines. My intestines are infinite. My words are eternal.

And then my words close in upon me and start tickling and pricking my body. My words are as sharp as razors. They cut my body into pieces. They cut my throat. My bathroom is full of blood. My bodies are piled up in my bathtub. My words float around in my blood and plunge into the caverns of my bodies.

What did Chuang Tzu tell me last night? Snares are employed to catch hares, but when the hares are got, men forget the snares. Words are employed to convey ideas, but when the ideas are apprehended, men forget the words. I would give all the tea in China to talk with such a man who has forgotten the words. That is what he told me in my bathroom.

I have not forgotten my words. I have forgotten my ideas. I have not forgotten my snares. I still catch hares. I've got millions of hares in my house. They are piled up on my writing desk.

Don't whine, comrades, we are bound to win, for we are right. And they are wrong, whoever they are. So they are bound to be defeated. And they *are* defeated, whoever they are. Whoever *we* are. They are defeated, but they don't whine over their defeat, and so we defeat them once again. They still don't whine, notwithstanding our victory. Somebody must whine, I say. So we begin to whine. Whoever we are. The world is too silent without whining. The universe is too empty without tears. Thales maintains that tears are the original substance out of which all others are formed. The earth rests on tears, he says. And whining is at the root of all music. That is why I like Shostakovich.

My wife betrays me every day. She goes out and strips her clothes off. A passer-by takes her in his arms. They go to the woods. Or they do it in my room. They seem to work in a factory. I can't help admiring the regular rhythm of their movements. The production of steel would increase enormously if I succeeded in diverting their energy from sex to industry.

What are these people doing here? We have freed ourselves from the influence of the treacherous and cowardly Liberals, they shout. Well and good. What next? Who are you? I

ask. We have won for ourselves hegemony in the democratic revolution, they shout. I know what you are here for, I shout. You want to lift my body into the air and carry it shoulder-high as far as St Petersburg. That's right, they shout. Don't do it, I shout. I suffer from vertigo. You suffer from syphilis, not from vertigo, they shout. You've built a new Tower of Babel and you must climb up on it to hang a banner on the vane. I can't, I shout. Everything would be going round me long before I got half-way. You must, they shout. So I am given a banner and obediently I climb up. Ladies wave their handkerchiefs and the cries of 'hurrah' are echoed down in the street. Then the crowd breaks into a shriek of terror and I fall down.

The Revolution again. I thought I had got rid of it for good. Where is my soul now? In the hands of the Bolsheviks? Have I fallen into their hands? Stalin strokes my cheeks and sings me a lullaby. I die and he puts me in the mausoleum. People bend over my face and kiss me on the lips. Their vodka-stinking breath is thick and slippery like jelly. My wives jump onto their backs. And they gallop around me. And my father bets thirty thousand dollars on those horses. And they gallop faster and faster. And Stalin takes a whip out of his pocket. And he brandishes the whip above my head. And the horses detach themselves from the marble floor and begin to fly. And I remember that I am an English poet.

I cannot write poetry any more. What can I write? I wrote an anonymous letter last night. And I sent it to myself. Your wife betrays you, I said in the letter. And I described her betrayals in minute detail. Your benefactor, I signed it. And I received the letter. And I read it. And I tore it up. I did not believe my benefactor. I don't believe anybody. Why should my wife betray me? I am an ideal husband. I excel all others in the ability to determine the main link in the chain of tasks that confront the Party.

I wrote another letter. I addressed it to the chief of the Police Department. Lenin was observed to be in communication with politically unreliable persons, some of whom now have proceedings pending against them on the charge of committing offences against the state. That is what I wrote in my anonymous letter. Your best informer, I signed it. Lenin is a dangerous individual.

I track myself down. I open a trap, run down a ladder, bump against a wall and listen to my own footsteps that try to catch up with me. My footsteps descend the stairs and I begin to run again. I hear my own voice. Halt! I shout. But I don't stop. Halt! Halt! Halt! resounds under

the vault. I clutch my own hand. But I don't stop. I wrench my hand from my hand and continue to run.

I run on and on. Space swims like a kite in the current of my breath.

I chase the darkness away by wandering up and down with two candelabra in my hands.

Only along this road can the proletariat liberate itself from its dependence upon the chauvinist bourgeoisie, and, in one form or another, more or less rapidly, take decisive steps on the road to the real freedom of nations and Socialism.

There are many old words in my head. They are very old. They are grey-haired and full of wrinkles. I extract them from my head and put them on my couch. They contract and wither before my very eyes. They compress into the shape of small mothballs.

My words cough a lot. They are ill. A skeleton holds a whip, a tottering skeleton covered with dirt. He cracks his whip and they march forward. My words. My adopted children.

Monopolist capitalism. Parasitic or decaying capitalism. Moribund capitalism.

I try to bring my mind back to the problem of personal religious salvation which must be dealt with in view of my impending suicide.

I have already brought my mind back to several spots. I remember balancing my mind in the palms of my hands as if it were my newborn child whom I was lulling to sleep.

Assuming that one is to be born again...when the time comes. Why postpone this breakthrough till some 'happier moment'? There is no such thing...neither within time, nor beyond time...neither in the land of the living nor in the land of Salvador Dali's pliable watches...

Why not extinguish all the stars and thereby put an end to the unbearable contemplation of future calamities?

Where is my wife? Her clothes are here, on my bed. She is not in my bed. Is it my bed? Whose bed is it? Stalin's? What is he doing in my bed? Haven't they removed him from the mausoleum?

On the whole, in spite of a host of drawbacks, this is after all a step towards a rupture with the social-chauvinists.

The social-chauvinists stand in the middle of the room and I go away from them until I bump against the wall.

I remember climbing my Tower of Babel on Jacob's ladder that unfolded itself with the solemnity of a scroll.

I try to forget myself by looking all the time at other people. The point is that I recognize myself in other people. They are nothing but mirrors in human shape. We walk together around the mausoleum. Sometimes I stop walking and they carry me out.

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

I don't recognise my voice. The voice I hear pretends to be mine. It is not. It comes from outside, and I am not outside. I am inside.

Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder;

To cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man;

To satisfy the desolate and waste ground; and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth?

This time I recognise Stalin's voice. He often boasts about the irrigation canals that were dug on his orders in the first half of his rule.

Shostakovich's last quartet is a long, funereal tunnel. Its air is suffocating, its ground, squashy. It reminds me, among other things, of Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* in the course of which a few men squelch and stagger through the mud of a no-man's land.

My mother must be dead by now. She used to come rather often. She slept in my bed. I would put blankets on her sleeping body. Four or five blankets. She was smothered in blankets. Did I smother her? I heard some screams, many screams. Smothered screams. Where did they issue from? I don't know. I scream myself. I scream around 5 p.m.

Is he really my lawyer? He says so. I don't need lawyers. I need executioners. At this stage of eternity. I've got two axes in my chest of drawers. I cannot wield them myself. And he is paralyzed. He speaks, but he does not move. I wish he were mute and agile.

Do you love me? Why don't you answer? Sex is of no importance. We have a lot in common. Spiritual affinities. *Die Wahlverwandschaften*. I used to love you when you were alive. And I do love your skeleton. Your skeleton is elegant. Where do you buy all these clothes? Dollars, dollars, dollars. Let's go out and sit on a stump. Let's invite my lawyer to dinner. He promised to kill me tomorrow morning.

Is the world better now? Without me? They see the universe in terms of money. For once, I am not guilty. On the contrary. They are so stupid. Even I am more intelligent. The future is stupid. The past is wise. Everything is useless. Everything is pointless.

The present grave-like stillness in the world must not deceive us. The earth is charged with revolution. The suffering caused by the high cost of living engenders a revolutionary spirit everywhere; and the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie with its servitors, the governments, are moving into a blind alley from which they can never extricate themselves without tremendous upheavals.

History flutters around my skull. I remain immobile and history circles above my skull. History traces vicious circles on the ceiling. Like a moth attracted by light. Everybody is always attracted by light.

Why can't I live normally? Naturally? Like a Chinaman? To speak perfectly I have to put words away. To act perfectly I have to remain immobile. And everything will go around me.

I put my words away, but they return and pester me. I lock my door, but they squeeze in through the peephole. And I cannot remain immobile. I have the fidgets.

Do you think I am still in the land of the living? Well, in another land of the living, then. Abroad, so to speak. Not in Paris, though. Not in Switzerland. On another planet perhaps. Nothing to do with the earth. I cannot fly on this planet.

This up-and-down, life-and-death pendulum creates a semblance of life.

I am full of holes. Tubes are inserted into my body. An octopus-like apparatus. A new soul is blown in through these tubes.

This planet is a huge poem. A bad one. A bad Russian poem. I am hungry. The human body *is* eternal. The human soul is perishable. My soul died in exile. I did not attend the funeral. I don't like funerals. I don't like cemeteries. I prefer mausoleums. I prefer dead bodies to dead souls. I prefer blood to light. When you kill a soul, a ray of light issues from it.

Whenever my thought-rays hit the atmosphere of the earth, they collide with the molecules of the air. Our disconsolate, agitated, jittery universe.

Something rolling...water...waves. Rats leave the sinking ship. I am staying. I am not a rat. Am I a cat? What am I going to eat?

God must be sensitive to the music radiating from my violin whose sobs and throbs seem to carry me through the air, as far as His castle. Am I a part of Chagall's painting?

The endless sprawl of my brain-waves is bound to reach the last page, the last line, the last sign, the last sigh.

Does God have a free hand to torture me before the advent of the Last Judgement? Tonight I repudiated all I had stood for in 1917. The preservation of my personality does not count any more. I said to myself, 'Count me out.' I deducted myself from myself.

Don't switch me off, please! I promise to be obedient and nice. Don't touch my umbilical cord! Why are you tampering with my fuses?

I swear not to undermine the tsarist regime in Russia. I swear to inform against revolutionaries. I swear to forget Marx and read Schopenhauer every day. I swear to defend the Winter Palace against the Bolsheviks. I swear to murder Lenin at the first opportunity. I swear to repay the damage I have done to Russia. How? By selling my body. I swear not to leave Switzerland in 1917. I swear to murder my parents before my birth so that humanity might be spared a great deal of trouble and suffering. I swear to believe in God. I swear to keep myself away from the earth and from the moon. I swear to become a poet and build an ivory tower in Alakayevka.

I am an old dog wailing his heart out on the streets. God has thrown me off the scent.

Suddenly bang, and I am right where I started.

God stood confused and convinced of the weakness and speciousness of His logic.

Humanity continues to march to the beat of the drum towards the common grave. Why can't they walk in silence? Why do they have to march to the beat of the drum? Why don't they stop? Do they really have to go so far? What is there at the horizon? Another mausoleum?

The Body, being severed from the Soul, rests for some time in the mausoleum - the most perfect alembic imaginable. But if the fire is increased and well-tempered, the Soul gradually descends in drops and saturates and moistens the Body. And a plant grows out of the Body. The Tree of Life.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SUICIDE

Chasms. Chasms. I might call them holes

or downward perspectives. I call them chasms.
 They yawn at my feet whenever I stop.
 I can't be on the move. Always. So
 they split the floor open.

I do not fall into these chasms,
 contrary to what might be expected.
 (One step would be enough.
 A half-step.)

In my mind
 stands a tree.
 I can't find it.

I can't find it. I can't feel it. Is *this* my punishment? Why do mausoleums sprout like mushrooms? Are they mushrooms?

He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

I have eaten two mushrooms. I hope they are poisonous.

My body is an icicle. I hang from a roof. I sound like Papageno's aria *Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen*.

I trip over my bones scattered all along the corridor.

I sprout out of my own mummy. The weather sprouts my limbs. I spread my foliage around the mausoleum.

I have found my Tree of Life! Adieu, adieu. Remember me.

I woke up suddenly and looked around to find out what had caused me to abandon the state of non-being to which I had grown so accustomed in the course of the Stalinist, deep-freezer era.

I stroked my head and its familiar relief reassured me: no bumps had altered it in the night. Nobody had clouted me on the head either with a fist or with a walking stick. There must be a shortage of walking sticks, I told myself.

So I was loved and idolised again. I looked at my hand, striving to remember who had stroked my hair a few minutes before. Was it myself or some admirer of mine? A woman?

Nice to be at home! Cosy. Why should I go out? What awaits me outdoors? The same chaos. The world is old, isn't it? God must be old too, by now. Tired of story-telling. Is the Almighty a good writer? Is He a good poet? Far inferior to Shakespeare, in my opinion.

Elisabeth! Elisabeth! Going deaf. That is the trouble with her. And her teeth. I wish she wouldn't bite me so often. A nasty habit. How am I supposed to account for all these bruises? Better stay at home. Helen bites me too.

I wonder if one can fall in love. With a human being, I mean. Not with an angel or God. Am I married?

Whose clothes are these? They smell beautiful. They are not mine. I cannot put them on. They slip away from my hands.

Elisabeth! Have you invited anybody to dinner tonight? The trouble with my wife is that she doesn't remember anything. She invites people to dinner and forgets she has invited them. And they come. They never forget invitations. They come and stare at me. The way those people stare at me is quite unpleasant and repugnant. As if I were an exhibit in some archaeological museum. I don't like archaeology. I don't like digging the ground. It is difficult to dig the ground when it is frozen hard. Besides, one may chance upon a corpse. I do, from time to time. Even when I don't dig the ground.

Singers and sportsmen. Nobody else. Nothing but singing, jumping, running, swimming, skating.

It is cold in here. A hollow body. I saw a painting last week. It was entitled *A Hollow Body*. It represented a human body without bones, tendons. Water was flowing through its veins, instead of blood. The skin was transparent, of course. *The Invisible Man* would have been a

more appropriate title. In my opinion. There was nothing on the canvas. Was it a canvas? Not a trace of paint. How did I know it was a human body? Because of the title perhaps. Was it *A Human Body*? Wasn't it rather *A Human Soul*? Something invisible, yet...How should I say? Tangible...the canvas was tangible. Was it a canvas? Was it a painting? I touched it to make sure the thing existed. It did. Is it still in existence? The soul is immortal.

Everything is eternal, if one takes memory into account. People have short memories. There is such a thing as cosmic memory, I presume. Call it history, if you like. An invisible history. Yet it does exist somewhere. In here perhaps.

Millions of U.S. Dollars are won regularly playing the Universe-Famous Venus Lottery. In fact, the Venus Lottery has awarded billions of dollars to people who have won - including its biggest jackpot of the Universe \$100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. Imagine all the things you could do and enjoy with \$100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. RFOVQE, GUVZXQ and other pleasures will become accessible to you. People from all over the Universe fly to Venus just to play the Lottery. Now, you too can play the Universe's Greatest Lottery and win a multi-billion dollar jackpot.

Whose voice is this? Doesn't matter really. It is the words that count.

Your subscriptions are sent to our express address located right in lunar crater Tycho. From there, your subscriptions are immediately sent by our special space-courier to Venus. This enables US to process your subscriptions from any location universewide in the shortest possible time.

There are many shops around here. Wonderful clothes! Wonderful!

United States Universal Marketing will immediately notify you when you win any prize of \$100,000,000 or more. In addition, you receive a complete list of winning numbers after every five weeks so that you can carefully check how you are doing. Your prize money will be confidentially paid directly to you anywhere in the Universe. Upon expiry of your subscription you will receive a final itemised statement of your winnings.

Today I bought myself a tie.

I bought myself another tie.

I bought myself a cashmere coat. And a cashmere jacket.

No less than 125,000,000 staff members are deployed around the Universe for the companies of the ZUKLR Holding Group. We fly only EZAOU.

We regard our highly-qualified men and women as our most valuable resource, a resource which yields top results for our business partners and investors - day by day, hour by hour, second by second.

After all, it is always worth investing Time and also Space in deciding where your assets will work best for you.

ZUKLR Holding is one of the world's leading financial services groups. Our Jupiter headquarters, combined with our companies' presence in all important universe markets, offers the investor the best possible options.

I cannot keep money in my boots, can I?

Why should you hide money under the floorboards in your bedroom? Are you so anxious to raise the living standards of mice and rats?

Special rates for the weekend. A wide choice of fine personal spaceships. From the very sensible to the absolutely extravagant. So the next time you need to get away from your unfaithful wife, or get back to your faithful wife, call US. Or ask your travel agent for details.

I followed the advice and I asked my travel agent for details. When I finally left his office, I carried a pile of leaflets in my hands and on my head. Soon I began to lose them. A street urchin picked up the Andromeda leaflet and immediately flew off.

If you've looked around recently, you'll know that you could easily pay \$5,000 for just one suitcase. Furito are able to offer you a whole set. Four pieces which give you everything you're likely to need. What about taking your wife with you? Just put her into our largest suitcase 'YUGZ'! She is faithful to you, isn't she? Unfaithful? All the more reason to take her with you!

Our suitcases are made from a tough, spongeable, smooth-grain material with a sexy design inside, which is completely machine washable.

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The latest witch's brew to reduce sensitivity during love-making and help avoid premature ejaculation. Over 1,200 applications.

After your flight, relax with a professional massage in the privacy of your hotel room, apartment or house. Our masseuses come from Venus.

I order her to strip and fling her on the bed. I strap her down to each bedpost so that she lies spread-eagled on her back, showing everything. When she is totally helpless, I torment her. I flog her, I cut her and watch her body become diaphanous. I kill her, I resurrect her, I kiss her wounds. But I refuse to make love to her. My subordinates file in and have her one after the other.

Any Wy-Ny-Sy enthusiast will tell you that TFZPL Wy-Ny-Sy equipment is well known for its technology, innovation and high performance. He'll also tell you just how low our prices are, for performance that's guaranteed. Low enough, in fact, for us to say that TFZPL gives you more performance per dollar than any other make of Wy-Ny-Sy.

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An informal lecture on the latest technique of transplanting hair is given on 78603-4129758673423064734 each evening after 6.30. It is tape-recorded to avoid embarrassment for men who want to know about having their existing hair redistributed to hide male pattern baldness. The lecture can be telephoned from your own home. Don't talk - just listen.

I love her!

Star-dust developer. Asserted by a leading sexologist to be the only tested electronic appliance that proved successful for the enlargement of the male organ.

Extension sheath. A washable and reusable sheath with a solid tip which effectively triples the length of the male organ.

Tomorrow we are invited to dinner.

The day after tomorrow we shall pay a visit to her grandmother.

She is my mermaid!

I cannot dive.

I cannot swim.

Is that my little skylark twittering out there?

I cannot fly.

When it comes to aroma nothing really compares with Reza pipe tobacco. You might be thinking that a pleasant aroma is all very well but what about smoking pleasure? Don't you

worry! Just relax in your armchair, your pipe sticking out of your mouth. And if you want to know how much it's going to cost you, we've got more good news.

KUBRDF. Our new watch inspired by the purest Saturnine elegance. Do you have a bed? You must have one. Otherwise you wouldn't hear our voice. Our potential customers listen to our velvety voice in their beds, often confusing it with the voice of their sweet dreams. You have always dreamed about a watch like that, haven't you? Why don't you have it then? You have a bed and you need one of our watches to know how long you have remained in your bed. You shouldn't stay in your bed for ever. There are other pleasures in store for you. Your life is a dream, but you can have this dream everywhere: on Saturn, on Andromeda, on the moon. Our watch will guide your step. Our watch will tell how long your pleasures last. Do you know the French expression '*faire durer le plaisir*'? Do you know French at all? Even Lenin had a smattering of French.

So take your old watch, crush it under your heel - let it go to Hell! - and visit us in our new shop. Our watches are manufactured in the finest jeweller's tradition. These solid gold masterpieces will measure out your Eternity. Dream-like. Decidedly contemporary. A visual and a musical homage to the metaphysics of Time.

Is it my house? I bought this house in the last century. Did I? How do I know it is *my* house? Do I recognise it? Do I recognise the furniture? Where does this vase come from? And this armchair? Is it a rocking chair? Is it a cradle?

Sleep my dear, sleep my dear!
It is pointless to hear
What I'm saying. Words are mere
Sounds.

It is my bed. When did I buy it? When did I sleep in it? When did I dream in it? What did I dream about? Never mind. Never mind.

Do I recognise the walls? Walls are the same everywhere.

It is my window over there. Is it my window? Looks like my window.