

VALERY ALEFF

THE LOST PICTURE

No one will ever tell me what is important, for we don't really know anything about *unimportant* aspects of our life. We often confuse the things which may be judged in terms of importance or insignificance, seldom doing justice to the time we spend on 'trifles', as we say with calm assurance. What we call 'trifles', however, may turn out to be much more important than whatever we regard as the key moments of our earthly existence – a bunch of keys opening the gates of Paradise. While wasting our time on so-called trifles, we often cover the distance between daily rounds and the sheer bliss which enables us to drink the milk of Paradise. At least we are offered the foretaste of this milk as we do something unimportant – in *our* opinion. The protagonist of Oscar Wilde's illustrious play spends a lot of time on the matter of christening which might seem unimportant to those whose main concern is money and prosperity. You change your first name, but your genes and your body which depend on them remain stubbornly the same; so do your mind, furniture and bank account. Why should you bother about your name, about a few letters put together by your parents or relatives? Suppose your father says to you after your mother's death, 'I agreed to call you Jack because your mother was adamantly opposed to any other combination of sounds. But now I insist on your altering your name. If you don't comply with my wish, I'll disinherit you.' In this case, you might think the issue deserves your full attention and act accordingly, going through the rite of christening with enthusiasm.

If you waste your time you may regret it one day; and yet this day may never come because not *all* days come to us during our lifetime. Some of them are certainly waiting for us beyond the border of death, but no one can really bank on this possibility and so we should once again face the problem we cannot shrug off without endangering our future prospects. What is important? What should we do? It is a personal matter and therefore others can't help us: we should rely on our own judgment. I, for one, don't think the political arena is likely to offer a lot of important situations and occasions on which to display one's capacities to the utmost. In other words, I'll never go into politics because I don't think this domain is as important as the arts and sciences. I would be wasting my time even if I resolved to make a speech in Hyde Park, without going any further – to Parliament, for instance. You do a lot to improve conditions for factory workers, but your successors spoil everything without asking your permission and often in spite of your disapproval. Sometimes you can neither agree nor disagree with them: you're no longer in the vale of tears and no traveller returns from the Hereafter to give the living a piece of advice. Of course the dead know better what to do and they might instruct us, if given an opportunity to voice their grievances. But I'm not adept at dealing with ghosts and have no intention of getting in touch with spiritualists in the future. And I'm not dead yet, judging from the number of mistakes I make in everyday life and the other lives available to me in this world.

Any pianist longs to know what Beethoven thinks of his own sonatas and how they should be played, according to their creator. (It's better to speak about the dead in the present tense, given that some of them are immortal.) Over the last 10 years I've got away from the piano, but I don't deny I'm

waiting for its return: the ball is in its court now. I'll speak about it insofar as my story will require its presence; after all, this story of mine is based on real facts and on the people among whom I'm chiefly known as a pianist, not as a writer or rake. Anyway I've written a lot about music and there are worlds elsewhere – some unexplored worlds I'd better take notice of. They're not likely to come to me on their own initiative: they've never met me socially or otherwise.

Some of those unexplored worlds relate to the things on which I'm not supposed to waste my time. The word 'importance' may occasionally be replaced by the word 'interest' – in the following question, for instance: 'Would this book be of any interest to you?' You may ask in your turn: 'Is it important for me to read this book?' You may add you're reluctant to waste your time on something unimportant, be it a book or a symphony. Waste not, want not is still on the agenda because we aren't dead yet and so the joys of eternity visit us only by fits and starts. St Augustine speaks about curiosity which makes us forget God and prayers, let alone our daily meditation upon suffering and bliss. The Russians say, 'In the marketplace they tore Barbara's nose off,' meaning she was too curious, poking her nose into other people's lives. I've always praised curiosity as highly instrumental in permitting us to acquire some knowledge – however inadequate – of the world where we work, rest and suffer. Those who don't venture into the areas they're ignorant of give up the ghost *before* settling in the Hereafter where they may derive benefit from omniscience – the capacity exercised by most of its inhabitants.

St Augustine speaks about 'a dog's coursing of a hare in the public games-place'. He doesn't go to this games-place in order to see the show, but if he chances upon such a coursing in the field, he forgets his profound insights and gives himself over to it. Don't we follow in St Augustine's footsteps whenever a similar opportunity presents itself in our life? Immediately God sinks into oblivion, which strikes a blow against our plans for the Hereafter: eternal bliss no longer awaits us. Indeed God is supposed to deprive us of Paradise if we don't think of Him day in day out; if we prefer a hare to His majesty. But we shouldn't forget that St Augustine was a partisan of predestination and consequently no belief in chance or improvisation tarnished his vision. He didn't believe our thoughts and actions could grant us an entry visa to heaven. On the other hand, even criminals may be found amidst the elect if God chooses to reward them for some unknown exploit or just for the fun of it. Or does He elect them for demographic reasons? Anyway, we'd better watch a dog's coursing of a hare because our future doesn't depend on it.

We must decide what is more worthy of attention: a hare or God. A prayer addressed to God isn't exciting in itself, especially if we pray on a regular basis; but our prayers are vital to our salvation and also to our inner equilibrium. Many people are given a clean bill of health by their doctors because they pray four or five times a day. But a show we may watch in St Augustine's field or games-place also work wonders for our health. So we must choose between these healthy pastimes. Pascal would have chosen the prayers: nothing proves that St Augustine was right when he denied to our thoughts and actions the opportunity of interceding with St Peter on our behalf. Our life in the Hereafter *may*

depend on the number of prayers we say before going to sleep. Anyway, I, for one, firmly believe in the power of prayer, which doesn't mean I wouldn't stop my car to watch a dog coursing a hare.

St Augustine also speaks about a lizard catching flies and a spider entangling them in her web. The spider rushes towards whoever falls into her web and St Augustine can't help watching the struggle, although its result seems to be a foregone conclusion. St Augustine wonders if the sin he commits on this occasion is a lesser evil in comparison with the dog-and-hare duel. 'Because these are small creatures, is it not the same thing?' A cat sits in a tree ready to pounce on a few ducks below. These creatures are bigger than flies and spiders; they're as big as hares and dogs. Are their sizes and our sins strongly correlated? St Augustine points out that, within the framework of these battles, our sins are of the same size. And these sins grow to a huge size if there are too many hares, dogs, cats and spiders in our life. Let's not forget that in the Hereafter our sins are not only washed, but also graded by size.

Flies, spiders. We can blow up their images to include in the field of our investigation men and women. They often behave like insects and animals as they pursue each other and swoop from the sky to catch their prey. Should I go on without so much as taking a glance at their hunts and traps? Good and evil exist everywhere and we're supposed to know what we face up to when preachers talk about evil and good; otherwise we may commit crimes *unconsciously*. I don't think God takes any notice of what we're plotting against the government or our relatives; He just counts crimes and misdemeanours. Or He counts nothing at all: He has already made up his mind. And God seldom if ever changes His mind.

Writers and businessmen study humankind so as to describe or exploit men and women. Nor can *ordinary* citizens disregard what is going on around them – for fear of being trapped and physically or emotionally abused. There are people who withdraw from society and devote their lives to God and Paradise-oriented thoughts which don't lead them anywhere, according to St Augustine. They're above daily routine and the incidents one may encounter in it. I do what I can to stay somewhere in the middle: neither above nor below the daily round, rouble and pound. That's why I'm about to tell a story in which there are no murders, no suicides, no car chases. I do realise, however, that I'm on a wild-goose chase, for no one can help searching for something or someone as long as one stays in the vale of tears, snobbishly renouncing Paradise and its delights. (Even if the Hereafter proved to be nonexistent, the void thus created would be a paradise in comparison with any wild-goose chase.) Anyway, a dog's coursing of a hare is far more spectacular than any car chase sponsored by Hollywood. And I prefer invisible murders to the ones that stick out a mile, boost sales and increase profits.

A man who stands in for St Augustine's dog doesn't pursue his prey; nor does he necessarily sue his victims for libel or compensation. It's his victims who sue him for libel and compensation – to no

avail, for he turns into a hare as soon as a court of justice looms ahead of him. He says he has been hounded by a horde of ill-informed and disgruntled individuals who, anxious to improve their finances, misinterpret whatever he does. He has a child-like innocence which I, for one, find very appealing in spite of the many proofs to the contrary I get whenever I speak about him to his so-called victims. According to *them*, he is a hare pursuing dogs, although he does his best not to turn up within anyone's field of vision once the swindling is over. If they accused him of being an aggressive hare, he would say the whole thing is absurd: sometimes a hare escapes the clutches of a dog, but in no way can the situation be reversed. I may have been playing the role of a hare for the last five years, which is rather annoying because I'm much keener on cats than on hares. I wouldn't mind swapping parts with my own cat, even though I'm quite conscious of the risks I might run after our mutual metamorphoses. What if I'm *really* pursued by a dog in my new incarnation? Of course I could climb any tree if a dog made his or her appearance in my garden, near my country house. I could also jump through an open window and hide myself under a bed or on a cupboard. Even if I climb the highest tree in the world, I won't hide from the man who happens to be the hero of my story.

The point is I'd better not hide from him at all; on the contrary, I should ring him up every day to pester him for money or for a picture that is supposed to hang in his castle. It does not, as far as I know: I visited his castle last summer and saw nothing similar to the picture I bought five or six years ago. Moreover, the host assures me he has never seen the picture in question – the portrait of a waiter holding a plate of oysters – but I'm not inclined to believe him. How many lies has he already told in front of his victims? On the other hand, I'm not 100 per cent sure his victims tell the truth when claiming to have been cheated by him: it's difficult to disentangle hard fact from myth or truth from lies. I *may* achieve this objective as I go on with my story, but even if I do succeed in unravelling this mystery I'm not likely to recover the picture which ought to have hung in my friend's castle.

I made his acquaintance 20 years ago, 30 years ago – after I left the Soviet Union forever. I couldn't possibly have met him *before* my departure from Moscow: though Russian to the core, he first went to Moscow and Saint Petersburg only in the early Eighties. (I defected from the Soviet Union in 1974.) So, for all the deficiencies my memory suffers from, I met him in Brussels either in the late Seventies or in the early Eighties, probably *after* his trip to Moscow and Saint Petersburg. It doesn't really matter whether we got acquainted before or after his journey to Russia because the picture I'm worried about wasn't on the market either in the late Seventies or in the early Eighties; and yet its creator – a woman renowned for her beauty and skill – was already born in those days which spelt disaster for the Soviet Union. She even knew for sure she would devote her whole life to painting in spite – or because – of the ruins she saw all around her.

As usual I'm watching the only Russian channel my television offers me in compensation for my motherland and mother tongue: I have partly lost them forever. Apparently children shouldn't be prevented from choosing whatever they long to play with, provided there are not too many guns in their rooms. For instance, a little boy plays with dinosaurs to the detriment of other representatives of

the animal kingdom. His parents explain to him that mountain gorillas are an endangered species. ‘By playing with them you’ll protect their lives,’ they say as the child flings a toy dinosaur into the fire in order to save it afterwards.

‘I don’t want to play with mountain gorillas,’ he says defiantly.

‘But don’t you think gorillas are more exciting to play with than dinosaurs? They’re certainly more intelligent, and they can climb any mountain.’

‘Can they climb the Matterhorn?’ asks the child.

‘Of course they can.’

‘I don’t care,’ says the child. ‘I prefer dinosaurs because they’re extinct.’

‘They became extinct when they came into contact with human illnesses,’ says the mother.

‘I beg to differ,’ says the father. ‘They became extinct because of the development of technology.’

‘I don’t care,’ says the child. And he continues to play with his dinosaurs.

3

Why am I playing with my dinosaur, with the man who pursues his fellow creatures, picks them up and sinks his razor-sharp teeth into their bodies? He doesn’t eat them: he plays with them, chewing their members like exquisite chewing gum. His victims beg him to swallow them in the hope of getting out of his belly at the earliest opportunity: they think about Jonah’s adventure and even pray to God out loud. I wouldn’t mind being swallowed by the monster, which might enable me to explore his insides, his hidden thoughts and intentions. I’m not likely to find the lost picture in his belly but at least one of his thoughts must contain it, otherwise the accusations made against him are groundless and therefore should be rejected once and for all.

Actually he keeps his victims at bay, not allowing them to contemplate his belly and head at close range – as if the money and pictures they claim to have lost might be found inside them. At least that is what a Belgian friend of mine says about him to her numerous cousins. ‘He doesn’t answer the phone. I dial his number every half an hour, but he must have changed his number, his phone and also address. I’m sure he no longer lives in the castle I visited three years ago. “I moved out of Brussels because I couldn’t stand the pace,” he said. At the time I had no suspicion he was a swindler, a cheat, a thief and a liar. This scandal has really knocked him off his pedestal. I’ll never go to his castle again – not for all the tea in Russia. And yet I’d better get in touch with him to find out what’s become of my Saint Petersburg flat.’

According to this lady with whom I was on intimate terms 30 years ago, this man lured her to a flat in Saint Petersburg and sold it to her in the presence of a notary. ‘The agreement was drawn up and verified by a notary,’ she says. She doesn’t say what the notary looked like, thinking it doesn’t matter because he was wearing a mask anyway. ‘They all wear masks and it’s no easy task to unmask them,’ she points out. Did the monster wear a mask when he stole my picture? Monsters don’t have to

wear masks: they look like monsters and wearing a mask would amount to tautology and could moreover raise their clients' suspicions. The monster I'm talking about seems an amiable young man. Is it a mask or am I plainly wrong? 'You don't have the humility to admit when you're wrong,' says my Belgian friend.

'I'm hopeless at physics, and it's the same with chemistry – I get it all wrong,' I say to her.

'You're hopeless at psychology as well,' she answers. 'You firmly believe he's innocent of the crimes.'

'The presumption of innocence is central to Russian law,' I say, bursting into laughter.

'He has this apparent innocence which, I suspect, he uses to his advantage,' she answers. And she may be right: there's something odd about the monster but I can't quite put my finger on it.

'Wakey wakey, rise and shine!' I said to him when *I* was in his castle. I should have stayed in his room, listening to his breath and the words he might have uttered in his sleep. Criminals are talkative under hypnosis and in their sleep, especially if you question them about their crimes. He might have broken down under cross-examination. Why did I have an urge to wake the criminal who looked rather angry as he reluctantly opened his eyes to welcome his guest and the dawn? I don't know. ('Why do you always sneak up on me?' he said.) I might have taken a walk on my own and I was aware of the coffee pot's whereabouts. What else did I need that morning? A piece of bread, a croissant, a scone with butter and jam? Habitually I don't eat much at dawn, waiting for lunchtime when I permit myself to indulge in a huge flounder, among other things. Why did I wake him, missing an opportunity to find out my picture's whereabouts? I would cheerfully exchange his coffee pot for my picture, although I've never seen it in the flesh, so to speak. (A painter I'm acquainted with talks about his picture's bodies, their goose bumps.) Five years ago, I saw its photograph in a catalogue of sorts and I can hardly recall *what* I saw. A waiter holding or carrying a plate of oysters? Was he carrying or holding it? Of course you're supposed to hold a plate in order to carry it. I wonder, however, if the waiter was rooted to the spot or was moving around in search of his customer. He *is* rooted to the spot in the picture I acquired, but he must spend a part of his life *outside* it, where he may choose not to carry a plate of oysters anywhere, being weary of his customers and their orders. He doesn't drop the plate for fear of being fired on the spot. What's more, he puts up with its weight to show his eagerness to remain on the staff of the restaurant. But he is reluctant to expose his body to the vicissitudes of the route lying between the kitchen and the table on which a sort of pedestal is awaiting the oysters. (How often do waiters trip and fall over, grazing their knees?) So he is motionless *everywhere* and thus once again the arts coincide with life, proving that neither of them can survive independently of each other.

I didn't learn anything about my picture that morning; nor did I make much progress with my search during the rest of my three-day-long stay in the castle where lots of pictures stared at me from the walls as if scoffing at my incapacity to recover their fellow creature. Or did they stare at me to emphasise their superiority over the picture I had purchased on the criminal's advice? Sure enough,

they were superior to any picture disposed of at the auction sale of which I had known nothing prior to the monster's interference in my private life – in my financial situation, to put it bluntly. During my previous stay in his castle he said the world was on the verge of collapse. 'If the factory closes, that will be a million euros' worth of investment down the drain,' he pointed out.

'Which factory are you talking about?' I asked.

'Never mind, never mind.'

'Anyway I don't know anything about factories,' I said.

'But you invest your money, don't you? By the way, there is a quirk in the rules that allows you to invest money without paying tax.'

'Even a short-term investment isn't one of my fortes.' I winked and gave him a smile.

'Have you ever heard about Vecherova? Are you fond of Russian portraits?'

'I'm not very fond of Russian art in general,' I answered.

'Don't you like Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky?' he asked.

'Of course I do. I was speaking about Russian painters.'

'Don't you like Kandinsky, Malevich and Goncharova? Vecherova is a little bit like Goncharova, by the way. I mean, she's a woman. Her style's quite different from that of Goncharova's, but she's also a woman. And women have a lot in common, don't you agree?'

I was aware of my friend's sexual orientation and so I resolved not to analyse the female of the species in his presence. Besides, I was still in the dark about his ideas. Why was he talking about Vecherova and Goncharova? He owned a few Goncharova pictures, but I hadn't come across Vecherova's contribution to the arts in his collection which was highly regarded by the Russians and even by foreigners. He collected mostly Russian art: furniture, pictures and letters written by the Tsars. And he often reproached me for not loving my motherland as much as he did in spite of the distance he had to cover whenever we spoke about Vrubel or another painter virtually unknown in the West. After all, he was neither born in Russia nor had he ever lived there for 26 years at a stretch, contrary to what I did during the early period of my life.

I don't know why I'm talking about him in the past tense: he is still alive and prospers, much to the displeasure of his enemies whom he might have swindled some years ago. Now everyone is on their guard, but you can always set a trap for a gullible friend of yours and he will walk straight into it, provided you're careful not to disclose your stratagem before the deal is done. Is he a born swindler prepared to carry on with his work even behind bars?

Six years ago I went to his castle in the company of my Belgian friend. Last summer I was there with my Saint Petersburg friend to whom the swindler spoke Russian for hours without switching either to French or English. At the very outset of that memorable visit I realised I had to put his collection in the past tense. As I walked around his castle I saw a succession of bare walls on which only a dozen pictures were hanging. 'Where are the other pictures?' I asked.

‘I sold them,’ he answered. ‘The daily grind of looking after those children had worn me down. And I’m about to get rid of my castle as well. I’m fed up with my castle, with my collection. I’ve spent a long time in this prison and it’s high time I did *something* about it. The other day I went for a walk near the seashore. I felt such a sense of freedom, up in the hills alone.’

He spoke in a similar vein for another 10 minutes and I thought he might have sold my picture too. Why not sell *everything* while you are about it? I put my Saint Petersburg friend in the picture about what was going on and she said I shouldn’t touch upon the incident on the first day of our sojourn in the castle. So I just walked around, looking at the pictures which still adorned the walls where so many faces, clothes and jewels had been hanging only three or four years before. As might have been expected, my picture wasn’t among them. Actually I didn’t know for sure he had stolen it; rumours *were* going round about the monster and his manoeuvrings, but I was in no mood to believe them.

4

I first met the swindler 30 years ago when I didn’t mind holding a conversation with someone I had never seen either in my dreams or in real life. But I have no idea whether we talked on that occasion or not: we might have limited our duo to a few noncommittal remarks. Be that as it may, I recognised him when he came up to me several months later to say he had heard me somewhere: in Brussels, in Germany or in Japan. ‘You played beautifully,’ he said. I thanked him and we talked for a while about music and art in general. At that cocktail party he referred neither to Goncharova nor to Vecherova because he had no intention of dealing a severe blow to my finances – not at the early stage of our relationship. He might have said something to the effect that buying Russian artefacts was a highly profitable business because no one was really interested in them. ‘But in a few years’ time they’ll cost an arm and a leg. Sooner or later people are bound to get weary of French furniture and Italian pictures.’

Did I hear this prophecy or is it an echo of my own thoughts I hear all the time? I might be confusing the times, for he was unlikely to engage me in a conversation centred upon economics at the early stage of what may be called ‘our friendship’. He must have realised I wasn’t keen on money and creature comforts; and yet my collection of furniture is in a class of its own, let alone my library. Anyway he had to conquer me first by exhibiting his knowledge of philosophy and literature. He resolved to conquer me in a different way; and yet he might have sensed I wasn’t very keen on Russia either. He spoke to me about Russia as if *he* had been born in Moscow in 1947, during the last period of Stalin’s dictatorship; as if *he* had watched Stalin’s funeral from my window.

He might have broached the subject by giving me a lecture on Peter the Great and his times. ‘At the beginning of Peter’s reign,’ he said, ‘Russia was backward by comparison with the countries of Western Europe. This backwardness inhibited foreign policy and even put Russia’s national independence in danger.’

‘Russia was in a class of her own,’ I said.

‘Breaking the resistance of the boyars and of the clergy and severely punishing all other opposition to his projects, Peter initiated a series of reforms that affected, in the course of 25 years, every field of the national life – administration, industry, commerce, technology and culture.’

‘Oswald Spengler thinks that Peter the Great broke the Russian spirit, the Russian way of life which had nothing to do with the American way of life,’ I said. ‘We had icons and our religious music.’

‘I like listening to Russian choirs,’ he said. ‘In terms of music your Divine Liturgy is far more beautiful than any mass.’

‘What about Bach’s *Mass in B Minor*?’ I asked. ‘Anyway,’ I went on, ‘the music you hear today in Russian churches is in no way comparable to what the Russians sang in the 15th century. Their sacred songs were on a par with Muslim prayers.’

‘Thanks to the reforms, the economic activity and the population of the towns increased. Anyone engaged in trade was legally permitted to settle in a town and to register himself in the appropriate category, and there was a right of free commerce for people of every rank.’

I’m not sure he spoke along these lines, but I always had the feeling that, whenever our conversation focused upon Russia, he recited a text from some history book or a magazine of sorts. In a way, he had no alternative, for he lacked first-hand experience of Russian life and could only rely on other people’s reports and memoirs. ‘From January 1, 1700, Peter introduced a new chronology, making the Russian calendar conform to European usage with regard to the year, which in Russia had hitherto been numbered “from the Creation of the World” and had begun on September 1.’

Once again I ask myself the following question: ‘Why write about him in the past tense?’ Even now he enlarges upon Russia in my presence as if he had to conquer me for another adventure after which I might lose *all* my possessions and bank accounts. But his tone and themes have grown more lyrical, not to say intimate, over the last 10 years: today he reveals the details of our Emperors’ *private* lives. ‘From the day of birth of her children, the Empress gave them her full attention. She fed them, bathed them daily, chose their nurses and was constantly with the children in the nursery and in class. She would often hold a child on one arm while dealing with serious matters or signing business papers. In her free time, she embroidered, knitted and painted. She was always at work.’ Thus, for instance, he talks about the last Empress, Alexandra Feodorovna.

Only when our story is over will I permit myself to write about him in the past tense. And our story is *not* over yet: the picture I bought five years ago adorns someone else’s safe or wall. I don’t even know if it will be over *some* day, given the number of days that have elapsed since I sent a cheque to a former friend of mine. He is no longer my friend because he often plays practical jokes on his friends, and I don’t like practical jokes. Actually I’m not sure I was his friend and not a mere acquaintance when I asked him to do me a favour by sending his own cheque to the person in charge

of the auction sale. Well, it's a long story and I'd better start at the beginning. When did the story begin, I wonder? When the swindler initiated me into Peter the Great's reforms and calendar?

5

It is the Maya calendar I'm eager to decipher on account of its proximity to our times and worries. Peter the Great and his numbers are far away, although the Russian Church still adheres to them, promising to change its customs in the 22nd century. 'Christians awake! Salute the happy Morn / Whereon the *Saviour* of the World was born!' My foreign friends drink champagne and eat oysters, *foie gras*; only two weeks later do my Russian friends entertain their colleagues on a large scale, serving vodka and sparkling wine, salmon and sturgeon. Of course they perform this complex ritual before and after Christmas as well, and I have no alternative but to listen to the nonsense they talk whenever I ring them up. Oddly enough, they never talk about the Maya calendar, about the end of the world, as if it were a piece of nonsense. Is it?

As usual, I'm watching the Russian channel which devotes a lot of time to the end of the Soviet Union because some people insist on its importance, saying they haven't lived on Earth for more than 20 years. 'First Gorbachev took vodka away from us,' they say, opening another bottle and clinking glasses. 'Then he removed the Soviet Union from our maps.' Will the Earth be removed from the universe in less than ten months? Or will it continue to go round the sun despite our disappearance?

On television, two Russians were talking about the Maya who seemed to be in the news, for all their remoteness in both space and time. 'So they thought we'd perish in 2012,' said a woman with a clipboard.

'It's quite natural to experience a few doubts just before you start making preparations for your own funeral,' said a thin, bearded man.

'But it's the funeral of *humanity* they were talking about,' said the woman.

'You have to take everything they say with a pinch of salt,' said the man. 'The Maya tend to exaggerate. Actually they carve their predictions in stone so you can *touch* the end of the world.'

'Why don't you speak about the Maya in the past tense?' asked the woman.

'Because they're in our midst, otherwise no one would talk about death.'

'When will it take place?' asked the woman.

At that point, another woman – my French colleague – entered the room where I was watching TV and I missed the date announced by the specialist in the Maya lore. Frustrated and furious, I went to an English bookshop – after my colleague's departure. Upon entering the shop I said, enunciating very clearly, 'The end of the world.' The woman, who is used to satisfying my scientific curiosity, picked up the book I'm browsing through in the quiet of my flat.

I no longer read books or even magazines from beginning to end as if, by reaching their last pages, I might hasten the advent of the catastrophe predicted by the Maya and our apocalyptic visions. And the pages I do read turn so fast I get the feeling they're trying to escape my attention. What for?

Do they fear I may chance upon a piece of information they have hidden between the lines? So I end up scrutinising every word and even whatever grows in the interstices between the words and lines. Nothing doing. I don't understand anything.

It's certain, however, that by 36 BC the Long Count was being carved in stone, because on Stela 2 from Chiapa de Corzo in Mexico we find the date 7.16.3.2.13, corresponding to December 6, 36 BC. Five years later, the famous Stela C from Tres Zapotes was carved with the date 7.16.6.16.18 (corresponding to September 1, 32 BC). On both these monuments, the full Long Count date could be reconstructed. An incomplete Baktun 7 date is recorded on Stela 2 from Tak'alik Ab'aj, meaning it must have been carved before the commencement of Baktun 8 in 41 AD. The Baktun number is clearly 7, but the Katun could be 6, 11, or 16, meaning possibly as old as 236 BC, 137 BC, or 39 BC. If it represents the last possible date in the 16th Katun of the 7th Baktun, it would correspond to July of 19 BC. There's a fair chance it is the oldest Long Count monument known.

The numbers almost destroy the letters growing in the interstices between them. The book entitled *The 2012 Story* is choked with numbers so I've eventually come to the conclusion that the word 'death' will not make its appearance on the pages I'm reading absent-mindedly; the death of humankind must be hidden among the numbers or in the words whose meanings I don't understand. What is the Katun? What does an incomplete Baktun mean? And what about a *complete* Baktun? Is death hidden in the interstice between the two Baktuns? Is the interstice in question large or small? Is death short? 'Death is so tiny, you need a magnifying glass to read it,' said a Moscow friend of mine. Why should I *read* death? Anyway I'd like to read *about* it first.

Continuing further down the Pacific coast from Tak'alik Ab'aj, a well preserved late Cycle 7 monument at El Baul clearly reads 7.19.15.7.12 (March 2, 37 AD). Stela 5 from Tak'alik Ab'aj contains two Long Count dates; one is clearly 126 AD and the other is either 83 AD or 103 AD. Farther to the north but within the region known as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the site of Cerro de las Mesas contains two early Cycle 8 dates. La Mojarra Stela 1, inscribed in 'the Isthmian script', contains Long Count dates corresponding to 143 AD and 156 AD. Linda Schele was able to date the Hauberg Stela with astronomical references in its inscription to March of 197 AD (Long Count 8.7.14.4).

Why do these texts mainly speak about the times prior to Jesus Christ's birth? The dates mentioned by anonymous writers correspond to 32 BC, 36 BC, 236 BC and 137 BC. Had humanity perished before the First Coming, there would have been no Christ, no Christianity and no Gospels. Is that what they mean by Short Count? And what does Long Count mean? Do we have to count the years that elapsed

from 236 BC to 156 AD? Shall I write an email to John Major Jenkins who is the author of the book I'm browsing through this morning? There's a chapter entitled *Long Count Origins* from which I learn that the Long Count was inaugurated on the June solstice of 355 BC. So what? Another date, another number. I wish the Long Count could be inaugurated in 2012, *before* the worldwide catastrophe of which some prophets and their stooges have been warning us for 22 centuries at least.

God or His emissary comes down and says, 'The Last Judgment is at hand.'

'And what about the Long Count we inaugurated last night?' we say in unison.

'There have been too many long counts in your history,' says God. 'Here's a short count, another one. My short count differs radically from your mathematics. It's much shorter, you know. It's only a short walk to My court.'

'Counts come in all shapes and sizes – fat and thin, short and tall,' we say to God. 'What about a fat count? Or a tall one?'

'If you feed your counts on cakes and biscuits, it's not surprising they're so fat,' says God. 'I'll put them on a calorie-controlled diet.'

In the light of what awaits us in 2012 it doesn't really matter whether our counts are long, short, fat, emaciated, bow-legged or suntanned. We are doomed and that is what counts after all, although one may die in a wasp-waisted dress or in a new pair of trousers. Will the world come to an end before I recover the picture I purchased at an auction sale in Brussels?

6

All this happened during my first visit to the castle where the monster will stay as long as no buyer can be found in Europe or outside its boundaries. At some point he told me a Chinese man was about to buy it with a view to transferring it to the Shanghai suburbs. But, instead of signing some sort of agreement, on D-Day he chose to disagree with the amount of money requested by the monster and walked out on the notary who grunted, looking at the door of his office, 'We're back to square one.'

During my first visit, the transfer to Shanghai wasn't yet on the agenda, so we talked about Russia and the money I had to remove from my bank to eschew the consequences of the forthcoming international crisis. 'With this money you'll buy a Vecherova picture,' said the monster. 'And if you sell it three years later, you'll get 33,000 euros. The picture you should buy costs 11,000 euros. Most of the pictures are going for a song, you know – it's a charity sale. Proceeds from the sale of these pictures will go to local charities. And you'll be able to get back one-third of the price – the tax, in other words. You'll become a multi-millionaire.'

I could see the monster trying not to laugh and of course that started me off. I laughed till I cried. I would just have cried, had I known what was in store for me.

His friend, who owned three wonderful black cats and a laser printer, brought a catalogue featuring the pictures which were to figure at the historic sale. The monster explained why it was historic and I leafed through the catalogue, asking a few pertinent questions. I first asked about the

crisis or rather the catastrophe at the end of which the entire population of the globe was to perish without further ado. He said he didn't believe in the Maya calendar, but pointed out that 10 years of incompetent government had brought about the virtual collapse of the global economy.

I must be confusing him with someone else or with the programme I watched the other day on the Russian channel: he did *not* so much as mention the Maya and their numbers. He just spoke about the plight of the poor and the forthcoming auction sale which seemed to have been set apart from the global economy and its numerous weak spots. I looked at the pictures and he did his best not to show too much admiration for them so as not to influence my choice; and yet he had already told me which picture I should buy in the hope of becoming a multimillionaire. 'This is the picture you should buy,' he told me as I turned another page and saw a plate of oysters. I first saw the oysters because I'm much more interested in food than in human beings. Then I saw the waiter who was either carrying the oysters or waiting for the world catastrophe: if the world comes to a close, no one will ever eat oysters any more.

'Do you like the picture?' asked the monster.

'Not bad,' I said.

'Do you like Russian painters?' he asked.

'Not particularly.'

'In order to understand Vecherova's masterpieces,' he said, 'one must be familiar not only with the art of the 18th century but also with that of the early 19th century. One must have studied Gainsborough and Beardsley, Levitsky and Briullov, Velasquez and Manet, and the German woodcuts of the 16th century.'

'Well, I didn't *study* the German woodcuts of the 16th century,' I admitted.

'In that case, you should buy the oysters because they'll guide you to the German woodcuts.'

'Do I really need a guide?'

'Use this picture as a guide to what your life should look like,' he said all of a sudden.

'Do you think I should carry oysters?' I asked.

'I'm speaking about this picture's harmony, not about the oysters materialised by Vecherova.'

'Aren't they part of this harmony?' I asked.

'Of course they are. But whenever you look at oysters, you're tempted to eat them. And I don't want you to eat them.' This time he let himself go. His laughter resounded through the castle and could even be heard in the garden where the three cats disported themselves.

Actually they didn't, as far as I can remember. The point is I hadn't come alone to the castle; I had been guided to it by my Belgian friend who was to buy a flat in Saint Petersburg two or three years later. At the time she wasn't aware of the monster's darker side so I accompanied her and was almost immediately caught off my guard. We came with a dog: my Belgian friend has four dogs in the house she had bought near Brussels, but she usually travels with one dog only. Actually, this dog died two years ago; our visit must have taken place prior to her untimely death. She was called Sobachka;

her mistress doted on her, unaware of her darker side. During our visit Sobachka bit not only the monster but also her mistress who went so far as to shed a few tears on that occasion. Sobachka didn't really quarrel with the cats; she was just on her guard, keeping away from their claws. I ought to have imitated her behaviour: we may learn a lot from cats and dogs and even spiders. I ought to have bitten the monster instead of listening to his praise of Russian art and his analysis of the global economy. It is true that his analysis was far more accurate than whatever was said and written by professional economists, but I lost a great deal of money as a result of my politeness and I still regret it.

It's high time I bestowed names upon all those involved in this sordid business. The monster will be Vassya, the Belgian friend Marussya. These Russian names do justice to the geographical aspect of my story: after all, the flat purchased by Marussya is located in Saint Petersburg and the picture I may have lost forever is due to the illustrious paintbrush of a Moscow resident. When Sobachka flew off the handle upon seeing the cats in Vassya's garden, neither the picture nor the flat had been paid for. The money was still in our respective purses, which would have pleased Jago who relied on his friends' estates and jewels. It must have pleased Vassya as well: he has a knack of emptying other people's purses and houses as if he were particularly fond of the void. I wouldn't be surprised if I caught him standing at the edge of a chasm, staring into the void – in Italy, at one of the spots where Nietzsche had his revelations. I don't think Vassya is a superman, but he is certainly not an ordinary, law-abiding citizen.

He couldn't know for sure the contents of our purses. Nor had he ever tried to measure them in order to find out how big they were: the contents of your purse partly depend on its size. Nevertheless he was determined to empty our purses at the earliest opportunity. The catalogue lying on his writing desk triggered off an avalanche of ideas; so did a book on Saint Petersburg he had in his library. Marussya didn't say anything to the effect that the Russians were warmongers. Anyway she would have bought the flat in Saint Petersburg because she hoped that by letting it she might become a millionaire: rents in Saint Petersburg and Moscow are ridiculously high. But Marussya couldn't afford to buy a flat in Moscow, so she resigned herself to owing one in Saint Petersburg.

At some point Vassya spoke about Nicholas II: 'At 26, Nikolai Alexandrovich began his reign as a lofty idealist. His first great concern was to bring an end to the threatening arms race and he personally presented a disarmament plan to the other great powers. Another personal project dear to his heart was the founding of a court for the settling of international disputes by peaceful means. The result of his efforts was the convening of the Hague Conference on the 18th of May, 1899. The subsequent "League of Nations" and the present "United Nations" were direct successors to the "Hague International Court" which was founded primarily through the efforts of the Tsar.'

'I don't like Nicholas II,' I said. 'Alexander II was head and shoulders above him.'

'Alexander II put an end to serfdom in Russia,' said Marussya. Her interest in Russia was kindled when she learnt that two of her ancestors had fought Napoleon's army during the Russian campaign.

‘During the reign of the Tsar Emancipator, alias Alexander II,’ Vassya pointed out, ‘a network of railroads covered Russia, the ship-building industry flourished and many miles of highways were built. Foreign trade reflected a buoyant and healthy economy, as private banks and mutual credit institutions multiplied throughout the country. In 1874 Russia joined the International Postal Union. I wish we could live in those days, in Russia. No economic crisis threatened your motherland.’ Vassya turned to me and smiled.

‘Even now there are no motorways in Russia,’ I said, smiling in my turn.

‘Nobody says you should live in Russia *now*,’ he said. ‘But if you buy a flat, you can let it – rents in Moscow are ridiculously high.’

Today I’m unable to ascertain who first had the idea of buying a flat in Saint Petersburg. I know for sure I’ve never been tempted to buy anything in Russia with the exception of CDs and DVDs. I also go to restaurants there because I can’t do otherwise: you can be poisoned by the food you find in shops. So I go to restaurants and satisfy my hunger; yet I’m aware that alcoholic beverages as well as ordinary food are often poisoned in Russia. Those who are in charge of food supply have no wish to poison the entire population of Russia; they just make a lot of money by putting in bottles and elsewhere quite a number of cheap ingredients that are liable to bring about death or at least a deep coma. So you go to a top restaurant and die at midnight unless you throw everything away or throw up your meals all over the back seat of your car.

The same goes for flats and houses located in the country of my birth. Of course you’re unlikely to be poisoned by a house you buy either in Moscow or Saint Petersburg; but if one day you find that your personal property belongs to someone else, your heart may stop beating. Marussya is still alive and I can’t help admiring her stamina: the flat she bought in Saint Petersburg no longer belongs to her despite the documents in her possession. Actually it no longer belongs to her *niece* who is to inherit whatever Marussya owns in this life: an old car, a ramshackle shed at the bottom of her garden. ‘Lady Bountiful,’ as Vassya calls her.

It’s better to own a house than some documents pertaining to the acquisition of this house. The same goes for flats, even if those flats are located in Saint Petersburg where prices are *not* ridiculously high. They’re just high and certainly not within the reach of most people; but Marussya isn’t of their number. At least she *wasn’t* of their number a few years ago – before she went to Saint Petersburg in order to buy the flat that no longer belongs to her niece.

Actually the flat in question *never* belonged to her niece, as it turned out.

We, citizens of Russia Vinogradova Valerya Alexandrovna Date of birth 19 March 1945, passport data 40 04 607773 issued 03 09 2003 and Vinogradova Olga Anatoljevna Date of birth 23 February 1983, passport data 40 04 778860 issued 23 10 2003 living to the address: St. Petersburg, Marata str., House 20, Flat 35 hereafter referred to the 'Sellers' on the one part and a citizen of Ukraine T.I. Turchinskaya date of birth 16 November 1958, living to the address: Saint-Petersburg, Kamennostrovsky Avenue, House 4, Flat 22 and acting in the compliance of The Power of Attorney 78 VD N°224302 certified by a Notary Public Tarakanovsky Leonid in the interests of a citizen of Belgium Marussya de Dragunevska Date of birth 19 July 1941, passport date P BEL ED673923 issued 12 October 2001 living to the address: Belgium, Promenade du Val du Veau d'Or, 9, La Poulpe hereinafter referred to the 'Buyer' on the other part have concluded the present Agreement hereby for the following:

- 1. We, 'Sellers', have sold to 'Buyer' the flat belonging to us as joint participation ownership to the address: St. Petersburg, Marata str.*

This agreement is a piece of evidence that Marussya is reluctant to part with; yet she does realise it has no value either for lawyers or for ordinary citizens. The latter are eager to tear such documents up as soon as they come across them in a courtroom or even in the streets, in entrance halls. They may get such a piece of paper by post, and when they do, they swear loudly in front of their children, tear the so-called document up and throw it away on the ground floor so as not to litter their flats. You don't have to be a lawyer or a lawyer's son to realise it's a worthless scrap of paper that doesn't prove you own any object, let alone a flat in the former capital of Russia. But Marussya keeps this sheet of paper as if hoping to show it to some Tsar who, being open-handed and magnanimous, will give her a palace instead of a flat, saying, 'Dear Marussya! The Russians are generous and they never cheat foreigners out of their money. They may cheat at cards now and then, but if a foreigner buys a flat in our land, he or she is entitled to special treatment.'

'I don't expect special treatment – I just want to be treated fairly,' says Marussya.

'Your flat is damp and small. And the building is run-down. You deserve the palace I'm giving you out of generosity.'

'Thank you, Your Majesty. Unfortunately I can't accept your gift.'

'Why not?'

'No one will ever rent such a palace. And I need money.'

'You don't know our oligarchs. They're fond of palaces.'

'I do know some of them. Vassya van Barabassa, for instance. He's fond of palaces, castles, pictures, antiques and money.'

'I know him too,' says the Tsar. 'Don't be fooled by his kindness and sensitivity – it's just a front.'

'Of course, Your Majesty. He's such a liar – you can't trust a word he says.'

‘Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll take care of it all. Anyway, our undercover agents are in the front line of the fight against drugs.’

2. *The above flat belongs to Sellers in the accordance of the Privatization Contract N°10053 of 02 August 1999, signed by the Head of the Territorial Administration of Central District of St. Petersburg Antonov V.S., the government registration of the deal was made on 10.08.99 by the City Interest in Land Registration Office of St. Petersburg., the registration number 343032.1, the Certificate of Right Registration VL N°206169 was given on 10.08.99 by the City Interest in Land Registration Office of St. Petersburg, the registration number 343032.2, the conventional number 236847 what is confirmed by the extract from the Unified State Register of Jus N° 78-78-01/6080/2005-114, distributed by the City Interest in Land Registration Office of St. Petersburg on 19 April 2005, the conventional number of the object 236847.*

This text is as abstruse as the book on the Maya and their end of the world, but when buying the book I didn’t think it gave me any right to a flat in Mexico City or even to a stone featuring the Maya calendar. I just bought a book I’m not likely to understand even in 2013, i.e. after the second deluge or the third world-conflagration.

I used to like numbers very much and the love I bore them didn’t depend on whether I understood what they meant or not. A column of figures appealed to me even more than a beautiful face or suntanned legs and arms. The remnants of this love account for the interest I show in both the Maya calendar and the Saint Petersburg flat that belongs to the people I’m not likely to meet even in the Hereafter. I may meet them in Saint Petersburg, though: Marussya insists on my looking into the matter because I spoke Russian in my cradle. Actually the first word I uttered resounded in a small garden situated in front of the house where I lived in my childhood; in other words, my cradle was far away – probably in the attic or in some wasteland. But Marussya isn’t in the habit of splitting hairs: she has decided that I should deal with her problem because she has no Russian and consequently can’t speak to Saint Petersburg lawyers and swindlers on her own. (In Russia the English language is spoken only sporadically and shouldn’t be relied upon when a huge amount of money is involved.) She can’t even deal properly with Vassya who may be defined as a Belgian or a Dutch or a Scandinavian swindler.

‘You speak Russian so you’ll be able to solve this mystery,’ she says. ‘You should probe for any inconsistencies in their story.’

‘There are many inconsistencies in the agreement you sent me,’ I tell her. ‘Can’t you detect them?’

‘Their English is awful. I understand only the figures, nothing else.’

‘I don’t even understand the figures,’ I tell her.

‘You understand Russian – that’s quite enough. But don’t forget that even if I win the court case, I’ll have to pay an enormous amount in legal fees. And I don’t want to pay anything – I’ve lost too much money already.’

‘There’s no mystery to speak of,’ I tell her. ‘The agreement is a fake. So is the flat, I suppose.’

‘I saw the flat,’ she says with assurance.

‘You might have seen *another* flat. Does the address printed in the Agreement correspond to what you saw?’

‘You know I don’t speak Russian.’

‘The Agreement is couched in English.’

‘It’s couched in legal terminology,’ she says. ‘And I don’t understand legal terminology.’

‘Neither do I,’ I answer. ‘But the flat is located in Marat Street, I take it.’

‘The Russians still worship the French Revolution,’ she says.

‘Did you see the name of Marat somewhere in the street?’ I ask her.

‘I can’t read Cyrillic characters,’ she says. ‘Besides, I was so tired I could hardly put one foot in front of the other.’

‘What about your eyes? Were you dazzled by the sunlight or by the glare of the oncoming headlights?’

‘A dog was grubbing about in the mud for a bone.’

‘Did you see Marat?’

‘I don’t want to see Marat anywhere. If he was alive, I’d kill him like Charlotte Corday – in his bath, in the streets or in a court of justice.’

‘Have you seen the play entitled *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade*?’ I ask her. She gives no answer to my question. So I put another question to her: ‘Have they any evidence to implicate Vassya in the theft?’

‘He was sending semaphore signals to his accomplices from the window.’

Our discussions lead nowhere and if I’m stupid enough to hire a lawyer in Saint Petersburg – that’s what she wants me to do, by the way – I won’t even get to the street appearing in the document I’m about to tear up. No, I’ll preserve it – just in case. Besides, I haven’t yet quoted it in full.

3. *The flat, total acres 84.30 m2, is on the 3-d floor of 4-storied brick house, built in 1877. Major repairs was in 1982.*

Vassya says he was approached by Marussya a few years ago – a bizarre statement, given that they have been on friendly terms for three decades at least. ‘But this time she wished to buy a flat in Saint Petersburg. I told her, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” I usually help her *sell* whatever she’s

got in Brussels: houses, paintings, furniture. She seldom buys anything because she's got no money. "Soon I'll be reduced to smoking the butts left in the ashtrays," she says. She doesn't smoke, does she? If she had enough money, she'd buy my castle, I bet. Don't you think she adores it? And my collection, of course. But I wouldn't sell her my collection even if she had enough money to buy it. I'll sell it only to a Russian artist or to a Saint Petersburg museum. I left her near the Russian Museum haggling over the price of a tin of caviar.'

Marussya, on the other hand, affirms that Vassya rang her up to say there was a flat in Saint Petersburg. 'I said, "I know there are flats in Saint Petersburg because it's a huge city. Of course it's not as big as Moscow, but it's big enough to have 10 million flats, 20 million flats." He told me the flat he was talking about was rather cheap. "So you can afford it. But Moscow is out of your league." He was always badgering me to buy flats in Russia. "The age-old fear of the unknown. You're getting cold feet. You lose your nose for a bargain. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."' Marussya did her best to imitate Vassya's voice. Then I heard *her* voice again: 'None of my friends has ever bought a flat in Saint Petersburg. Isn't it dangerous to deal with the Russians?' And Vassya answered her: 'Am I not your friend? I've got several *houses* in Saint Petersburg. As for Pelenussya, Critussya and the likes of them, they're a boring bunch of conformists. Not one of them would step out of line.'

'Why didn't you consult me about this?' I asked. 'I heard about this flat for the first time four years after you'd bought it.'

'He should have said, "There's many a slip twixt cup and lip." Why didn't he say *that*?'

'It's not too late to say, "There's many a slip twixt cup and lip," considering that you're determined to get your money back or kick Ms Fuksovik out.'

'It's strange, but I couldn't work up any enthusiasm for going on that trip.' Marussya sighed deeply and sat down. 'I said to myself, "You've always dreamt of walking around Saint Petersburg. Why not go boating on the Neva?"'

'What else did you say to yourself?' I asked.

'I'll only agree to sign the contract if certain conditions are met,' she answered.

Vassya went to Saint Petersburg because he liked the city and was longing to spend some time in its museums and on the banks of the Neva where Pushkin used to stroll in the 19th century. 'This booklet gives some useful pointers on what to expect when you arrive,' he said to Marussya, showing her a photograph of Nevsky Avenue. 'It's one of those trips that leaves you emotionally drained.'

Marussya cried in the house that had witnessed Pushkin's death and for an hour or so Vassya thought he might sell her his Russian collection if she had enough money to buy it. But he knew she would never have enough money for any collection, not even for the butterflies hanging in the house which, in accordance with the law promulgated by Gorbachev in 1991, belongs to Nabokov's father and mother. So he dropped the subject and his musings on life chose the opposite direction – the road at the end of which another billion euros awaited him.

Marussya didn't need Vassya's presence to visit the house where Pushkin had died almost two centuries ago. Nor was she ill at ease in the museums: as everyone knows, pictures speak the language understood even by those who have forgotten their mother tongues. In Marussya's house there are several maps of Russian cities so you can find your way through the geometry of Saint Petersburg without going there. The flat Marussya bought would have been visible, had her owner taken the trouble to draw a circle around it on one of the maps. But the owner, alias Marussya, was too lazy and the flat remained invisible on the map and in real life. Of course no one would prevent you from paying a visit to its present owner, Ms Fuksovik, who keeps saying she was born in the flat bought by Marussya. 'And I've never left it,' she adds, winking at the people to whom she happens to talk.

'Do you never go out?' they ask.

'Never. In Russia we also have meals on wheels, you know.'

Marussya says there were *two* women in the flat when *she* visited it in the course of her ill-starred sojourn in Saint Petersburg. Actually she went there twice and on every occasion she saw two women in it. 'Are you sure you didn't see one woman and her reflection in a mirror?' asked her lawyer.

'There was no mirror in the room,' said Marussya.

'You don't *always* see mirrors,' said the lawyer. 'Sometimes you just see a sort of doppelgänger. You think another man or woman is keeping you company. Actually, you just see your own or someone else's reflection.'

'I know what I look like,' said Marussya.

'What about the two women?' asked the lawyer. 'Weren't they sisters? As a matter of fact, the Russians are used to bumping into *three* sisters. But there are exceptions to every rule.'

'If I put it to him that he'll really have to make a choice –'

Marussya hired a Belgian lawyer who had a smattering of Russian and could be trusted: in her opinion, he didn't belong to any mafia she was aware of. He wrote her several letters in which he spoke about the letters they had exchanged for some time to no purpose. 'If you don't tell me how much you paid Ms Turchinskaya and how many people you saw in the flat you bought, I shall not be able to help you,' he wrote. 'You continue to fudge the issue by refusing to give exact figures and names. Do the women you saw in the flat own it? If they are sisters they might bear the same name on condition that neither of them adopted the name of her husband. Are they married or not? If they are not, their family name must be Vinogradova. At least this is the name I find in the document I borrowed from you. If their name is Vinogradova I can proceed with the case. But in order to do so, I must know how much you paid Ms Turchinskaya. Or did you give money to one of the sisters, to both of them? If so, how much did you give them? Did they see the money you paid for the flat? This detail is very important. As for my fee, here is the number of my bank account: CCP 0000-167935444-33. If you decide to pay for my services by instalments, I shall put an end to the whole business. Are you financially embarrassed at present?'

‘I’ve asked you to put an end to this sordid affair in every letter of mine,’ wrote Marussya. ‘You haven’t done anything to speed things up. You might at least have set the wheels in motion.’

‘Did you pay Ms Turchinskaya by credit card or in cash?’ wrote the lawyer. ‘Or did you make out a cheque to Ms Turchinskaya? As for my fee, I have not received anything yet. You can pay by credit card, if you wish. But in order to do so, you should come to my office. Do you know my address? Here it is: Feklistamp str., 47, Budergoooot. Here are a few points I should like to emphasise. I have no doubts your English is perfect, but in Russia they hardly speak any foreign languages. So you must know Russian to deal with those people. And you should know French or Dutch to correspond with your Belgian lawyers. I must compliment you on your French, but that is not enough. Let us get to the bottom of this affair. I insist on your telling me every single detail of what you did in the flat you had bought and also in the streets of Saint Petersburg. You ask me if it is possible to sell this flat. You tell me the flat is estimated to be worth around \$200,000. You add, “\$170,000 would do at a pinch.” Let me quote the document I borrowed from you in order to proceed with the case:

4. *In accordance with the flat passport, issued on 14 April 2005 by the Development-Inventory Office of Central district of St. Petersburg the flat inventory value in the current year 2005 is 571 571 roubles, the document number 4710/05 which is enclosed to the Agreement.*
5. *The alienable flat is valued and sold by the both hand for 571 571roubles. This sum was paid up to the ‘Sellers’ by the ‘Buyer’ before the signing of this Agreement outside the Notary’s Office.*

‘Let me inform you that the amount mentioned in this document – 571 571 roubles – would not allow you to buy an attic in the suburbs of Tula or any other provincial town. This amounts to very little indeed – around £20,000. And why on earth did you pay this sum *outside* the Notary’s Office? Where did you do it? In the streets of Saint Petersburg? On the banks of the Neva? In some museum or other? When did you do it? I’ve asked you this question several times, but you’re proving difficult to pin down to a particular date. I think that the unwillingness to compromise on both sides is the major stumbling block to reaching a settlement.’

9

Instead of answering her lawyer, Marussya wrote me a letter in which I found her correspondence with the lawyer and Ms Turchinskaya. ‘Do you realise what is going on?’ she wrote. ‘Will Turchinskaya and Vassya ever be charged with conspiracy to defraud me of \$200,000? They should also be charged with conspiracy to murder – I won’t survive this catastrophe. You told me once that Vassya had pushed you into buying a picture. Well, you’ll never see this picture. And you’ll never recover your money. And you’ll never recover from the shock of losing this money. One day you’ll realise I was right, as sure as eggs is eggs.’

Up to then I had never thought Vassya would steal the oysters without showing them to their owner first, which would have been illogical and even dangerous from *his* point of view. But there's such a thing as fair play and gentlemen are supposed to stick to this notion for fear of losing any claim to high social status. And Vassya is an aristocrat who, at some point, married a German princess whose father told him once, 'I thought it was my duty to check on your family tree. I'm satisfied on the whole, but you've got a few drops of Russian blood in your veins. Of course you're not responsible for your ancestors' crimes. Nevertheless, it's my duty to point out that my cousin died at the front line when fighting the Russians in the Second World War. I'm not eager to give my money over to someone who is guilty of my cousin's death.'

'I don't think I invited your cousin to Stalingrad in 1942,' said Vassya.

Are the drops of Russian blood responsible for Vassya's dishonest behaviour? Marussya thinks so; she seems to forget that she also has a few drops of Russian blood in her veins. 'The Russians are just a bunch of crooks, present company excepted,' she said. 'Why don't you call yourselves crooks? You don't need other names: Putin, Turchinskaya. Mr Crook, Ms Crook.'

'How to distinguish between the Crooks?' I asked.

'Mr Crook the Second, Ms Crook the Twentieth.'

'They're not kings and queens, are they?'

'They're *crooks*! They spend their lives wheeling and dealing on the stock exchange. I can always tell a Russian a mile off.'

I can't say I paid too much attention to Vassya's conduct and the way he answered my questions. In the Eighties I met him only two or three times and I don't even recall if we exchanged a few glances on those occasions. What can a human glance tell you? In the early Seventies Bob Wilson put on a play in which he analysed a deaf man's glance, but I didn't see the play and anyway I wouldn't have learnt anything from it because Vassya isn't deaf. He isn't even in the habit of turning a deaf ear to what you say to him; and yet some of your words may cause a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He has the knack of laughing off your remarks and accusations, and the smile he exhibits when confronting your ire doesn't say whether he is guilty or not guilty. There are all sorts of lie detectors which are used by ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, so they don't really have to switch on a cumbersome apparatus in order to unmask a suspicious individual. I'm entirely incapable of finding out whether a man or a woman standing in front of me is guilty of a crime or a saint whose bones will be preserved as a relic in some monastery or other.

I recall some of Vassya's smiles, but I still don't know whether they're crooked or not. His front teeth aren't crooked: his broad, benevolent smiles have enabled me to see and even contemplate them rather often. If I kept a diary I would write in it almost every day, 'Slowly a smile spread across his face.' Alas, I don't keep a diary and I meet Vassya every four years, according to my calculations; or every five years. Shall I spend three months in his company to study his smiles and their meanings? Some people believe that smiles betray a person's true nature more infallibly than frowns and I agree

with this observation all the more eagerly since Vassya frowns very seldom. How to study the frowns of a person who frowns only twice a week? I wish I could write in my non-existent diary, 'He frowned at me, clearly annoyed. And I continued to annoy him so as to study his frowns at leisure.' People who frown a lot or have very expressive faces usually develop deep lines as they get older, but Vassya looks young and my Saint Petersburg friend – Dinussya – thought he was 35 when her gaze fell upon him for the first time. I know he is 53 years old and I can't help wondering how he has managed to protect his looks from the harmful effects of the sun, of the moon and of the stars that count our years without respite and mercy.

And yet I can't say his face isn't expressive, for it is always ready to express his emotions and gratitude, his opinion on the matter under discussion and the grief one is bound to experience upon losing a friend or a hope. He doesn't really need to open his mouth: his face is far more eloquent than any words, however eloquent and persuasive. In short, his face undergoes all sorts of metamorphoses which, oddly enough, make you believe it doesn't change at all, being insensitive to the universe and even to the Hereafter. (I know that the Hereafter is situated outside this world. Does this also apply to the universe? Can all the worlds be found *within* the universe?) If there are too many trinkets in a cardboard box, you get the feeling there's only one object in it; the same goes for Vassya's face. You can find *anything* in it: honesty, treason, crime, compassion, charity, generosity, gloom, doom, the full bloom of youth and so on and so forth. At the same time it is just Vassya's face and you're completely at sea with its smiles and frowns. You're tempted to tell him, 'Don't frown so – it spoils your pretty face.' And you round off your demands by saying, 'Could you let me have a look at your unspoiled, pure, *immaculate* face? I wish you'd allow me to see your face with no additives, so to speak. What are you frowning about now? What have I done?'

Vassya does frown from time to time, especially if someone says he is a bastard. I suppose he would frown if I told him he is a crook, a bastard and a swindler. Actually, Marussya says he is not an illegitimate offspring of a European queen, contrary to what he tells everyone whenever he deigns to enlarge upon his ancestors. 'He's just the son of a concierge.'

'What about his father?' ask Marussya's guests.

'Her boyfriend. He made a fortune through some sham property deal. You can make a fortune out of junk if you call it "antiques". Well, with a personal fortune of 20 million euros, you don't need to rob museums. But Vassya's been getting up to all sorts of mischief lately.'

'Someone else's soul is murky,' say the Russians. I don't care about Vassya's soul and even my own soul doesn't take up too much room in my train of thought. Vassya believes in God; so do I. But I don't ask my soul superfluous questions such as, 'How are you today? Are you worried about your salvation, my salvation? Are you in trim for the run on Sunday?'

'How often do you go to church?' Vassya asked me once.

'Not very often, I'm afraid.'

'You should. Every Russian should go to church, otherwise he's not Russian,' he said.

‘Perhaps I’m not Russian,’ I answered.

‘In my area there’s only one Orthodox church. Every Sunday I drive 40 kilometres to attend a religious service. My soul runs towards God whenever I listen to our Divine Liturgy.’

‘Shouldn’t it rather fly?’ I asked.

‘It would be presumptuous of me to say my soul *flies* towards God – I’m not a saint, you see. Nor do I say my soul crawls or walks towards God. I always choose the Middle Way. Anyway we have to run to keep up with God.’

‘Isn’t God immobile?’ I asked. ‘Doesn’t He always sit in the centre of the universe?’

‘God is immobile and mobile. And you need a mobile phone to catch up with Him.’ Slowly a smile spread across Vassya’s face.

Is there no room in Vassya’s soul for worldly matters, for the pictures he wants to steal at all cost? Does his mind deal with thefts and other acts of civil disobedience? He does his best to persuade me that his soul is beyond suspicion. What about his *mind*? Does it also run towards God in churches and elsewhere? It’s no easy task to rob people if you’re always on the run. The pictures you may yearn to steal are *immobile* and you keep running around them in circles. ‘When will you steal the pictures?’ you are asked now and then. ‘We’ve been waiting for you to steal them for a decade at least.’

‘I shouldn’t stop in my tracks,’ you answer. ‘I’m supposed to keep up with God and only by *running* after Him can I do it properly.’

‘The pictures are yours for the taking. Why don’t you take them?’

‘If I take the pictures, I’ll lose God. And so I’ll lose everything down to the pictures.’

‘You don’t have them yet. You can’t lose what you don’t have.’

‘For nothing in the world will I part with God.’

I paid 11,000 euros for Vecherova’s picture. The English say ‘a drop in the ocean’; the Americans answer ‘a drop in the bucket’. Taking into consideration Vassya’s fortune, one shouldn’t use the American expression when speaking about this theft and the contribution it made to the swindler’s bank accounts: it’s certainly not a drop in the *bucket*. The ocean is probably too big, but if we switch to the Russian language we get the appropriate word at last – ‘the sea’. A drop in the sea. Anyway I still can’t figure out why he did it. Just to keep his hand in?

Did he *really* steal and sell the picture I bought? If he didn’t steal it, he could find a plausible pretext to restore it to its legal owner, saying, ‘It’s a long and messy business. The auctioneer put the picture in his attic because no one had asked for it. And his charwoman put it in the darkest corner of the attic when she was tidying the attic up. So for years and years no one could see the picture you’d bought. No one could even guess it was there, standing in a corner. But I called the auctioneer and said, “I’ll sue you if the picture isn’t found in the space of two days.” So he found it. He climbed the ladder leading to the attic and found the picture.’

He might also have said, ‘The whole incident started as an innocent caper. I wondered if you were likely to forget the picture in the long run. If you *had* forgotten it, I’d have concluded you were

engrossed in Beethoven's sonatas, anxious to play the whole cycle at the Royal Albert Hall. But you play only five or six sonatas. And you've written no masterpieces of late.'

Vassya said nothing of the kind because he stole and sold the picture.

10

Scholars have simplified the notation so that a Long Count date written 9.16.4.4.1 means that 9 Baktuns, 16 Katuns, 4 Tuns, 4 Uinals, and 1 day have elapsed since the zero day of the Long Count, which the correct correlation fixes at August 11, 3114 BC. The 'zero' date is written 0.0.0.0.0 but can also be written 13.0.0.0.0 (as the completion day of the previous cycle). The 'end-date' of a 13-Baktun cycle is thus written 13.0.0.0.0. The use of the term 'end-date' gives rise to the mistaken notion that the Maya calendar ends in 2012. But Maya time is cyclic, and it should go without saying that time continues into the next cycle. We use similar conventions in our language when we speak of 'the end of the day', but we don't expect the world to end at midnight.

Scholars might have simplified something for the sake of a few well-read individuals versed in the Maya lore, but I can't make head or tail of these details. I do understand what the zero day means: in the course of my life I've lived through many zero days which correspond to the idioms 'back to square one' and 'to turn over a new leaf'. But what on earth is the zero day of the Long Count? This Long Count proves to be so long one gets the feeling it must stretch as far as the eye can see – forward and *backward*. To what extent is the eye of time long-sighted or short-sighted? Or should I speak about the eye of *eternity*? Is the Long Count a synonym of eternity? In this case there will be no end either at midnight or midday. No zero days, no zero nights. Thanks to the Long Count, the world is eternal.

Not quite, not quite. The author of the book still touches upon the fateful year – 2012. He says the Maya time is cyclic and consequently we are to expect a new cycle, a new series of trials and tribulations; unless we free ourselves from good and bad karmas.

For the purpose of understanding 2012, one first needs to know that December 21, 2012, is the end of the 13-Baktun cycle in the Long Count calendar, and in Maya philosophy the 13-Baktun cycle equals one 'World Age'. Furthermore, it is important to clarify that December 21, 2012, is not the invention of imaginative modern writers but is a true and established artefact of the Maya philosophy of time.

I couldn't care less about Baktun and its cycles, even though they seem to engulf or equal one 'World Age'. I just want to know how old the world is and what we are to expect from it. Is the world old or

middle-aged? Is it bound to pass away in December 2012, bearing the Maya prophecy out? ‘I’m shocked by how old the world looks,’ said Vassya the other day. Was it a zero day of sorts?

They are used to saying any end is linked to beginnings – to another day, another night, another cycle, another life, another love. They must be mistaken: not every end is followed by a beginning. The world grows tired even if it looks like a dancer in his or her prime. No point in saying, ‘I suspect the world is past its prime’: it goes on dancing. Plisetskaya used to dance at the age of 70 and many people found she looked like a young ballerina. There’s a Soviet novel in which a pilot sets himself up as a hero during the Second World War. His plane crash-landed and burst into flames. He lost the use of his legs, but the catastrophe didn’t prevent him from crawling through the woods until he came across a group of children. (Does the verb ‘to come’ sound right in the context?) In Part Two of the novel he spends several months in a hospital where he resolves to resume his post in the squadron in spite of his frailty. Our jokers said Plisetskaya’s husband – a famous composer – was going to write another ballet for his wife. In Act One, Plisetskaya was to crawl across the stage; she was to spend Act Two in a bed installed on the stage, not far from the wings. I don’t approve of this joke: Plisetskaya is a dancer of genius and therefore should be praised for her lifelong devotion to art. And I don’t like the situations in which a hero becomes the laughing stock of those who would have spent the rest of their lives on beaches, had such a disaster befallen them.

What about the *world*? Was it wounded? Did it lose the use of its limbs? Time may fly faster than before, but the speed of time – or of light – doesn’t necessarily influence the world, its ways and habits. Like a baby it may crawl around on its hands and knees. Does it have the energy to get out of bed? What if it *is* old after all? What if it was invalidated out of the service because of injuries it received in the course of the 20th century?

This Long Count example didn’t occur on a period ending, such as a Tun ending or a Katun ending. If celestial events occurred perfectly on one of these period endings, future events would more easily fit into the Long Count’s predictive framework. For this, we can look at the Long Count date 9.14.0.0.0 – the completion of the 14th Katun of the 9th Baktun. Corresponding to December 3,711 AD, this particular Long Count period ending is found at Copan, Tortuguero, Tikal, Calakmul, and other sites, suggesting it had a meaning with universal appeal.

Did it appear in Paris, in London, in Moscow? What kind of universal appeal are we offered by this text? These numbers occur at Tikal and some other cities I’ve never heard about. Their times may be different from ours, for all I know. We live in different worlds that don’t communicate with each other. They wouldn’t even communicate with their hands, if they had some for the purpose of which I also know nothing. Tun, Katun, Baktun, cartoon, shoals of tuna. I throw these names up in the air, but I’m not supposed to catch them. Actually I wouldn’t mind if they fell to the floor and broke before my very eyes. And if some future events fitted into the Long Count’s ‘predictive’ framework, I might not

be able to take advantage of the events because my long counts are certainly different from theirs. I can't predict their numbers; they can't predict mine. Nothing is predictive in the situation we are facing unless we stay *within* our own long count without attempting to break into others. We can predict changes in climate with a surprising degree of accuracy, provided the climate we are dealing with is *our* climate and not someone else's.

I cannot predict what will happen next year, but I know I'll get up tomorrow morning and have lunch in a Versailles restaurant. Of course I may die in a few hours so I'd better predict this occurrence too: no one will ever prevent me from making several predictions at once. It was predicted that a comet would collide with the Earth. It is *our* Earth so the prediction is bound to come true. Are Tortuguero and Calakmul situated on *our* Earth? They can't be found in our times – that's for sure. (They're *not* in my computer's memory.) But I'm not sure whether the prediction analysed in the book I'm quoting may come true or not for the simple reason that I know nothing about its whereabouts. Calakmul, Tortuguero. Did they drop from another galaxy, from some twilight zone?

The famous Long Count date at Coba is interesting because it takes the Long Count far beyond the level of the Baktun. Most dates in the Long Count use only the first five place value levels, but it theoretically can be extended indefinitely. The Coba date is basically the same date as that in the Creation Texts found elsewhere, which identify the end of the last era of 13 Baktuns on August 11, 3114 BC. This is usually written 13.0.0.0.0, but at Coba the previous cyclic periods are also given, such that we have a total of nineteen levels above the Baktun, thousands of times larger than modern science's estimate for the age of the universe: 13.0.0.0.0.

What on earth does *that* mean? The last number looks weird on account of its length and its baker's dozen repeated 20 times. And there are four zeros at the end: even the baker's dozen is powerless to express the horror of the situation. (The Russians say, 'Devil's dozen.') At least it can't do it on its own. Zero days, zero nights, zero years. To zero in on zero time. What's more, Stalin's stooges used to call him Coba. The only good news concerns the age of the universe. But is this assigned to the zero universe? Of course one might say,

*'Don't throw that universe away,
You'll find a use for it one day.'*

What kind of use, may I ask? Do I need a long number made up of zeros?

In *History of Mathematics* by D. E. Smith I found the following piece of information: 'If zero is added to a number, the sum is that number itself; if zero is subtracted, the number remains unchanged; if zero is multiplied, the result is zero; and if a number is multiplied by zero, the product is zero only.'

Apparently it comes from an Indian treatise. No point in multiplying a zero universe; no point in dealing with it. What would I do with a zero? Suppose it is a wheel my car lost on its way to a *positive* universe. I get out of the car, head for the lost wheel, pick it up and roll it along the side of the road back to the car. But what can be done with a zero universe? Is it a wheel lost by Helios' chariot? What may be the consequences of such a disaster? Of course Helios can get off the chariot and roll the wheel back to it.

*'You need a chariot jack
In order to put the wheel back,'*

Selene says to him.

'You can't teach an old Sun new tricks,' answers Helios.

*'You shouldn't be tight, you shouldn't be tight –
You've got an appointment with the night.'*

'I mean you shouldn't be *late*,' says Selene.

'Mind your own business,' says Helios.

'Do you want humans to work 24 hours a day? If they don't see the dark, they won't be able to fall asleep.'

'At least they'll find their beds – they can't see in the dark.'

'But there are cat people among them,' says Selene.

'Even cat people are afraid of the dark.'

'Can you teach an old cat new tricks?' says Selene.

'The Sun can do everything,' answers Helios.

'So can the Moon,' says Selene.

'Can you put this bloody wheel back?' says Helios.

'Perhaps. But I don't want to – I'm weary of shining at night.'

'Humans have temper tantrums when they get stuck in traffic jams,' says Helios.

'When you're stuck in traffic, a mobile phone's an absolute life-saver,' says Selene.

'But if you get stuck in the middle of the sky with no chariots around –'

'Air traffic has increased 30% in the last decade,' says Selene.

'They fly *beneath* my chariot, far away from its wheels.'

'Your chariot has only one wheel now.'

'I know damn well how much trouble it'll cause,' says Helios.

'So do I,' says Selene. 'By the way, I've always wondered what you do during the night. How do you get back to your starting point, to the east? I can't see you from where I hang in the sky.'

‘In a huge cup I float around the Earth by the stream of Ocean.’

‘Do you feel comfortable in the cup?’

‘Not really. And what do *you* do in the daytime?’

‘I run around the Earth through the woods. Doctors have discovered that jogging and swimming do wonders for your health. Why don’t you *swim* along the stream of Ocean? Anyway it’s too late to speak about that. But I would *jog* through the sky if I were you. Leave the chariot alone. Cheer up! Regular exercise is good for your health.

‘Health is joy and joy is health.

Let’s accumulate more wealth.’

You are in love and if, for some reason, you decide to add a zero world to your love, your love remains unchanged as if you hadn’t done anything with it. So why should you fret over these zeros? You subtract zero from your possessions and realise that your villa and your car remain within your reach. Your eight children are crammed into the back of the car, but you don’t mind because you realise a zero world can deprive you neither of your children nor of the back of your car. Even the wheels of your car are still there so you don’t have to roll them to your car and ask your wife to look for a jack. And your gardener – whose name is Jack – doesn’t have to plant out the geraniums in early June: all your geraniums are rooted to the spot and no one is on the point of picking them up.

And what if you don’t really like the form of the zero? You’d rather live within a huge heart, for a heart shape is the symbol of love. And you speak and think about life only in terms of love, whether you refer to God or humans or animals. Insects, too, deserve your love, your heart and its shape. So why live within a zero or just outside it? Suppose you see a zero whenever you wake up and look out of the window. You make a grimace of disgust: for all the love you have stored within your heart and elsewhere, you don’t manage to fall in love with the zero. A zero is just a zero, nothing else. If you ask what it feels towards humans, it may answer, ‘Zero.’ If you ask a zero what its childhood was like, it may answer, ‘I don’t remember anything.’

‘Did you have an accident? Did you suffer from loss of memory after the accident?’

‘I’ve got no memory. I’ve got a lacuna instead of a memory.’

‘But you do remember you’ve got no memory, don’t you?’

The zero shows you a scrap of paper on which the following words are written in black ink: ‘I don’t remember anything. I’ve got no memory. I’ve got a lacuna instead of a memory.’

‘But you remember *some* words. You remember the word childhood, don’t you?’

‘I don’t remember anything. I’ve got no memory. I’ve got a lacuna instead of a memory.’

‘But when I spoke to you about your childhood, you knew what I was speaking about.’

‘I don’t remember anything. I’ve got no memory. I’ve got a lacuna instead of a memory.’

‘What if I try and forget Your Majesty, my dear Zero?’

*Five, four, three, two,
One. How do you do?*

Is our future another Ground Zero? The 21st of December, 2112. 2184. The Earth is a popular tourist destination. Hordes of tourists flock to the Earth each year. What they see is no longer the smouldering wreckage of our civilisation. Just a number of zeros or one gigantic zero.

Orwell's *1984* is widely acclaimed for its contribution to the fall of communism. The book might be entitled *1919* or *1920* or *1921* or *1922* or *1934* or *1948* – if we single the following paragraph out:

It was always at night – the arrests invariably happened at night. The sudden jerk out of sleep, the rough hand shaking your shoulder, the lights glaring in your eyes, the ring of hard faces round the bed. In the vast majority of cases there was no trial, no report of the arrest. People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated: vaporized was the usual word.

Being a good journalist, Orwell described what hourly happened in the Soviet Union until Stalin's death: afterwards, people would suddenly find themselves in lunatic asylums to which they were conveyed in the daytime, not at night. There were also arrested and imprisoned, but at least you can peruse the reports of these arrests if you take the trouble to leaf through the files preserved in some national archives. I don't know what is going on in North Korea, but I'm sure Orwell was loath to confine his inspiration to small countries only: he aspired to encompass humankind.

He gives some thought to what he calls the Thought Police. 'The Thought Police would get him just the same. He had committed – would still have committed, even if he had ever set pen to paper – the essential crime that contained all others in itself. Thoughtcrime, they called it. Thoughtcrime was not a thing that could be concealed forever. You might dodge successfully for a while, even for years, but sooner or later they were bound to get you.' Of course many people know what you think about, especially if you have a mobile phone and communicate your thoughts to your wife or husband on a regular basis. But if you say, 'Down with Big Brother', no one will arrest you. And yet the United States is everybody's Big Brother – according to *some* people. Actually the authorities don't give a damn about our thoughts, provided they contain neither little girls, nor little boys, nor bombs.

The three slogans of the Party described by Orwell are: 'War is peace', 'Freedom is slavery', 'Ignorance is strength'. The first slogan is very popular now: a country is at war with another country, but the word 'war' is replaced by the word 'peace' and instead of 'murder' we say 'collateral damage'. We kill for the sake of peace and call our victims 'terrorists', even if they are just peaceful citizens.

We hope the different ethnic groups in such and such an area can live together in peaceful co-existence. If they don't, we obliterate the different groups and leave only one group that lives in peaceful co-existence with itself. And if it doesn't, we help one part of this group get rid of another part. 'This is a peaceful solution,' says a general.

Nietzsche would have approved of the second slogan because he thought in terms of fate to which one has to bow in order to become free, craving for eternal recurrence – freedom is slavery to fate, in other words. (*Amor fati*.) There's nothing wrong with it. You don't become free by asking your mother to give birth to you in the United States or another free country. If you adhere to this slogan in good faith, you are free, whatever regime happens to reign in the country of your birth or youth.

'Ignorance is strength.' In days of yore, you were often shackled by unwritten rules or slogans such as: 'You should read masterpieces', 'You should listen to masterpieces', 'You should attend every performance of the Ballets Russes', 'You should enjoy Schoenberg, Proust, Joyce, Musil and Klee'. Now you can read whatever you like and get away with it. But if you don't read a bestseller, people stop talking to you. What can they talk about except business and bestsellers? So they don't talk to you at all and your business is defined by newspapers as bad and slack. The way to be successful in business is always to stay one jump ahead of your competitors, but you're unable to jump because no one talks to you. Reading newspapers isn't enough, as everyone knows. So you go bankrupt after only a year in business.

*To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone – to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone:
From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of doublethink – greetings!*

The letter written by the protagonist of Orwell's novel. In our world men aren't different from one another, but they don't live alone – far from it. There's a multitude of truths and Orwell must have known it: I'm sure he read Nietzsche in his spare time. 'What is done cannot be undone.' Nothing has ever been undone – at least that's what God-fearing individuals affirm. Isn't God's memory omniscient and boundless?

When did the age of uniformity begin? Isn't 'democracy' synonymous with 'uniformity'?

Three cheers for the age of solitude! Should I write a letter to *those* people, to the distant offspring of our society bent on communication?

To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and mostly live alone – to a time when many truths exist and masterpieces are constructed and not deconstructed:

From the age of uniformity, from the age of the herd instinct, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of onethink – greetings!

What name shall I bestow upon our age? Yeswecannot. The nuclear age, the computer age, the yeswecannot age.

*Zero, one, two, three –
A plum, a cross, a chestnut tree.*

11

On Russian TV I saw a man who contemplates the stars through a homemade telescope, yearning for a sort of space odyssey – a one-way journey, as he put it. ‘I don’t want to come back,’ he said. ‘Why should I? I’ll get lost amidst the stars. Journalists will write I’m a tragic victim of destiny. What do journalists know about destiny? Do they consult the stars about these matters? Life and death, space and time. You don’t feel time on Earth, do you? At last I’ll know what space is about.’

Perhaps it *is* advisable to buy a single to Mars or the Milky Way. Instead, I have to unravel the mystery I’m not very fond of, even though the painting that legally belongs to me is involved in it to such an extent I’ve no idea where it is now. Suppose I know its whereabouts, but its new owner turns out to be a stranger of whom I’ve never heard and whose academic credentials leave a lot to be desired.

‘Why don’t you have this picture if you’re its rightful owner?’ he asks.

‘I wished to sell it, not to hang it in *my* house. I don’t like this sort of picture.’

‘Why did you buy it, then?’

‘I was told I’d be able to sell it for a good profit in a few years’ time.’

‘You’ve every right to speculate in property, but leave the arts alone. A piece of music is sacred. So is the picture we’re talking about.’

‘Won’t *you* sell this picture, once the economic crisis is over? It’s rather hypocritical of you, telling me not to speculate in works of art. I know more about music, literature and museums than you and all your relatives put together.’

Why didn’t I get the picture right after the auction sale devoted to Vecherova’s art? I don’t deny I bought it with a view to making a big profit in 2011 or in 2012 when, according to Vassya, its author would be at the top of her profession. I thought it was useless to go all the way to Brussels in order to get an object I would need several years later: I really had no wish to hang it in my living room. Besides, the auctioneer told me Vassya had taken the picture so as to give it to me at the earliest opportunity. ‘But we meet very seldom,’ I said to the auctioneer.

‘Why don’t you go and fetch it?’ he said.

‘It’s a long drive from Versailles to his castle,’ I said.

Now I would go to Australia to recover the picture I lost so stupidly, with such nonchalance. But the picture is not in Australia; and even if it *were* in Australia or New Zealand I wouldn't know where to look for it because Australia and New Zealand are much bigger than Vassya's castle. And I was unable to find my picture in his castle. It's true I didn't really look for it: I'm not in the habit of rummaging around other people's houses. Besides, I had no search warrant so Vassya might have handed me over to the French police, had he caught me red-handed. Anyway, had I found it somehow, I wouldn't have been able to prove it was the picture I had bought at an auction sale in Brussels.

'This picture is part of my Russian collection,' Vassya would have said to the police.

'Don't you remember I bought it on your advice?'

'I bought it in the Hague.'

'I saw this picture in the catalogue you showed me. The waiter, the plate of oysters.'

'There are many oysters in the world and they often appeal to painters.'

'There are many waiters too. But this waiter is unique.'

'This picture's unique. It's in a class of its own. All my pictures are like that. Trash isn't in my line of business.'

When did the whole story start? When did he realise he could cheat me with impunity?

<i>0.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>3114 BC</i>
<i>1.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>2715 BC</i>
<i>2.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>2325 BC</i>
<i>3.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>1932 BC</i>
<i>4.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>1537 BC</i>
<i>5.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>1143 BC</i>
<i>6.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>748 BC</i>
<i>7.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>354 BC</i>
<i>8.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>41 AD</i>
<i>9.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>435 AD</i>
<i>10.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>830 AD</i>
<i>11.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>1224 AD</i>
<i>12.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>1618 AD</i>
<i>13.0.0.0.0</i>	<i>2012 AD</i>

'I always found it interesting,' writes John Major Jenkins, 'that the middle of the 13-Baktun cycle (6.19.5.0.0 = 550 BC) corresponds to the appearance of two pivotal historical figures, key avatars of Western and eastern religion and philosophy – the Buddha and Pythagoras.'

I just don't understand what all this is about; and yet I've already come across Baktun cycles on several occasions. However often you utter the word 'Baktun', it doesn't get closer to you, staying out

of your reach on account of the Maya's outlook on life. And neither the Buddha nor Pythagoras can help you come to terms with all their Baktuns, Tuns and Tycoons. Baktun sounds almost like Baku – a city where I played with the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra back in 1972. Do I get nearer to Baktuns as I recall the concert in the first part of which I performed Prokofiev's *First Piano Concerto*? Prokofiev might have gone to Mexico during his so-called Western period, but I'm sure he didn't know much about the Maya civilisation; anyway, no vestiges of it appear in his works. So Prokofiev is of no help either.

What about all these figures, digits and numbers? Are they relevant in the context of the theft I recount in the hope of finding solace in its intricacies? But the further I get, the angrier I grow so that no peace awaits me at the end of the tunnel through which I've been crawling for many days. What *does* await me? A sort of light? A light of sorts?

12

This story might have begun in 1224 AD or in 1618 AD when one of Vassya's forefathers cheated his long-standing friend at cards. A defective gene? I'm told a particular gene is responsible for the inheritance of kleptomania. Do our personalities result from the complex interplay between our genes and our environment? If so, I should study not only Vassya's genes but also the air he breathes and the water running in his kitchen and bathrooms; and also the water in which he swims almost every day. (He owns a swimming pool and it's a half-an-hour drive from his room to the Atlantic.) I wonder if the genes involved in this adventure are mutant or not. What difference does it make? Do mutant genes always cause cancer? I'll tell the story to my doctor and ask him the following question: 'Is it the culprit who usually succumbs to the disease?'

Is he *really* guilty of the theft? Before I come to any conclusion, I should describe to the court exactly what took place in Brussels and in Vassya's castle. But do I have enough evidence to sue the swindler for compensation? The lack of evidence means the case is unlikely to go to court. And only in court can you establish a person's guilt beyond any reasonable doubt: this is the prosecution's task, I'm told.

If you think you can rob someone by counting on his or her lapses of memory, you run the risk of being unmasked and taken to court: your victim's memory may remember its duty and other things as well. So a memory lapse may become a piece of evidence, enabling the victim's solicitor to say to the members of the jury, 'I now have compelling documentary evidence of the crime.' The point is it wasn't a memory lapse on my part: I just didn't want to have the picture at home. Neither the waiter nor the oysters appealed to me as I leafed through the catalogue lying on Vassya's chest of drawers – on *one* of his chests of drawers, to be exact. I made no effort when I suddenly felt like reviving this episode from my recent past: my memory hadn't deserted its post. Among other things, I recalled the words uttered by the auctioneer: 'Your picture must be in Vassya's castle. He said he'd take care of it.'

Well, I didn't stumble upon it in Vassya's castle, contrary to the auctioneer's prediction. The crook must have hidden Vecherova's masterpiece in another castle; or he just sold it to a Russian oligarch.

So he counted on my memory which, in his opinion, was entirely usurped by music and art in general. 'Don't you have your head in the clouds?' he asked me once.

'Of course I do,' I answered: at the time I didn't know he would steal my picture, counting on my head and on the clouds. And I added light-heartedly, 'I also have it in the trees from time to time.'

'Don't you have it in the sea every Saturday? Or are you afraid of drowning? By the way, do you know how to swim?' Usually this question – the last one – is asked on the eve of a murder; but I'm still alive and even cheerful in adversity.

So he thought my head was in the sea, at the bottom of the ocean. You can rob someone who happens to be on holiday and from whom you may receive a postcard with the following piece of information: 'The campsite is in a beautiful location next to the beach.' Actually you wouldn't rob those who are weighed down with all their camping equipment: sleeping bags, gas cookers and pans. You'd better rob a man who writes to you on a sheet of paper you may find in the imperial suite of a posh hotel, 'A few kilometres from the crowded beaches of Spain's Mediterranean coast, many once-thriving villages stand deserted and in ruins.' You realise at once that the man you're acquainted with intends to buy the area in order to convert it into a sports and leisure complex. And while he negotiates for yet another contract, you empty his penthouse.

If your head is permanently at the bottom of the sea, you can be robbed at any time, provided your penthouse isn't devoid of rare and precious treasures. I live in a huge flat and the furniture I've got is precious only to *some* extent: Vassya wouldn't have stolen my chest of drawers and wing chairs. Why did he rob me of my picture? Was it exciting to steal it when my head was presumably under water? But now it's no longer under water, judging from what I see around me as I wake up and remove a sort of shell that covers my left eye: my doctor operated on it three days ago. Of course the images I see with my left eye are misty, blurred, not to say non-existent. But my right eye is perfectly all right so I know for sure I'm not under water, let alone at the bottom of the sea. 'I'm not Captain Nemo, if you must know' – that's what I should say to Vassya first thing tomorrow morning. (Every day I brace myself for a phone call I'll give him sooner or later.)

Did he get a real kick out of stealing Vecherova's masterpiece? Frankly speaking, I'm not sure it's a masterpiece; and I'm pretty sure Vassya was in two minds about its quality. So he stole it for the sake of stealing, not in order to enrich his collection of Russian portraits, furniture and imperial letters.

A lone hooded man who squirmed through a broken window and evaded security alarms stole five paintings by Picasso, Matisse and other artists overnight Wednesday from the Paris Museum of Modern Art in a brash theft of art valued at \$114 million to \$127 million. Museum officials discovered the theft shortly before 7 a.m. Thursday. They said they had captured video images of the black-clad burglar as he stole into the museum, housed in the Palais de Tokyo, the

1937 Art Deco showpiece that sits across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower. The burglary – which triggered no electronic alarms – immediately raised fresh questions about museum security in the French capital. Last summer, a thief snatched a red sketchbook of 33 Picasso drawings from the Picasso Museum while it was undergoing renovations. Security alarms did not sound in that case, either.

I lighted upon this text in the *International Herald Tribune*; I picked it up at Frankfurt Airport as I was going back to Paris after a recital I had given in a city the name of which I can't remember. (Where's my head today? Under water or in the trees?) But I remember this issue of the *Herald Tribune*, otherwise I wouldn't have quoted its contribution to my awareness of the seamy side of life. Actually I went so far as to ask my Parisian friend, Monicus, to search for it on the Internet: in Versailles I don't have access to it. It was five or six months ago; at the time Monicus wasn't yet familiar with this service thanks to which you can read newspapers printed in Cambodia, even if the issues you're interested in date back to the 19th century. Four days ago she finally sent me the material I had been looking for since last October. I decided to write a book on my picturesque or rather picaresque adventure six months ago.

I think it's far more exciting to put a hood on your head, which shouldn't be in the clouds at that particular moment, and squirm through a broken window all the while evading security alarms and security guards. You know that what awaits you at the end of the tunnel is not a virtually unknown Russian painter but Picasso and Matisse whose value on the market and elsewhere – in the hearts of connoisseurs, for instance – can hardly be overestimated. First you have to break a window without being spotted by a nosy passerby or a cat: animals' propensity for arousing suspicions is well-known and has been embroidered upon by Agatha Christie, among other novelists. (*The Dumb Witness*.) Vassya got only 11,000 euros. If he sold the picture to a Russian oligarch, he got 50,000 euros. 'What's the absolute maximum you can afford to pay?' he asked the oligarch.

'I could pay 20 billion dollars, but not for this picture. Apparently there are other pictures on the market: Picasso, Matisse. I could pay 127 million dollars for them. I don't know how much Vecherova's picture's worth, but I like it. I adore oysters and some waiters are my good friends and assistants. So I'll pay 50,000 euros, not a cent more.'

'Why can't you pay more?' said Vassya. 'Vecherova's a painter of genius. The last time she paid me a visit we took a walk in the garden. She made a quick freehand sketch of the view from the bridge. We had a fantastic time. She's a new Picasso, a new Matisse. Do you prefer old people to teenagers? Would you like to grow old? And what about your wife? Doesn't she go to beauty parlours every day? And what about *you*? A figure like yours is usually the product of many hours spent in the gym.'

'I felt so unfit after Christmas that I decided to join a gym,' said the oligarch.

'Anyway you look like a man who's found the secret to eternal youth.'

‘What about Matisse? Didn’t *he* find the secret to eternal youth?’ said the oligarch, pointing to a Matisse painting. ‘I bought it three years ago,’ he said, bringing a smile to his daughter’s face. ‘This picture will never grow old.’

The black-clad burglar is shown all over the world: the success of his robbery has given him unexpected celebrity status. Vassya is hardly known outside the family circle and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds: he joined it five years ago. He is also a member of the Royal Society for the Protection of Cats; and yet the latter society is incompatible with the former.

Anyway it’s far more exciting to test security alarms than my memory and patience. Why did he do it? Is it a test of my tolerance threshold? Anyway I’m exercising a new policy of zero tolerance against my offenders, and Vassya should be put in the picture about this policy.

Police and museum officials said little about the security failure, particularly whether the alarm system had malfunctioned or had been disabled. The French newspaper Le Parisien quoted an unidentified source from the museum who claimed that the security alarm had not worked for two months, and that management had been notified of the problem. But in a hastily called news conference outside the museum, Christophe Girard, deputy mayor of culture for Paris, told reporters that the museum was equipped with security alarms, and that three armed guards patrolling the museum on Wednesday night had not noticed anything amiss. ‘We must leave it to the police to determine how the security system was evaded,’ Mr Girard said.

Unfortunately the text I received by fax isn’t as exhaustive as the one I chanced upon at Frankfurt airport where I read it while waiting for my flight. In that text the author also touched upon some other robberies which were more attuned to what my dear Vassya or another thief of note did in Brussels right after the auction sale devoted to Ms Vecherova’s talent. Actually I shouldn’t draw a parallel between what happened to my picture and other robberies. My robbery is in a class of its own; nothing can be compared with it.

If I remember rightly, a *private* robbery was listed in the article I read at Frankfurt airport. I mean, the pictures someone stole didn’t belong to a museum; they were part of a private collection the owner of which – a middle-aged woman – had known a lot of wonderful painters personally. That woman knew how to appeal to young people; for a while a young man courted her hourly and she ended up inviting him to her house, to her private gallery. He drugged his sugar mummy and nonchalantly stole three paintings of hers after disabling the alarm system. Upon awakening, the woman threw a tantrum; I wonder why she got so upset about something that was utterly trivial. Of course the loss of the pictures couldn’t delight her, but the utter triviality of the theft might have helped her erase the crook from her mind: there’s no point in loving a commonplace individual.

I don’t mean that everybody ought to fall in love with Vassya whose art of stealing has reached the point where no one is able to compete with him despite an astronomical number of competitors.

But, to some extent, I respect him for this art because he teaches one how to defy the laws of human nature that forbid us to forget our possessions and dignity. I lost both in the course of this adventure.

In a Soviet film, three men stole a Rembrandt picture from the Hermitage. They didn't break anything and put no sleeping pills in the guard's Thermos. They just removed the picture from the wall where it had hung for more than a century. 'Restoration' said one of them and they left the museum, heading for a communal flat with a view to hiding the picture in a cupboard. Or did they hide it under a bed? The owner of the room said to his neighbours he liked to have breakfast in bed not only on a Saturday morning, but every day. He lived in a room with only two chairs, a bed and a table, and the picture was hidden under the bed on which his body was lying day and night. He told his neighbours, 'From now on, I'll have all my meals in bed because I'm fatally ill.' No one listened to him; no one wanted to steal the painting above which he was lying, eating and making love to his girlfriend who, incidentally, wasn't in the know. She didn't know that a precious picture stolen from the Hermitage was hidden under the bed. Had she been put in the picture about the theft, she would have become hysterical and insomniac. She would have insisted on staying with her boyfriend day and night in order to bend down and look under the bed every five minutes. She would have gone crazy in the long run because you can't sell a picture like that and she had no desire to keep it: she wasn't very keen on Rembrandt.

'The stature of the paintings would make them difficult to sell in the art market, raising questions about whether the theft was a form of kidnapping to demand ransom from the museum.' She gave a thought to this stratagem and even tried to talk her boyfriend into calling the museum without further ado: they all believed they were running out of time. 'I don't know their phone number,' said the man.

'Look it up in the directory,' she suggested.

'All directories lie,' he said. 'Do you remember what Stavrogin said to Liza Tushina? "All calendars lie."'

'But a telephone directory's not a calendar.'

'Everything and everybody are always lying. A woman lies about her age –'

'I've never lied to *you*,' she protested.

'Unfortunately you're not a telephone directory.'

'What would you do with a telephone directory in your bed?' she asked.

'You aren't the director of the Hermitage either,' he said. 'If you were, I'd demand a ransom from you. How much would you pay?'

'Ten million dollars, 20 million euros.'

'All right. So we can return the picture.'

That's what they actually did. They removed the picture from under the bed and took it to the museum. They hung it on the same wall, on the same spot – as if nothing had happened. The guard looked at it and said, 'My Rembrandt is much better now.'

‘Restoration work on this painting is now complete,’ said one of the thieves.

‘Restoration work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling is also complete,’ said the guard pensively. ‘I wish I were in Rome,’ he added, opening his Thermos.

13

6. *In accordance with Reference N°9 (the registration form), issued on 21 June 2005, in the selling flat the following persons are registered. Vinogradov Anatoly Isaevich Date of Birth 17 May 1947, Vinogradova Valerya Alexandrovna Date of birth 19 March 1945, Vinogradova Olga Anatoljevna Date of birth 23 February 1983.*
7. *The above flat wasn't alienable, not pawned, not contested and not sequestered at the moment of the signing of this Agreement. 'Sellers' guarantee that the alienable flat is free of any third persons, excepting habitation of the persons keeping the right to use this flat. The alienable flat is in a proper quality and satisfies the requirements of Housing Legislation of Russian Federation.*

Were the swindlers encouraged to learn foreign languages at school? They make many mistakes – on purpose, no doubt. They want to beguile their customers into believing they're poor Russian citizens incapable of fraud, of criminal thoughts. They have no intention of transferring their euros or dollars to a Swiss bank, which would enable them to live in the lap of luxury in the United States of America. But how would they live there? They have only a smattering of English.

Their knowledge of English allows them to sell their flat and buy a hut in some remote village, but they will never settle down in the States, let alone in England. They just look up every word they need in their dictionary. ‘Alienable’ means their flat may be transferred to the ownership of another man or woman. Marussya is a woman and so the document they supplied upon selling their flat was legal and correct from any notary's point of view. Oddly enough, this word was misunderstood at some point by somebody – perhaps by the person who has been living in the flat for more than five years. Marussya met this woman during her last visit to Saint Petersburg. She pulled herself together and knocked on the door behind which her property seemed to be waiting for her. Instead of the Vinogradovs, however – two sisters and one man – she saw a tall, dark-haired woman who gave her a piercing glance and asked curtly, ‘What do you want?’

‘It's my flat,’ said Marussya.

‘I beg your pardon?’ A scornful look, a scornful laugh.

‘I bought it recently,’ said Marussya.

‘I think your brain's been addled by the heat!’

‘I bought it some time ago,’ said Marussya.

‘I don't remember selling it to you,’ said the woman. ‘Besides, I've no intention of moving out. Why should I?’

‘What’s your name?’ asked Marussia.

‘Fuksovik. What’s yours?’

‘Marussia de Dragunovska.’

‘Okay. Now I know to whom I should never open this door.’

‘Why?’ asked Marussia. By way of an answer, Ms Fuksovik slammed the front door of her flat.

‘You told me you’d gone to your flat only two times,’ said Marussia’s Belgian lawyer. ‘You said nothing about Ms Fuksovik or anybody else.’

‘She spoke to me in a gruff voice, obviously annoyed that she’d been disturbed.’

‘You talked only about two sisters.’

‘That’s right,’ said Marussia. ‘*Mea culpa*. I was worried about my dignity.’

‘What does your dignity have to do with it?’

‘I’ve always longed for a society in which the dignity of all people is recognised,’ said Marussia.

‘Whose dignity are you alluding to? Ms Fuksovik’s? Or are you worried about the two sisters? What’s their name? Vinogradov, I believe.’

‘I must have blanked it out. Turchinskaya said in English, “You’ll need to paint over these dirty marks on the wall.” She learnt this sentence at school, I suppose. I was humiliated during the last visit to my flat, and I didn’t want to admit it. I just wanted to curl up and die. When the criminals get their deserts —’

‘We all get our deserts in the end,’ said the lawyer.

‘She said, “I think your brain’s been addled by the heat!” I’m afraid my sun-addled brain can’t make any sense of your instructions.’

‘You’ll have to use your initiative,’ said the lawyer.

‘I thought you said, “Don’t do anything on your own initiative.”’

‘There must be some misunderstanding. I said that the Russian government was riddled with bribery and corruption. Those monsters won’t listen to your tearful pleas. Neither will Putin, let alone Medvedev.’

‘I wonder if I’ll be able to retain my dignity throughout this ordeal.’ Marussia spoke in a voice vibrant with emotion.

‘I’m sorry to put you through this ordeal,’ said the lawyer.

‘You got me wrong,’ said Marussia. ‘I must admit I feel rather uneasy about the whole affair. I felt what I was being asked to do took away my dignity and self-respect. They wanted me to behave *normally*, as if nothing had happened.’

‘Normally?’

‘They wanted me to think I’d never bought anything.’

‘Anything?’

‘This flat, I mean.’

‘But you did buy it, didn’t you?’

‘Of course I did. Can’t you see the Agreement signed by the notary?’

‘How much did you pay?’

‘\$200,000, more or less.’

‘Somehow we got our wires crossed because I’d got \$170,000 written down in my notebook. The value of property has slumped.’

Marussya thinks the word ‘alienable’ was misconstrued by both the notary and Ms Fuksovik. For some obscure reason, they deduced from this word that an *alien* could live in the alienable flat, notwithstanding Marussya’s visible and invisible presence – her signature, among other things. They decided, moreover, that the alien might have been *born* in this flat, which entitled him or her to stay in it until his or her death. In this particular case, it is Ms Fuksovik’s death that came into their minds, although they chiefly spoke about her *birth* in this flat. According to them, one had no alternative but to die in the house where one was born – in the same house, in the same bed. So, as a matter of fact, Ms Fuksovik wasn’t alien in relation to the flat Marussya bought after much soul-searching; she merely didn’t match the description given by Ms Turchinskaya and approved by the notary. Her name doesn’t figure in the document I quoted some time ago, on several occasions. And she wasn’t present during the ritual at the end of which Marussya let out a sigh of relief: she thought she was a happy owner of a flat situated in Saint Petersburg.

Instead of Ms Fuksovik, Marussya saw two sisters. ‘This agreement was drawn up and verified by the notary,’ said Ms Turchinskaya, showing them the document I can’t help drawing upon. They signed the document and sighed heavily, heartrendingly, as if loath to part with the walls they had grown accustomed to in the course of many years. Two days later Marussya saw them once again; this time their meeting took place in the flat the sisters had sold in the heat of the moment. ‘Against my better judgment,’ said one of them, bursting into tears. The house was a complete shambles – not only Marussya’s flat but the entire house with all its occupants seemed on the move. Judging from the chaos she saw, the sisters were on the point of leaving the house forever. Their underwear and dresses were strewn all over the floor; a large pile of sand embellished a worn-out carpet.

‘Did you notice the tears in their eyes when they talked about the flat?’ asked Turchinskaya.

‘I saw the tears,’ said Marussya.

‘They don’t want to move out. But they have to – they signed the Agreement.’

For once, Turchinskaya didn’t lie: they did leave the flat and disappeared forever either in Saint Petersburg, which is huge enough to hide two sisters and all their relatives, or abroad – perhaps in Belgium. Though relatively small, this country is capable of hiding an impressive number of sisters; and their relatives may settle down in Luxembourg.

Is Ms Fuksovik in any way related to the sisters? ‘They must be hand in glove with the present occupant of the flat,’ says Marussya. ‘There are wheels within wheels in this organisation – you never really know what’s going on. Anyway, they should be charged with conspiracy to defraud.’ Neither

she nor the Belgian solicitor can offer any other explanation for the sisters' behaviour. An underlying pessimism infuses Marussya's life; and yet she doesn't know for sure whether she is just a pessimist or a pessimist and a fatalist into the bargain. Anyway she believes her Saint Petersburg adventure is over; she often utters the word 'dénouement'. I wonder why she asked me to find a lawyer for her in Saint Petersburg where I'm acquainted neither with lawyers nor with their clients: I've never heard my friends talk about lawyers or the need to seek their help. 'If something *can* be done to postpone the dénouement of my adventure,' she thinks in her leisure time, 'it should take place at the scene of the crime.'

Three years ago, she confided in the Belgian ambassador to Russia, asking him to rescue her from 'a gang of crooks, from their clutches', as she put it. In her letter she says she didn't intend to live in the flat herself because she needed money and not a pied à terre in Saint Petersburg. 'If some day I feel like staying in the city of Peter the Great, I'll go to one of the magnificent hotels I saw in the brochure supplied by my travel agency.' She says she received 1,000 dollars every month, but 'that did not last', she points out. 'So I wish to sell the flat I bought three years ago, following a tip-off from a friend who is no longer my friend.'

She says she wasted a lot of time and energy in her endeavour to recover the flat that belonged to her no longer. 'Now I have to spent considerable amounts of money because this flat cannot be recovered with the aid of incompetent people. I hired an international lawyer who does nothing to help me. I feel he is just going through the motions. He should be dismissed from his job for incompetence. But I have not dismissed him yet because he is an honest man. And nowadays honest men and women are few and far between, as everybody knows. Seven months ago I hired another lawyer – a white Russian officer – who speaks Russian fluently and goes to Saint Petersburg twice a year. The following document is the first substantive information obtained by my new lawyer.' And then Marussya quotes the end of the Agreement I fell in love with upon seeing it for the first time:

8. *Right of property for the alienable flat passes into the hands of the buyer beginning from the moment of state registration of this agreement.*
9. *All persons having registration in the above flat engage to be struck off the register and to quit the flat during 10 days from the moment of the signing of this agreement.*
10. *'Buyer' pays expenses referred to the conclusion of this agreement.*
11. *The contents of Russian Federation Civil Code Articles N°N° 209, 288, 292, 460, 551, 556, 558 are explained to us by the notary.*
12. *The present agreement are made and signed in duplicate.*

'There are nuances I don't understand,' writes Marussya. 'To whom were the contents of the Russian Federation Civil Code explained? No one even took the trouble to utter the word "code" in my presence. I dread to think what they said about me behind my back, but they said nothing to this effect

when I was listening to them. And I was listening to them all the time because I smelt a rat. “The present agreement are made and signed in duplicate.” Their English is not up to my standards. That is why they did not disclose any details about the Russian Civil Code, I suppose. At least they might have uttered the word “code”, in my opinion. But it is their signature I turn my attention to at present. The above document is NOT signed.’ And Marussya quotes the very end of the Agreement:

St. Petersburg June 22, 2005

The present agreement is certified by me, a Notary Public Tarakanovsky Leonid and signed by the both parts in my presence. Their personalities are ascertained, their capability and the belonging of this flat to ‘Sellers’ are verified.

The present agreement is under the jurisdiction of state registration.

Registered in the list as N°3-5902

Enforced payment in accordance with tariff 8 573 56 roubles.

The Notary’s signature

‘There is no signature,’ Marussya goes on. ‘There is no signature of any kind. So no one was “struck off the register” and I am NOT in the register. In other words, I AM NOT THE ONLY LEGAL OWNER OF THE FLAT. There are many illegal owners of this flat, one might presume. But I am not of their number. I am not even an ILLEGAL owner of this flat. Why do they speak about 10 days? Did Ms Fuksovik move in 10 days after my departure from Saint Petersburg? They actually speak about the signatures and the document in question. I did sign it, by the way. Please, find enclosed this document. You will notice my signature at the bottom of the second page. There are no OTHER signatures on that page, on any other page. Only MY signature can be found in the document I am sending you. What does that mean? Did they resort to invisible ink? You may ask if I saw them sign it. Frankly speaking, I don’t remember this episode very clearly because I was talking to Ms Turchinskaya. By the way, I wonder if Ms Turchinskaya is related to Mr Tarakanovsky – to the notary who did not sign the Agreement. Their names sound alike. Not all Russian names sound alike, contrary to popular opinion. For instance, “Pushkin” does not sound like “Tarakanovsky”. People must confuse the Russians with the Chinese whose names do sound alike. The same goes for Japanese names – for oriental names in general. But Russian names do NOT sound alike so that I am asking myself if Mr Tarakanovsky is related to Ms Turchinskaya or not. Of course both of them are part of the same gang, but it does not mean they are related by marriage or otherwise. At some point I felt I was being frozen out from the discussions, so I don’t know much about the gang’s infrastructure and future.

‘But my main purpose in writing this letter is to expose widespread corruption in OUR midst. It is common knowledge that the Russians are crooks, but there are Europeans who think and act like the Russians. One of them is my former friend, Vassya van Barabassa. I find him arrogant and

domineering. His first name sounds Russian. It IS Russian in fact. His surname reminds one of Friedrich Barbarossa and the thief who was crucified with Jesus Christ. Wasn't his name Barabbas? Well, Vassya van Barabassa IS a thief and he must be a member of the gang I stumbled upon in Saint Petersburg. He will no longer manage to hide his corrupt dealings under a veneer of respectability. Anyway, his veneer of politeness is beginning to crack. He is at the ROOT of the problem I have been facing for three years. What is more, he is the ROOT CAUSE of my anxiety – if it is Vassya van Barabassa who controls the intrigue I am writing to you about, I don't have a ghost of a chance of recovering either my flat or my money or both. His promises turned out to be so much hot air. Everybody says about Vassya van Barabassa, "He's a sly old devil – I wouldn't trust him with my money. Crooks slip up on some minor detail but he doesn't." I should have listened to all these friends of mine. They are NOT crooks and I can rely on them for good advice. As for Vassya van Barabassa, the effects of his friendship are horrible. I would not wish them on my worst enemy. Actually, he is my worst enemy now. It is difficult to quantify how many homes will be defiled by him in the near future.

'When he is in a bad mood he is obnoxious to everyone. At least he has always been obnoxious to me because he is ALWAYS in a bad mood, as far as I am concerned. He was always the odd one out at school – he did not have many friends. (One of my friends was at school with him, you know.) Now he is surrounded and idolised by crooks, by the scum of the Earth. He sank in my estimation when I saw how he treated his wife.

'I find it really difficult to strike the right note when TALKING to Vassya van Barabassa. Recently I wrote him a letter and he answered it by return. In his letter he says to me, "Your letter is as rude as your conduct. You don't even have the decency to apologise. Do you realise that your remarks are too close to the bone? If you've got something to say, say it to my face. For more than a year you've been spreading rumours that I robbed you in Saint Petersburg. Will you dare to deny all responsibility for the rumours which have been circulating?" Believe me, Your Excellency, that I say to my friends only what I KNOW about this affair. I don't say Vassya van Barabassa is a crook. I just point out that the flat I bought seems to have vanished into thin air.

'Of course the flat is still there – in Marat Street, almost in the centre of Saint Petersburg. But my name did vanish into thin air – it is NOT in the register or anywhere else for that matter. Perhaps some computer at the hotel where I stayed might remember my name, but this computer is NOT a reliable witness. Ms Turchinskaya and the anti-Chekhovian sisters might say, "We've never seen this person. She MIGHT have visited Saint Petersburg – we don't deny that. But so many tourists come to our beautiful city that one can't talk to all of them. And not ALL of them buy flats in the former capital of Russia. So we've never met Ms Marussya de Dragunevska." And even if you put on their writing desks my recent photograph, two photographs of mine, they will deny the accusations against them. It is little wonder they are so disrespectful – their boss, alias Vassya van Barabassa, has thumbled his nose at authority all his life.

‘Be that as it may, he doesn’t have the authority to pull rank on me any more. Incidentally, I feel their gang is made of conflicting groups who slug it out most of the time. A policy of divide and rule is advisable at this point. We are going to need some professional backup for this ruse. But we must size up the situation before we decide what to do.

‘I am determined to take whatever action is necessary to rectify the situation. I must put Vassya van Barabassa on the spot by asking him when he is going to pay me back that money I spent in Saint Petersburg. But I don’t want this story to get into the grubby hands of the tabloid press. I will defer to whatever you decide. Isn’t it your duty to protect Belgian citizens?’

14

This is a four-page-long letter and, leisure permitting, I may return to it in due course. But life isn’t confined to a few letters, to the flats one can buy and lose, to something one might lose forever in spite of notaries and lawyers, solicitors and friends. Life is more important than a scrap of paper and a calendar that is always wrong. Life may just slip out of the room while nobody is looking. Even *you* don’t look at it; and yet it is your life and not someone else’s. Your friends don’t notice anything either: they continue to talk to you as if nothing had happened. You’re no longer alive, but they pay no attention to this state of affairs: they’re used to life and death and might think they’re interchangeable. Your friends are interchangeable as well, so you can have a lot of friends elsewhere, on another continent. You can have a lot of enemies on the same continent or in New Zealand. On the other hand, you know that no one will ever replace an old friend who can betray you occasionally, treating you like an enemy. Whatever he does, he is your long-standing friend to whom you may turn when a new danger is on the agenda. And your agenda isn’t just a scrap of paper you can throw away without looking at the rubbish bin where it is hidden now. What’s written or printed on this scrap of paper?

It’s nevertheless clear that a healthy manuscript tradition developed in Yucatan. The fact is tragically apparent in the historical accounts of hundreds, if not thousands, of Maya books being destroyed during the Conquest in book burnings like the one at Mani in 1562. It is a sad and astounding fact that, given their prolific literacy we today have only four surviving Maya books.

Isn’t that enough? But the scraps of paper someone burnt at Mani, back in 1562, may have contained a piece of information on which the life of our planet depends, according to a few scholars. They are certainly wrong; and yet everyone is worried because there’s no smoke without fire and for the last 10 or 20 or 30 years we have seen nothing but smoke – not just a Dickensian fog. Smoke is everywhere and a tiny smoke-filled pub may reflect our destiny more accurately than any calendar, however ancient and reliable.

‘The following programme contains scenes that may be disturbing to some viewers,’ as they say on TV. These calendars and newspapers contain the words we can’t discard, for all our longing to do so without waiting for the disaster announced through these words. We often say, ‘Words, words, words,’ when reading a newspaper. We often think, ‘Looks, looks, looks,’ when someone gives us a questioning look. And yet this look *might* be important – far more important than being earnest or light-hearted. The same goes for words which don’t seem to stare at us blankly or otherwise. They’re rooted to the spot and don’t care about the people who look at them.

Only the barest fragments of the Long Count can be found today. Michael Coe wrote that the Yucatec Maya believe the current World Age is to end in the year ‘2000 plus a little’, but it’s unclear whether this information comes from modern sources or ancestral lore. In highland Guatemala, a Jacaltek Maya legend called ‘Man of Lightning’ mentions the dire events of the Oxlan ben (Oxlan = 13; be = road), which Victor Montejo believes might be a reference to the end of 13 Baktuns in 2012. But exactly when the 13th Baktun is to conclude was not preserved; the Long Count had slipped away.

So the Long Count also slipped away: not only life has a knack of doing so without a warning. They might have said to us, ‘I have to warn you there’s a degree of danger involved in this.’

And you might have said in your turn, ‘How do you mean? What are you talking about? About life, about the Long Count?’

‘There’s some danger of low-level radiation.’

‘So what is an acceptable level of radiation?’ you might have asked.

‘The radiation leak has had a disastrous effect on the environment.’

Does this information come from modern sources or ancestral lore? These Baktun and Tycoons get under my skin. ‘The dire events of the Oxlan ben’ probably mean that snow and ice have left many roads treacherous and so you’re warned to drive slowly. But you have no intention of going anywhere, which doesn’t mean anything: there are roads everywhere. Even if you remain in your armchair all day long, you do go somewhere; you drive along a treacherous, snow-covered road. The current World Age may end in the year ‘2000 plus a little’; it may also end in the year 2020 *minus* a little. How big is the ‘little’ they’re talking about? You give a little smile and try to measure it in order to learn what ‘little’ means in the article you have just perused in search of a significant piece of information. But the ‘little’ you’re searching for has many uses and many shapes which wholly depend on its whereabouts and the observer looking at it or reading about it in a newspaper. Your smile has its size and the radiation they talk about might be bigger or smaller. They say you can’t draw a parallel between a smile and an acceptable (or unacceptable) level of radiation; and they’re certainly right except that you don’t smile when they talk about low or high-level radiation. It’s not a scrap of paper you throw away as soon as you realise you’re looking at a worthless scrap of paper. You can neither

throw it away nor reduce it to an *acceptable* level. The point is no one knows what is acceptable or not in these matters. Someone says, 'It's acceptable.'

'Many servicemen suffered radiation sickness after the early atomic tests,' says a young woman. She is so young no one believes her. But she continues to talk. 'It's feared that people living near any power station may be exposed to radiation. Actually those who live *far* from these power stations are in danger too.'

'I'm critical of attempts to indoctrinate my children in green ideology,' says a moustachioed gentleman.

'The government's new-found enthusiasm for green issues has been welcomed by environmentalists,' says the young woman.

You think that what you hear is just a scrap of paper you ought to throw away at once without trying to decipher it. Just another anthology of stock phrases.

'It's not very green, throwing away so much rubbish,' they say to you.

'I'm going to try to be a bit greener and recycle more,' you reply, entering into the spirit of the occasion.

'You have a guilty look on your face,' they say to you. 'You must have done something wrong because you're looking so guilty.'

'I've thrown many things away without trying to recycle them,' you say. 'But I'm trying to recycle the Maya calendar.'

'Wearing the correct type of clothing will reduce the risk from radiation,' they say.

Japan's struggle to contain the crisis at a stricken nuclear power plant worsened sharply early Tuesday morning as emergency operations to pump seawater into one crippled reactor failed at least temporarily, increasing the risk of an uncontrolled release of radioactive material, officials said.

With the cooling systems malfunctioning simultaneously at three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station after the powerful earthquake and tsunami on Friday, the acute crisis developed late Monday at reactor No. 2. At this reactor, a series of problems thwarted efforts to keep the core of the reactor covered with water – a step considered crucial to preventing the reactor's containment vessel from exploding and preventing the fuel inside it from melting down.

The plant's operator, Tokyo electric Power, said late Monday that repeated efforts to inject seawater into the reactor had failed, causing water levels inside the reactor's containment vessel to fall and exposing its fuel rods. After what at first appeared to be a successful bid to refill the vessel, water levels again dwindled, this time to critical levels, exposing the rods almost completely, company executives said.

International Herald Tribune, Tuesday, March 15, 2011

As usual, I was watching TV – the Russian channel which regularly displays a number of beautiful women who talk to you about catastrophes and the babies dying on every corner of your native city. This time a news presenter – a woman of effortless charm – was talking about an earthquake that had rampaged through a Japanese city, leaving chaos in its wake. I have never been exposed to an earthquake and its dangers so that I don't know if it covers a huge territory at once or goes through it like an army of unbridled hooligans. Can one use the verb 'to rampage' when speaking about an earthquake?

Then I saw an enormous wave which, as the presenter pointed out, had swept away a town and a rural community. I had seen many earthquakes on TV, but this one impressed me beyond measure on account of its ferocity. Every natural disaster is ferocious to some extent and so we aren't really shocked to hear a devastating explosion or to see a devastating fire, provided all this happens on television. Why was I in a state of shock for about an hour after watching this news? Does my animal nature have anything to do with it?

Animals don't only *feel* the approach of a natural disaster: they can *foresee* one to some extent, fleeing a treacherous area well before any human has an inkling of what is in store for him or for her. (Even women, for all their legendary intuition, are not in a position to equal animals in this respect.) I heard what the presenter was saying about the earthquake, but Versailles is far from Japan and so I was sure this natural disaster concerned neither myself nor any French citizen. Of course everyone is concerned with the welfare of their fellow creatures; at least our religious books insist on this point. I sent a few emails to my Japanese friends, saying I was deeply moved by what was happening; but I was neither a victim of the earthquake and the tsunami nor a rescuer engaged in a frantic all-night effort to reach the survivors before their supply of air ran out. Why couldn't I get over the shock I had experienced upon hearing (and seeing) the news?

The power managers are 'basically in a full-scale panic', a senior nuclear industry executive said late Monday. The executive, who is not involved in managing the response to the reactors' difficulties but has many contacts in Japan, added: 'They're in total disarray. They don't know what to do.'

Workers said they were having difficulty injecting seawater into the reactor because its vents – necessary to release pressure in the containment vessel by allowing radioactive steam to escape – had stopped working properly.

The more time that passes with fuel rods uncovered by water and the pressure inside the containment vessel unvented, the greater the risk that the containment vessel will crack or explode, creating a potentially catastrophic release of radioactive material into the atmosphere – an accident that would be by far the worst to confront the nuclear power industry since the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant 25 years ago.

International Herald Tribune, Tuesday, March 15, 2011

I bought this newspaper and realised the world was on the brink of another catastrophe; and yet no one could say it was just *another* catastrophe, *another* disaster, *another* apocalypse. The earthquake I saw wasn't an *ordinary* earthquake. Of course there are no ordinary earthquakes in the history of humankind, for our Earth is on the move and doesn't remain silent as we go through our daily routine. And every word our Mother Earth utters brings us closer to the end of the world about which scientists and fortune-tellers speak so often. Something is wrong with the Earth's crust, but even the *Herald Tribune* can't bring me up to speed with the latest developments because I have missed a few issues in which they probably touch upon the bowels of the Earth, her indigestion. Anyway I'd better capitalise the Earth, otherwise she might take umbrage and break off our relationship.

It is in these terms that Dinussya, my Saint Petersburg friend, talks about heavenly bodies, saying for instance: 'You should salute the Sun every day, preferably as soon as you wake up. Say to the Sun, "I hate to be a nuisance, but could you help me? I'm not speaking for myself – the whole of humanity needs your light, your warmth, your sunny disposition. We don't always treat you with the respect you deserve because we're very busy and have no time to look at you. We have no time to look up and see how beautiful you are, hanging in the sky like a ripe fruit, like a god on whose benevolence and good will we all depend day in, day out. Even in the night we depend on you, on your trip to the opposite side of the Earth. What would happen to humanity if you didn't rise one morning to help us live another day?'

Dinussya hasn't forgotten the Moon which may ruin our lives if she gets too close to the Earth, posing a serious threat to her crust. 'Do you think their love is platonic?' I ask.

'The Moon shouldn't become very intimate with the Earth,' she says.

'So intimacy between the Earth and the Moon isn't recommended, is it?'

'They should love each other from a distance. The Earth gets excited when the Moon is too close to her crust. Why didn't they use helicopters on the very first day of the disaster? They might have tried to cool the reactors at the outset, when it wasn't too late. Now it's too late, I'm afraid. I love Japan so much. What a disaster! The end of the world.'

Tokyo Electric Power Company officials announced on Tuesday evening that they would consider using helicopters in an attempt to douse with cold water a boiling rooftop storage pond for spent uranium fuel rods. The rods are still radioactive and potentially as hot and dangerous as the fuel rods inside the reactors if not kept submerged in water.

'The only ideas we have right now are using a helicopter to spray water from above, or inject water from below,' a power company official said at a news conference. 'We believe action must be taken by tomorrow or the day after.'

International Herald Tribune, Wednesday, March 16, 2011

Tomorrow or the day after. Is it not too late? Didn't I learn about the disaster too late? Those who adore Japan must have stayed alert after seeing the disaster on television. I didn't. I thought it was an ordinary earthquake, a tragic item on the Japanese agenda.

Too late or not too late; it's useless to speculate without more information. And the information I get from the Russian channel is not available in Japan so that a friend of mine, Makiko – I called her this morning – says that almost everything is under control. But a word, however unambiguous, is a substance you can stretch to any shape you want. So Makiko stretches the words she uses to calm herself and the people who call her from Japan, from abroad. She says Tokyoites are a bit low on petrol, but she has got plenty of it so that theoretically she can drive as far as the Russian coast, providing ferryboats have enough petrol too. But she is reluctant to leave her flat because, unconsciously or consciously, she fears the radiation she may face outdoors. She says Tokyoites have never been confronted with so many problems at the same time. 'What would you do if confronted by a man wielding a knife?' she says. 'You don't have a knife so you try to dodge him. We're dodging the aftermath of the catastrophe.' I say to her that the Russians spoke about a series of explosions which might release a lot of radiation. 'Did they speak about them in the past tense?' she asked.

Then she said she was delighted her pupils couldn't have their lessons because there were minor earthquakes in Tokyo – five earthquakes per day. 'My pupils are afraid of holes, of chasms so I can practise at home. I've got several concerts in Europe and I must get ready for them.' (My friend is also a pianist.) She says I should call her if I hear another piece of news from Russia. 'I'm watching the BBC and CNN, but that's not enough. Neither the Americans nor the English are likely to tell me I'm dead – they're bent on sparing my feelings. The Russians are straightforward. I like your open and direct manner.'

Apparently the Japanese officials don't want to cause any alarm by dwelling upon the end of the world; and yet you don't need the Maya calendar to make a speech on the subject. You just buy a recent issue of the *Herald Tribune* or look out of the window.

Across the vast Tokyo metropolis, home to about one-quarter of the nation's population, life has suddenly been upended in ways large and small. Some stores have been stripped bare of essentials like rice and milk, prompting the prime minister, Naoto Kan, to go on national television and implore people not to panic.

Rolling blackouts to save energy have forced office workers to head home early rather than be trapped downtown. Many people are staying inside to avoid contact with any radioactivity from the stricken nuclear power plant in Fukushima, about 170 miles or 250 kilometers to the north, that may be carried this way by the wind.

International Herald Tribune, Wednesday, March 16, 2011

The Emperor also made his appearance on TV to say a lot of tests were under way and so there was nothing to worry about. I'm not sure I'll have enough energy to write about the lost picture in the light of what is going on in Japan, in the world. What is a lost picture in comparison with a lost world? They used to speak in these terms about Atlantis. But the images I saw on TV reminded me not only of Atlantis but also of the Apocalypse, of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. I'm reluctant to quote anything from it: my television set is quite eloquent and therefore needs no moral, no physical supports. It is an excellent prophet of doom; the more I watch it, the further the Maya calendar and whatever goes with it recedes in my mind.

15

They talk about a butterfly's wings that may cause an earthquake on another continent, if not on another planet. (In this case, it wouldn't be an *earthquake*.) The picture I lost was more imposing than any butterfly, however effervescent. Did the catastrophe we are talking about originate in Vassya's theft? A malicious, wicked act. Compared with it, any butterfly's wings look innocuous, not to say non-existent. A helicopter may stir up clouds of dust and no one knows how this occurrence will influence our future – or our past for that matter.

Vassya no longer answers my phone calls. He sees my number and decides to turn a deaf ear to my entreaties because he must be afraid of the outcome of our discussion. Marussya predicted this state of affairs a long time ago – at the very outset of this story. 'You bought a picture on the strength of Vassya's advice? Where's this picture? I see, all right. He stole it along with my flat. Stealing is in his blood – he can't do anything about it. Even if he had no wish to steal, he would steal because he can't do otherwise. No doctor will ever cure him – despite what many people think, aversion therapy is no longer used by professional psychologists. You know I'm addicted to chocolate. I ate so much of it one day I was sick and that cured me of my addiction. Vassya's got scores of pictures. So what? Stealing is like eating to him. He eats other people's precious possessions. He devours them, as a matter of fact. His mother was a concierge and she must have stolen a lot out of hours. Worse still, instead of doing her job, she was stealing. She thought *that* was her job. That's how her son laid his hands on the pictures he's got in his Russian collection. His mother must have been Russian and the Russians are swindlers and robbers, present company excepted. "Russian culture should be exported all over the world," he told me in his dining room. There he sat, happily chomping his lunch. He doesn't answer my calls because his mobile phone reveals my number and my intentions. I think he's moved out. He must have sold his castle. Wouldn't you sell your castle if you were in his shoes? He's probably living in Australia now. Where would you live if Interpol was after you? In South America? We're not talking about the Nazis, are we?'

'He might be in Greece,' I said.

'I'm sure he travels under an alias. Why in Greece?'

'He's got a villa in Greece.'

‘I will cure him.’ Marussya lowered her voice.

‘A magic pill? Can you buy it over the counter?’

‘I know quite a lot about herbal medicines. Shall I send him my favourite mixture? Do you think it’ll get lost in the post?’

‘Are you a New Ager?’

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘Alternative medicine and astrology are part of the New Age movement. You’re not vegetarian, are you?’

‘I don’t read my horoscope every night,’ said Marussya.

We continued to talk in similar vein, but her concentration lapsed after a few minutes. She finally heaved a sigh and whispered, ‘My story was seized on by the tabloid press.’

The story of *my* phone calls is running parallel to the story I’m determined to recount in graphic detail. Or is there only one story – a huge story of my shame, of Vassya’s triumph, of the end of the world?

When I learnt that the picture wasn’t kept in the castle, I decided to pester the thief with my phone calls. For some reason, I thought it wouldn’t be wise to discuss the matter on the spot, especially that I didn’t know what kind of ‘spot’ it was. My picture wasn’t there – that’s all I knew about that particular spot; at least I was unable to find it there. At some point Vassya told me in hushed tones, ‘Digging in the garden certainly takes it out of me these days.’ Should I have gone on with my search? Digging in the garden is good exercise.

I’m not a professional detective and therefore have no idea where stolen objects can be hidden. Edgar Poe seems to think that the best hiding place is so obvious one isn’t tempted to examine it. ‘Can you really put an object on a chest of drawers for everyone to see?’ you ask yourself. ‘Why use the verb “to hide” under the circumstances? You just *put* the object on the chest of drawers and no one takes any notice of it because this hiding place is too obvious, too banal. People don’t think you’re *so* unimaginative. According to Poe, however, you prove to be highly imaginative if you don’t *hide* what you have to hide.’

Well, Vassya did hide what he had to hide, otherwise I would have found my picture: I inspected the walls, leaving aside the nooks and crannies. Why not hide a picture by putting it amidst other pictures? Don’t all pictures look alike to some extent? Don’t oysters look like the creatures one sees in Max Ernst’s paintings?

I should have talked to *him* instead of the Sun, of the Moon, for if Vassya gets close to other people the Earth suffers a lot; so do earthlings, animals and plants. The Talmud says that if one man is killed, the whole of humanity is destroyed. I wasn’t killed and a lost picture is nothing in comparison with what goes on in a tiny Siberian village or in Africa where people starve to death, according to the newspapers I see in our supermarket. But Vassya’s dastardly conduct may touch off a natural disaster: God doesn’t seem to share the views of those who appropriate a flat beyond good and evil.

‘Vassya, my dear. I know you intend to steal the picture I bought in Brussels. You should think long and hard before you make any important decisions, and the decision you’ve just made is very important because not only my life depends on it. My life is insignificant in the context; yet I don’t know what I would do without my life. We’ve never talked about Max Stirner, but I’m sure you like his masterpiece *The Ego and His Own*. You must have read it in the original – *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. Your German is perfect and your knowledge of it is all the more remarkable since you didn’t learn it from your first and only wife. You must have courted her in German and her father agreed to your marrying her only because you spoke his native tongue fluently. Be that as it may, now I’m concerned with my picture that will no longer be mine, if you appropriate it. Of course Stirner thinks it’s only too natural to appropriate other people’s jewels and millions or even something that has no owner and can be taken with impunity – otherwise someone else will take it, as he puts it. Social classes, the state and the masses are abstract notions; only true individuals exist and you’re no doubt a true individual in spite of your dishonest actions. In the light of what you actually do in real life you may be called a *false* individual, but for argument’s sake I’ll refer to you as a *true* individual. Both private and public morals go by the board in your presence. You consider human life from your theoretical standpoint and so nothing remains of it except one individual, one ego, and whatever has been appropriated by this ego – *sein Eigentum*, in other words, in German words. Even a Hegel-sanctioned state of marital bliss failed to win your favour, otherwise you wouldn’t have divorced your wife. And she wouldn’t have divorced you, had she felt you needed her, your sacred bond, your fulfilment of religious duty. You’re longing to be free and no one can deprive you of this God-imposed right. You say about other people, “The very concept of free life is unknown to them.” There’s no denying you know this concept. And you know by heart the aphorisms relating to it. But suppose I say to you, “I’ll give you a key then you’re free to come and go as you please.” All right – I’ll give you the key to the front door of my flat. So what? Do you think you can steal my pictures, my furniture, my piano and my books? When giving you the key I said you were free to “come and go as you please”. I didn’t say, “You’re free to take whatever you like.” The Georgians are renowned for their hospitality. If their guest admires a dagger or a sabre, they say to him, ‘You can have it.’ I said nothing of the sort, mind you. The Russians are hospitable, but more often than not they follow the maxim “Moderation in all things”. Only vodka proves to be an exception to this rule.’

Yes, I’m sure Vassya likes *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, even if he hasn’t read the book either in French or in German. Only individuals and their egos survive in the course of this book that destroys not only our values – Nietzsche had the knack of turning them upside down – but literally *everything*: government, laws, friendship. For instance, if Vassya tells me, ‘I’ll come round and see you every day,’ I know he won’t keep his promise. Every time he answers the phone – I should put this sentence in the past tense – he says, ‘I’ll call you at the end of the week,’ or ‘I’ll call you next week.’ I no longer wait for his calls because he called me only once, leaving a message on my answerphone. ‘Please, call me as soon as possible,’ he said. I called him and he didn’t answer the call.

Or he says, 'I won't do anything. I promise.' And he steals your pictures, your villas and your happiness. You say to him, 'Don't you remember your promise?' And he answers:

'I just stole your picture. Was it dangerous? Even brief exposure to radiation is very dangerous, but you weren't exposed to radiation as a result of my act. I just stole your picture. So what? I said I wouldn't do anything, but I didn't say I wouldn't *steal* anything. I said to you, "If anything goes wrong, I'll take the blame." But nothing went wrong – I stole your picture and you didn't say anything. No one did. So nothing went wrong and consequently I won't take the blame.'

'Do love and friendship mean nothing to you?' you ask.

'Today I'm your friend and tomorrow you disappoint me. Or you don't disappoint me. You bring me a box of chocolates and think I'll be delighted and embrace you heartily. You're mistaken – I've changed my mind. Or rather, I had a change of heart at the last minute – just before you came with the box of chocolates.'

'After five years of chopping and changing, you must decide whether we're on friendly terms or not,' you say to him. 'If we *are*, you should return the picture to its legal owner. If we are *not*, then I'll repeat the key sentence of Chaderlos de Laclos' famous novel: "A war."'

Vassya does think he may change his mind as often as necessary to maintain a balance within his ego and soul, given that he believes in God and often touches upon his soul in our conversations. He may say, for instance: 'At last my soul has succeeded in shaking off its shackles,' whereupon I say to myself that he had appropriated yet another picture or castle. I wonder if his soul and ego can enjoy the intoxicating freedom of everyday life without stealing my personal property or just a part of it. Is 'stealing' synonymous with 'freedom'? Communists used to think that workers and peasants could steal only what had already been stolen: their masters were professional thieves. If a slave kills his master, he will be brought before a judge wearing a white wig and a sort of gown. And the slave's solicitor will say to the judge: 'New evidence emerged, vindicating my client completely.'

'What kind of evidence?' the judge will ask, taking his wig off.

'To restore the balance, my client had to kill his master.'

'What kind of balance?' the judge will ask, putting his wig on.

'Masters are used to killing their slaves bit by bit. My client chose instantaneous death, not a long torture. He is far more merciful than his master.'

Vassya hasn't killed me yet and even Marussya harbours no suspicions of this kind; and yet she is prepared to accuse her enemy of what he has never done, not even in his dreams. Again I'm watching the Russian channel which has always brought me up to speed with what *can* happen in our world. They're showing a film about a man who is nothing if not honest. He has an honest, open face, and his life is as honest and open as his face. He is approached by a high-profile businessman about whom you might say: 'The money never reached the people it was meant for but was stolen by dishonest officials.' I mean, he is one of those officials; but he does his best to hide his dishonesty behind an honest exterior. For once, he changes his tactics and comes into the open, putting his

dishonesty on the table, so to speak. And he doesn't think this table is the best hiding place in his castle. The honest man has no wish to get involved in these machinations and refuses point-blank, infuriating the dishonest businessman. As soon as the honest man leaves the castle, the businessman talks to his stooges or bodyguards or both. They all but kill the honest man whose wife is about to give birth to a charming, beautiful daughter. They threaten his wife because any public disclosure of the information her husband is privy to would be very damaging to their boss, his company and numerous collections. Instead of a maternity hospital, the daughter is born in a sort of attic where the wife's closest friend plays the role of a midwife.

I have no wife, no family and no daughters, so Vassya can't kidnap any relative of mine to make me forget the picture once and for all. What he *can* do is steal another of my belongings and threaten to steal everything except my life if I go on pestering him with my complaints. The point is I've never accused him of stealing either my picture or even my time: I thought it would be wiser to wait a little, giving him a chance to change his tack. Every time I called him we spoke about Russia or Japan; I let the real issue lie dormant. I was utterly wrong, judging from the outcome of my stratagem.

He continued to speak about Russia and I didn't tell him the picture I had bought was Russian and so we might have switched to its intrinsic value instead of holding forth on Emperors and their whims. 'Nicholas II was particularly fond of icons of the Blessed Virgin and he had a special devotion to Saint George whose name his brother bore,' he would say. Whenever he talked along these lines, I ought to have interrupted him to point out I was also fond of painters, especially of Vecherova whose masterpiece had been stolen and sold to a Russian oligarch. 'Above all creatures the Tsar loved birds. When he heard them singing, he would become so absorbed that his playmates often commented on it. Once, when a young sparrow fell from its nest, little Nika, as his friends called him, said: "It's necessary to pray for the little sparrow; may Dearest God not take it – He has enough sparrows." And what about your cat? Has *he* spared any sparrow?'

He made fun of me by mocking my patience and diplomacy. He often asked if I really disliked Nicholas II. 'He doesn't fit my image of how an Emperor should rule his country and subjects.' He might answer thus: 'When the war began in 1914, Nicholas II ordered that all the money deposited in Britain be returned to Russia. The British didn't want to comply. The Tsar then called a conference of merchants of the highest rank and bankers. He placed 50,000 euros on a table and said, "I will never compel you, but I ask you to give money for the military victory of which the Russian people will be proud." The merchants and bankers refused to give any money. Nevertheless, the Tsar built a hospital and gave a major portion of his own income for various military needs. But the greedy didn't make use of their wealth very long, for the Bolsheviks came and took away not only their capital and their property, but their very lives. You must have been contaminated by the Bolsheviks. But don't forget that communism has been consigned to the scrap heap of history,' he rounded off.

Everybody knows that you should attack your adversary in order to defend yourself to the best of your abilities. What's more, your attack should be targeted at the strategically important point – at

the bone of contention, so to speak. If your adversary is likely to accuse you of stealing a valuable object, you should accuse him of stealing in your turn, even if he has not mentioned anything yet. I've never accused Vassya of stealing, but he said I must have been contaminated by the Bolsheviks who had come and taken away the merchants' money. What did *I* steal? I wonder.

I wonder why he spoke about 50,000 euros? Speaking about euros in relation to Nicholas II is a glaring anachronism, but I'm sure it wasn't a mistake on the swindler's part. Why 50,000 and not 40,000 or 60,000? Is that the amount of money he got for my picture?

My predicament demonstrates the importance of strategic planning. Vassya's assumption and the emphasis he put on the princely sum of 50,000 euros were a sort of strategic advance; as usual I withdrew, and I'm not sure it was a *strategic* withdrawal.

Some foreign embassies have suggested that their citizens in Japan head south, or leave the country entirely, directives that have led to a rush of departures this week at Narita Airport, Tokyo's main international airport.

A number of foreign airlines suspended flights into Tokyo and shifted operations to cities further south, and some expatriates were leaving on Tuesday.

Nations like South Korea and Singapore said they would step up inspections of food imported from Japan.

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Vassya didn't talk exclusively about the Russian Emperors: he knew that Russia was a big country where one could find a lot of topics worthy of being discussed at the dinner table or even over the phone. He thought that Western countries held a grudge against Russia for having conquered so many territories in the course of human history. And they wished to annex these territories either by peaceful means or through an intervention in the context of a world war. If a war spreads across the entire globe you can always usurp an area which, though big in itself, would appear rather small in comparison with the world and the universe. Why not call a war 'universal' if it is bound to help you attach another province to your country?

Vassya spoke about how my native land had been physically and psychologically mistreated through six or nine centuries. The Mongols were first on his list of usurpers and he repeated with gusto the sentence I had heard so many times in my youth: 'But for the Mongols, Russia would have been the most powerful country in our century.' Then the Mongols were replaced by the Bolsheviks and now people often turn to the United States in their search for a scapegoat. I tell them that Russia is great anyway and they nod in agreement, smiling reassuringly; yet I can feel they don't entirely subscribe to my opinion. They must think Russia would have been even greater, had she lived alone in the hostile world. I try to persuade them that literature is more important than economics, let alone

economic imperialism of which many people accuse the United States or China. And Vassya speaks about Germany and the way the World War One began.

He says that Russia couldn't have kept herself aloof from the conflict: all her conquests were at stake, given the insatiable appetite for power displayed by Germany and England. 'Germany wished to deprive Russia of the Baltic and the Black Sea, of Peter the Great's victories and the window he'd opened, as Pushkin put it. You can still look out of this window, can't you? And what do you see when you look out of it? Germany and France where you currently live. You can even see Versailles, if you scrutinise the horizon carefully. What's more, you can climb out of the window and set off on a round-the-world journey. If it weren't for this window, you wouldn't be in Versailles today, at this very moment. (Again we were speaking on the phone.) Germany and England decided to shut the window and keep it shut forever. And they'd have drawn the curtains if Russia had allowed them to play havoc with her national interests. The Bolsheviks financed their party by robbing banks and the Germans were giving money to the Bolsheviks. The English too were giving money to the Bolsheviks. Yet England became an ally of Russia in 1907. A staunch friend and ally. No wonder the Russian Revolution toppled the Provisional Government. If you have money, you can achieve all your ambitions and objectives.'

'You've already achieved your main ambition in life – to become wealthy,' I told him. I burst into laughter before he could find a worthy riposte. He joined me and for a while we laughed half-heartedly without uttering a word. When Vassya laughs he sounds like a horse neighing. 'Without the unifying forces of the army and the monarchy, the Russian nation is fraying at the edges,' he said at last. But he continued to laugh as if mocking his own words.

In Fukushima, at least 750 workers were evacuated on Tuesday morning after a separate explosion ruptured the inner containment building at reactor No.2 at the Daiichi plant, which was crippled by Friday's earthquake and tsunami. The explosion released a surge of radiation 800 times more intense than the recommended hourly exposure limit in Japan.

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I began to speak to him on the phone after our visit to his castle last August. Dinussya was in Versailles and she said she couldn't spend her holiday away from the sea, from the waves she was keen to ride. I was reluctant to go anywhere because I'm not in love with the Sun to which I'm supposed to talk every morning so as not to thwart Dinussya's peace plan: she wants to placate the Sun. 'It's sending negative rays,' she says. 'We must talk it into coming to terms with the Earth, otherwise the Japanese coast will be damaged by another tsunami, another earthquake.'

Last August, the tsunami was still far away, sleeping in the bowels of the Earth or on the Sun. Dinussya wished to go for a swim and the swimming pool to which I have access, being a local resident, didn't come up to her expectations. 'I'm longing for the sea,' she said and I realised I had to

comply with her wish, notwithstanding my aversion to the aggressive Sun which mostly parades its might on beaches. The Riviera was out of my car's reach so I resolved to give a phone call to Vassya whose castle is situated in the neighbourhood of the Atlantic Ocean. Nobody answered my first call, but I persevered and eventually heard Vassya's voice and his greetings. He said I could come at any time and I put him into the picture about what was going on in my flat: I spoke of the Sun and the ocean. Of course I said I missed him very much and he laughed to remind me of his sunny disposition, of his customary gaiety. Next morning we put three suitcases into the boot of my car and drove off, thinking about the Sun and the picture I wanted to recover.

Needless to say, I lost my way several times, so it was rather late when we saw the outline of his castle in the distance. Actually a lot of trees prevented us from seeing the castle but I knew it was beyond the trees: my memory was positive about that. 'You know, I visited the area four or five years ago and my memory seems to recognise the landscape.'

'I don't trust your memory,' said Dinussya. 'You're always forgetting my birthday.'

'I'll write it down now so I won't forget,' I told her. And I laughed good-naturedly as if to get ready for my conversations with Vassya.

I parked the car near where I thought that the gate was, but there was no gate in sight and Dinussya lost no time in scolding me for my despicable sense of direction. 'Where's the gate you're talking about? We're not in Versailles, are we? I can see only a fence.'

'Every fence has a hole or an opening,' I pointed out. 'Shall we crawl through this opening?'

'But where *is* it? Anyway, I haven't come here to crawl. I'd like to swim.'

'I didn't tell you his castle was standing in the middle of the ocean.'

'Are you sure he's waiting for us?' she asked.

Dinussya has got two mobiles phones; I switched one of them on and called Vassya's number. His telephone was out of order, judging from the signals I heard and from Dinussya's sarcastic smile. That was the most worrying aspect of the situation.

'I don't know if we've been stood up or if he's just late,' I said. 'Let's wait another half hour.'

'Why should *he* be late? Do you mean to say we are late and, weary of waiting for our arrival, he fell asleep two hours ago? His phone isn't out of order – he just doesn't answer it.'

'He doesn't have to be hospitable towards anyone who walks through the area. He might think we're strangers, foreigners or extraterrestrial beings.'

'But why isn't the gate open? Because there's no gate or what? How do we get indoors?'

By way of an answer, I shouted: 'Vassya!' There was no answer.

'Is the air also out of order?' asked Dinussya. 'It looks like the air doesn't carry sounds any more.'

'Perhaps it doesn't. Can you hear me?' I saw another sarcastic smile of hers. 'I can't hear you,' I said.

For an hour or so we walked along the fence as if to draw as many circles around the castle as was consistent with the number of hours we had spent on the road. Many people believe that waiting outdoors is an omen of bad luck – even if it doesn't rain and the wind is in an amiable mood. Dinussya seemed to share this point of view; and yet I thought there was nothing to worry about because we had enough money for a double room in a four-star hotel. We didn't need Vassya to go swimming and have lunch at a three-star restaurant, not far from the waves about which Dinussya spoke very eloquently. 'And what if there are no waves?' I asked her.

'I'm in no mood for the waves tonight,' she said. 'Where's our host?'

At last he made his appearance, waving at us from a window I hadn't noticed before. 'I thought you wouldn't come,' he shouted. 'I said to myself, "If they do come at last, I won't so much as wave them goodbye. I've sold my collection to the Hermitage.'

I thought I would see bare walls and empty rooms, but the castle wasn't really empty, although many pictures *had* disappeared along with a dozen pieces of furniture. He didn't take the trouble to enumerate his losses, which would have been rather illogical, given the amount of money he had got for his former treasures. 'I sold them partly to the Hermitage and partly to a well-known collector who never thinks in terms of money,' he said. 'He just buys what he likes. So do I, as a matter of fact. This time I *sold* what I liked but I don't regret it. By the way, Marussya made some rather barbed comments about my lifestyle. She lets her tongue run away with her. Is the stew bubbling yet? There's a knack to using this corkscrew.'

We drank a bottle of bad wine and Vassya spoke to us about his alarm system which didn't allow any stranger to walk around the house as long as he was in bed. 'I have to switch it off and I can't do it from my bed or even from my room.' This restriction partly accounts for my failure to find the picture I would also have sold to the generous collector, had I found it on one of Vassya's walls.

The next morning Dinussya coiled her hair into a neat bun on top of her head and we drove to the sea. She was silent at first; when she spoke, her tone was accusatory. 'I'd be delighted to spend the day on the beach, but it's too cold to go swimming.' Soon she changed her mind and for an hour at least her head was bobbing gently up and down on the water.

'Sometimes I have an urge to swim out across the ocean.' Vassya had a dreamy look in his eyes. 'Swimming and swimming until I'm so far out and so exhausted I can just allow the water to pull me under and relieve me of life.'

'What's wrong with your life?' I asked.

'I'll take care of you,' said Vassya.

'I've no intention of killing myself,' I pointed out.

'I know a rich woman who's looking for a husband,' he went on. 'Another rich woman is in search of a gifted author – she's a literary agent. You'll become famous and rich if you follow my advice. It's high time you became both, if I'm not mistaken. You live like a multi-millionaire recluse

who refuses to give interviews. But you're not a millionaire, are you? You shouldn't push past the waiting journalists, refusing to speak to them. Does anyone wait for you?

'Didn't you wait for me yesterday?'

'I'm neither a journalist nor a literary agent. But if I was a rich woman I'd marry you. Would *you* marry me?'

'I'd marry you if you were a journalist,' I said. There was the faintest trace of a smile on my lips.

'All right. I'll get in touch with a famous journalist – I know a dozen of them. My private museum used to attract the intellectual elite. And also the educated ruling elite. If I had to write a novel about you, I'd capture every nuance of your future. With your first English book comes the endless merry-go-round of publicity and interviews. But it creates a very bad impression if you're late for an appointment. And you're always late, aren't you? Last night you were late. Five years ago you were late. Your interviews will be broadcast during prime time, you know. You should do your homework to prepare thoroughly for them.'

'Find the journalists first.'

'I like helping the Russians – it's my hobby. Between you, me and the bedpost, I need a hobby to keep myself busy and stop my train of thought from getting into mischief. I knew a Russian singer whose hobby was trampolining and restoring vintage motorcycles. What a wonderful singer he was!'

'Is he no longer in the land of the living?' I asked.

'That reminds me of a Jewish story,' said Vassya. 'Abramovich rings a bell. A middle-aged man opens the door. "Does Rabinovich live here?" asks Abramovich. "I don't call it a life," says the middle-aged man. I did a lot for him, for the singer. But what can you do if a person you work for hits the bottle? He kept asking me, "Have we got time for a quick drink?" And he drank for hours, forgetting his songs and his voice as well. What's more, he couldn't hold his drink. I used to say to him, "You look a bit rough – how much did you have to drink last night?" But I had to be very careful with what I said because he was so sensitive. "I was stone cold sober," he would answer. And I couldn't bring myself to tell him he was a liar. "Are you accusing me of lying?" was one of the questions he asked me every ten minutes. He even tried to pretend he was a film star's son – can you credit it? He was a darling of Parisian cabarets.'

'So he was a cabaret singer,' I said, looking at my toes.

'He could sing Verdi's arias too. And he was very fond of Mozart.'

'Did he sing those arias in Italian?' I asked.

'He knew several languages, but he was so lazy he sang only in Russian. His memory often failed him – no wonder, considering how many glasses of vodka he drank every day. There was a gigantic ice cube in his room and a bottle of Russian vodka always stuck out of it. I could *always* smell the alcohol on his breath. He'd have become a new Caruso if he hadn't drunk so much.'

'So you realised you were on a sinking ship, and decided to get off,' I said.

‘Je l’ai abandonné à son sort,’ said Vassya.

‘Ne me quitte pas, ne me quitte pas,’ I sang.

But 50 workers stayed behind, a crew no larger than would be stationed at the plant on a quiet spring day. Taking shelter when possible in the reactor’s control room, which is heavily shielded from radiation, they struggled through the morning and afternoon to keep hundreds of gallons of seawater a minute flowing through temporary fire pumps into the three stricken reactors, where overheated fuel rods continued to boil away the water at a brisk pace.

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Vassya is a spontaneous individual. He seeks no philosophical support when scheming against his fellow creatures who often suffer as a result of his actions. I think he takes a rather cynical view of men, but that doesn’t mean he knows in what book his conduct and outlook originated 30 or 40 years ago. Carneades used to say we had to disregard other people’s preoccupations, heeding only our own desires and urges that often fulfil their needs at the expense of our friends and colleagues. Suppose your friend or colleague is dying, but you may save him on condition that you miss an appointment during which you’re supposed to sign a few papers. If you don’t sign these papers, you’ll lose a certain amount of money and an opportunity to spend your holiday in Greece. If you call your friend’s doctor and stay with him until the doctor’s arrival, your friend and associate will remain in the land of the living. But you don’t need him any longer; anyway, your friend and all other human beings are bound to die. And what does it matter when they cross the border between this world and the Hereafter? So you don’t miss the appointment and sign the papers, which enables you to say to your son, ‘I started my life on the bottom rung of the ladder in this company.’ You’re no longer on the bottom rung of the ladder; you’re a self-made millionaire. And you tell your son another rags-to-riches story, saying now and then: ‘That’s how I want you to live. Of course you’re not as poor as I was at your age. Nevertheless, you should struggle for life and make it to the top.’

Chrysippus is said to have written 705 books. In one of them he declares bluntly: ‘There can be nothing more inept than the people who suppose that good could have existed without the existence of evil. Good and evil being antithetical, both must needs subsist in opposition.’ Suppose I say to Vassya, ‘There are a lot of bad people in the world.’ What would *he* say? ‘You’re good and I’m bad. If I wasn’t bad you wouldn’t be good. Without my evil you either die or become evil yourself. We talk to each other without falling into a chasm. Why don’t we fall? Because you’re good and I’m bad. I tend to fall, but you pull my legs and arms towards your body. So I don’t fall and we go on talking and smiling. And you don’t rise into the air. What would you do amidst the clouds? I pull your body down and we continue our talk. What a pity we won’t be able to talk after your death, after my death. According to Posidonius, sin makes the vapours of the soul muddy and thereby prevents it from rising

as far as the good soul rises. I'll stay near the Earth. You'll rise to the stellar sphere and spend your time watching the stars go round. And I'll just go round on the surface of the Earth, as the prisoners do in Van Gogh's famous picture. If you bought one of *his* pictures, I wouldn't steal it. Scout's honour!

I asked Dinussya what *she* thought about him. I had no idea whether she *was* thinking about him or not: she was in the immediate vicinity of the ocean and in her ecstatic mind men and women existed only insofar as they could bring her even closer to the waves she had been dreaming about for several months. She said Vassya was trying to woo her away from my problems and the lost picture about which, however, he hadn't said anything. 'At some point I even thought he wanted me to marry him,' she said, putting her hand on my shoulder. 'I've lost count of his seductive looks. He's aware of my attachment to you and does all he can to break our relationship.'

Dinussya is a violinist; she works in a famous Saint Petersburg orchestra. She told Vassya a story of how a woman, upon learning she was a member of this orchestra, said, 'May I touch you?' So Vassya asked immediately, 'May I touch you?' And he touched Dinussya's shoulder, neck and shoulder blade. Next time, after putting the same question to both of us, he touched her forehead, her hair and right cheek. 'If you touch one cheek, you should touch the other as well,' he said, adding proudly, 'I'm a good Christian.' So he touched her left cheek and laughed like a horse. I mean, the sound he produced reminded me of horses, of their way of communicating with humans. That's how Vassya used to communicate with other mortals as if proclaiming he was as good and helpful as a horse. 'I'm a beautiful horse but a bit too frisky for an inexperienced rider. If you're an *experienced* rider, I'll do everything for you. At the end of his life, Gulliver trusted only horses to the detriment of humans and other animal species. Why don't you trust me? Do you think I'm a kleptomaniac? Can a horse steal a painting?'

'He feels I'm very strong,' said Dinussya, 'and he wants to win me over before it's too late. He's afraid of my intuition, of my perspicacity. He thinks I'm a woman of exceptional perspicacity.'

'You are,' I said, 'but even *I* can guess he stole the picture and hid it somewhere, out of my reach.'

'I think he's eavesdropping on our conversation,' she said. We were lying in the room he had brought us to upon our arrival.

'But he's far away,' I said to her. 'His room is on the other side of the castle.'

'He didn't open the gate. He wanted to listen to what we were talking about.'

'But there's no gate of any kind,' I said.

'How did we enter the castle? Did we fly over it for a while? Did we land on its roof?'

'You're right, but I don't think he could eavesdrop on our first conversation.'

'He wanted to find out what we'd come here for,' she said.

'I wish I could hold this castle up to the light in order to inspect it carefully,' I said. 'I would spot everything – microphones, my picture.'

Even if a full meltdown is averted, Japanese officials have been facing unpalatable options. One was to continue flooding the reactors and venting the resulting steam, while hoping that the prevailing winds did not turn south towards Tokyo or west, across northern Japan to the Korean Peninsula. The other was to hope that the worst of the overheating was over, and that with the passage of a few more days the nuclear cores would cool enough to essentially entomb the radioactivity inside the plants, which clearly will never be used again. Both approaches carried huge risks.

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Dinussya said last night on the phone, ‘Today I cried again. I thought about Japan, about those people they’ll never find in the ruins, in the ocean. On television they showed a piano lying in the fields. There was a photograph in the grass of a young woman. A journalist picked this photograph up and said, “Perhaps it was her piano. She might have played it.”’

This morning I called my Japanese friend once again – the pianist with whom I discuss the situation from time to time. I was surprised to find she was still in Tokyo: so many people had left already, going south, flying abroad. She has a lot of friends in France and elsewhere, and she is rich enough to live in a five-star hotel for the rest of her life. Yet she is staying in her native city as if nostalgia were her chief concern – her future nostalgia. ‘My cousin said everything was in order. Anyway, things are looking up.’

Dinussya talks about the grass instead of saying, ‘There was debris everywhere.’ The wave ‘ravaged the city’s sewage-treatment plant and destroyed almost two and a half kilometers of shops and apartments on the outskirts of the town. It roared up a river and swamped the new retail district. It leaped over the harbor wall, took a left and razed whole blocks of the old city centre, flinging entire buildings a hundred meters or more’ (*International Herald Tribune*, Wednesday, March 16, 2011). ‘Next to me was a bar. This was a sushi shop. Across the street, there was the barber shop. There was the electronics shop.’ That’s how they talk now. What do *I* have to say?

*Walking along the top of a fence: a cat, a woman. Hands
Can’t keep what they’re to keep, to hold, to caress.
Another angel. He’s got 300 arms, like the Buddha.
He is the Buddha. You say that nothing’s true. All right – nothing,
Nothing, nothing. The void sings a lullaby; we join in.
Mankind falls asleep. When you sleep you aren’t
On the verge of collapse, success, disaster: you’re in the middle.
Stay in the middle, stay in the middle, stay.*

On Russian TV they're dancing and singing. 'Stop the music – my girl's dancing with another guy.' The members of the audience know the words of this stupid song by heart. Their lips are moving up and down, up and down. As if nothing had happened. Stop the music! Why don't you stop it? You just talk about stopping it. Actions speak louder than words. Stop the music! In a minute or two your girl will dance with yet another guy or with you. What does it matter? You should stop the music all the same. You should stop singing and dancing.

In the same issue of *International Herald Tribune* they speak about another disaster:

Walt Disney Studios spent an estimated £175 million to make and market 'Mars Needs Moms', which sold £6.9 million in tickets at North American theaters in its opening weekend. That grim result puts the 3-D animated adventure on track to become one of the biggest box-office bombs in movie history, on par with such washouts as 'The Adventures of Pluto Nash', 'Cutthroat Island' and 'The Alamo'.

Marcus Aurelius says, 'Frequently consider the connection of all things in the universe.' What's the connection between this item of news and the Japanese disaster? They are both disasters; they are discussed in the same newspaper. So you shouldn't write in your diary, 'There's no observable connection between the two events.' Yet I'm tempted not only to write it in my diary but also cover the walls of Vassya's castle with this sentence. Let it replace my picture on them.

Marcus Aurelius says, 'The wickedness of one man does no harm to another.' What he has in mind boils down to one doctrine – the virtuous will alone is good. Nobody can harm your virtuous will which doesn't depend on the number of paintings stolen from your house by professional or unprofessional thieves. Suppose a wicked man is standing in front of you – a plausible supposition, to put it mildly. A lot of thin films are thrown off by his body; they travel on until they touch your soul-atoms. Your soul-atoms are hospitable, but not to the point of giving a warm welcome to the wicked man's thin films, to his poisonous vibes. Similar poles of magnets repel each other, and opposite poles attract. The matter stands differently with the virtuous man and his wicked counterpart. The former's soul-atoms repel whatever has the opposite effect. They say to the thin films that meddle in their affairs: 'Go away. You shouldn't meddle with things you don't understand. You'll never understand virtue because you're wicked. Don't you know that wickedness and virtue are poles apart? Don't you know I'm a paragon of virtue? Don't you know I'll never compromise my reputation, not even for the sake of money or glory? My virtue will be proof against your charms. The wicked are often charming – that's why wickedness has conquered the world.'

Marcus Aurelius says:

It is peculiar to love even those who do wrong. And this happens if, when they do wrong, it occurs to thee that they are kinsmen, and that they do wrong through ignorance and

unintentionally, and that soon both of you will die; and above all, that the wrongdoer has done thee no harm, for he has not made thy ruling faculty worse than it was before.

I'm not sure I love Vassya and I'm not even sure he has done me wrong by stealing my picture and pulling my leg. To paraphrase Socrates, I say, 'I feel absolutely sure I'm not sure about anything.' Did he pull my leg when he talked about rich women and the agent who could find me a publisher in England and the United States? At least he could have said, 'I don't want to raise any false hopes, but I believe she can do a lot for your books.' Vassya doesn't seem to understand the difference between truth and falsehood. Is he my kinsman in spite of all these defects and misdemeanours?

Two years ago I rang him up and realised his voice was showing a few signs of distress. He said he was in love and there was nothing – and nobody – more precious for him. 'You know, this person belongs to another world or at least to another society. Marussya would say, "This person is at the bottom of the heap." Well, I feel on top of the world when I'm in this person's company. If this person decides to maintain the status quo, I'll commit suicide. If, on the other hand, this person joins me, we'll go together to the end of the world, to the pillars of Hercules, to the Mount of Purgatory.'

'Life's richer than love,' I told him. 'Love's just a part of life, not the whole of it. Your collection is wonderful. Every picture you've got is a life in its own right. Why don't you think in terms of all those lives?'

'There's only love in life. The rest is outside, perhaps in the Hereafter. And I couldn't care less about the Hereafter, about other worlds and other planets. I live on this planet, in this area. I met this person in the area where I currently live. If this person joins me, we'll travel all over the world and every city will become our city, our love. The rest will be outside, outdoors. Otherwise I'll commit suicide. If I do, you'll inherit three pictures from my gallery.'

He was my kinsman during this talk.

The Pacific coast of north-eastern Japan has endured many tsunamis, including one from the 9.5-magnitude earthquake in Chile in 1960, and disaster preparedness is a strong part of daily life in the region. But this earthquake produced 30-foot-high waves, far beyond what anyone had imagined, wiping out entire towns. It is becoming clear that the number of casualties might reach the tens of thousands.

International Herald Tribune, Thursday, March 17, 2011

Tens of millions more in losses are expected, pending worldwide box-office results. The film opened in 14 overseas territories, representing 25 percent of the international market, and attracted \$2.1 million.

International Herald Tribune, Wednesday, March 16, 2011

‘I find I just can’t communicate with Vassya,’ Marussya said to me on the phone. And she recounted the story of how she had set about her superhuman task, writing down incriminations and supplications on a sheet of paper she kept in her favourite chest of drawers. Once her inspiration dried up, she read what she had written, muttering to herself until she had the whole speech word perfect. She recited it several times and was quite satisfied with her memory and delivery. (She was acting her part in front of a dewy-eyed cellist she had invited to lunch.) Next morning, however, she realised with horror she didn’t always choose the right words when speaking to her adversary who was as usual conspicuous by his absence. Alas, her memory wasn’t as trustworthy as it had been 20 years before the beginning of her quarrel with Vassya. ‘Just relax and be confident, and you won’t stumble when you deliver your speech,’ she said to herself.

But she was neither confident nor relaxed. So she sent her opponent a letter. Here it is:

Vassya,

I don’t say ‘Dear Vassya’ for obvious reasons. I know you’re impervious to criticism, but even you must understand why I don’t call you ‘Dear Vassya’ any more. It’s not just a truism one may and should use at the beginning of a letter. It’s much more because it denotes the attitude one has towards the person to whom one writes. You’re no longer DEAR to me and that’s why I don’t write ‘Dear Vassya’ or ‘My Dear Vassya’.

I don’t wish to go back to that wretched morning when, after listening to your sales talk, I decided to buy the flat which may rightly be regarded as our bone of contention. Your powers of persuasion are almost unlimited and I must admit I didn’t doubt your sanity. One must indeed be insane to buy a flat in the country where honour and responsibility do not exist. Probably I was insane that morning and also during our stay in Saint Petersburg, but let us talk about something else – it’s no use crying over spilt milk and lost flats.

I have no idea how you’re related to the people who bamboozle other people into buying flats which belong only to them and not to the buyers. Nothing belongs to one in Saint Petersburg, no matter how much one pays for flats and other things one can buy there on the spur of the moment. I don’t want to say I accuse you of being an instigator of the so-called business deal of which I am an unfortunate dupe. Probably you’re not a member of the gang whose dishonest aim is to rob foreigners and also Russian citizens. By the way, fights among rival gangs account for most murders in the city, I’m told. Many innocent people perish as a result of these fights. Luckily for me, I wasn’t killed during my stay in Saint Petersburg.

Most foreigners don’t speak Russian so it is easier to rob THEM, especially since the Russians believe all foreigners are prosperous and affluent. No, the times have changed, I’m afraid. Today, the Russians think their oligarchs are the richest people in the world. (Moscow is the capital of multimillionaires, by the way.) Those wretched individuals can’t rob the oligarchs

because the latter are likely to KILL them. So they rob foreigners and POOR Russian citizens who don't realise they're being robbed despite their knowledge of the Russian language.

Every month I got around 1,000 dollars. I suppose you hoped I would be lulled into a false sense of security by this so-called rent. Then everything stopped and you wouldn't answer the phone whenever I called you. I stood at the edge of a chasm and stared into the void. So I decided to get rid of this flat and finally you answered the phone and said you would find a rich buyer for this so-called property. For a while I didn't hear from you and then you told me you had found a buyer – a high-flying investment banker – who was prepared to pay a lot of money for this flat situated in a residential area of Saint Petersburg. The buyer called me too and we discussed the matter over the phone. He said he would come to Brussels to give me the money I badly needed at the time. I said I could go to Saint Petersburg and get this amount of money at the scene of the crime. (At the time I didn't know it was a SCENE OF THE CRIME, so I must have used another expression.) He said he was in Germany and I said I could go to Germany in order to meet him. At that point I already knew there was something fishy going on in Saint Petersburg and also in Germany. Two days later he called me to say he was no longer in Germany. I'm sure he has never been to Germany or any other Western country.

But even at that point I didn't doubt your words. When you said you had another buyer in the room from which you were ringing me up, I believed you. The second buyer was as elusive as the first. He was even worse – he never pretended he might go to Germany. In other words, he was never WITHIN my reach. The same goes for the money he promised to pay me for the flat. 'Is the flat empty?' I asked you on the phone. You assured me it was empty and therefore available for a Russian oligarch. I used to think you were funny, but your behaviour has now gone way beyond a joke.

I told you I didn't like the situation because of the rent I counted upon. 'The rent is due at the end of the month' is a pleasant thought and I needed this thought (and the rent) to live in very comfortable surroundings. In those days Saint Petersburg was part of my surroundings – I thought I OWNED the flat. But you said no one lived in the flat and consequently I was ill at ease and not my usual self. I didn't realise the empty flat was much more desirable than the one where somebody lives under false pretences.

I have no idea whether you're related to Ms Fuksovik or not. She must be a member of the gang you got involved with during one of your frequent visits to Saint Petersburg. Could you explain in plain French or English why she is living in my flat? Whenever in a tight corner, you speak Russian so that no one understands you except your stooges, alias the members of the gang. And they don't need to understand you because they know what you are about to say. You discuss these robberies well beforehand, but I don't want to accuse you of any crime you might have committed. I still trust you and hope you'll help me in the long run. It's natural that I should rely on you – I lack the wherewithal to hire a good lawyer. Don't forget that for more

than five years I have faced the double whammy of the crisis and the prospect of losing my Saint Petersburg flat.

Do you remember how I paid for the flat? Of course it was a long time ago and you don't have to remember anything or anybody – not even the people you loved. (Have you ever being in love with a human being?) 'Do you wish to be paid in cash or by cheque?' I asked Turchinskaya or one of the sisters. And you said to me, 'I have a lot of money in one of the Russian banks. I'll pay for you in Saint Petersburg and you'll give me cash in Belgium.' So it's you who got the money, if I'm not mistaken. How could I be mistaken? Your beady little eyes were fixed on the money I held out. So you got both the money and the flat. Of course you have no intention of living there. You just rent it to Ms Fuksovik. In Saint Petersburg you have a couple of luxurious flats at your disposal. So you don't need the flat I bought in a hurry to make ends meet. Let others live in it and I'll collect the rent. Is that what you think? And yet your most intimate friend collects money for the homeless.

Another friend of yours – the one from whom you stole a Russian picture – told me you accuse Turchinskaya of the robbery. Apparently you said you had been robbed too, adding, 'When she finds herself in prison for years and years she'll regret it!' I hope you'll regret it too. You also said, 'I bet she feels pretty miserable now. And I should hope so. After what she's done.' Do you mean to say the police caught Turchinskaya red-handed? When did it happen? You also said, 'It isn't as if she needed money. Just did it for excitement.' What did YOU do it for? Everyone knows you don't need money. You may need friendship and love – every NORMAL man or woman needs both love and friendship. But you certainly don't need MONEY.

Let me ask you this question once again: 'What did you do it for?' Did you intend to launder the stolen funds before returning them to Western Europe? Or was it excitement you wanted? You can't just wave me away as if I were a child!

I would like to meet Turchinskaya and really give her a piece of my mind. She must be made to suffer. She deserves to be taught a real lesson. But what about you? The trouble is YOU haven't been robbed. So you don't know what I feel. The effects of this robbery are indescribable and I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemy. And you're not my worst enemy yet. You're not even my enemy. Yet I can't say you're my friend. Never again will I say you're my friend unless you prove it. Any relationship can go through and survive painful crises, and become all the stronger for it. Be flippant about your crimes, if you want to!

It is easy to be flippant, but we have a serious problem to deal with here. You probably need a psychiatrist because a multimillionaire doesn't stoop to selling houses to his friends in order to rob them. I'm amazed that you waste your time on such low tricks. Yes, that was a pretty low trick to play and I hope you regret what you have done. It is not enough to repent just hours before one dies. Do you think you'll be invited to Paradise after your death? You believe in God, don't you? You were brought up in the true faith, if I remember rightly. So you must view

your life as a spiritual journey towards a greater understanding of your faith. Anyway, I've been sustained by the strength of my religious faith ever since I purchased this apartment. I hope you're a pious follower of the faith, never missing your prayers. Why don't you pray for me, for a change? Aren't we supposed to pray for our victims? Let us pray to God that our problem will be straightened out. This mess is a disease from which we should recover – the sooner the better. You must pray God's forgiveness for what you have done. Let us pray together.

Marussya de Dragunevska

And here is the letter Marussya received two months ago:

Dear Marussya,

I still call you 'dear' because I don't abandon my friends as easily as some people do, judging from your violent letter. Never again will you invite me to your cocktail parties, I suppose. I was sent home in disgrace, wasn't I? Well, I can live without your parties. But I wouldn't like to live without you because I've known you for many years and life is too short to forget time and its awards. Memories fade with the passage of time – even those who don't suffer from memory lapses are aware of this cheerless truth. The past often looks like a bare flat where no one has lived for several months. You speak about your empty flat, leaving aside your mind that often goes blank.

Don't you remember how I got you off the hook seven years ago? Your memory is conveniently short, it seems to me. You would have lost three flats at least, if I hadn't interfered in your so-called internal affairs. Do you remember my money-saving offers? Do you remember the Karestwaaal Festival which had a disastrous impact on your bank account? You kept me at bay so I couldn't interfere and save you from ruin. Do you remember your young pianists and their 'company'? Without the help of a generous investor, this company of yours would have gone bankrupt. Do you remember who found the generous investor, our benefactor of happy-go-lucky women?

My reputation has been unfairly sullied by allegations, half-truths and innuendos. You make incredible accusations in deadly earnest. Let's have it out in front of all your guests! You speak to them about Saint Petersburg and the flat I saw only once. You speak to them about two sisters and I have no idea who these sisters are and where they live. Do they live in your flat? All right, I don't mind. Do they pay their rent? If they don't, you should throw them out, saying, 'Tenants who fall behind with their rent risk being evicted.' Actually you don't have to tell them anything – just throw them out. Or you can tell them, 'If you think the rent is too high, you should buy the flat. Some people prefer paying a huge sum of money once and for all.'

Don't drag me into your argument! It has nothing to do with my presence in Saint Petersburg. These two sisters are neither relatives of mine nor my wives. Why do you say to our mutual friends I am a proficient thief? Do you know the saying: 'It takes a thief to catch a thief'? So you're a thief too. And yet I'm not a thief, whatever you may say to our mutual friends and the people I've never heard about. If I sell you my house and refuse to leave it, you can say, 'I want my money back.' And if I answer, 'I'm sorry but I've spent your money already,' you can call me a thief. Did I sell you my Saint Petersburg house? Did I refuse to leave it? I'll never leave it, if you must know. But that doesn't mean I am a thief. What about you? I'm not convinced by the image of the whiter than white princess depicted in your lengthy epistle.

My reputation, my reputation. Last week I saw Genevussya de Rotfront. She walked past me with her nose in the air. Do you remember what Iago says to Cassio who complains about the loss of his reputation? Have you ever read Shakespeare in the original? 'As I am an honest man, I thought you had receiv'd some bodily wound, there is more offence in that than in reputation: reputation is an idle, and most false imposition, oft got without merit, and lost without deserving.' I am honest but I am not Iago. What do you take me for? Have you read Shakespeare at all? When you're a nurse, cleaning up vomit is all in a day's work. I've been your male nurse for a long time. Shall I notify you of my decision to quit?

Have you read Plutarch? I don't think you've studied the language of Homer, so I won't ask you to read Plutarch's works in the original. One of the heroes he describes in his masterpiece walks along the seashore and sees a lot of corpses. These corpses are wearing necklaces, tiaras and gold bracelets. Or diamond bracelets – really one is spoilt for choice. He doesn't choose anything. Let's call him Vassya. If you read Plutarch's Lives in French or English, you'll find the name of the hero I'm writing about. Vassya is followed by one of his stooges. At some point he says to him, 'You can pick up whatever you wish because you're not Vassya.' My stories always have hidden meanings.

Another hero described by Plutarch withstands the rough treatment of a passer-by for hours as he goes about his business. He deals well with all the criticism heaped on him – he doesn't turn a hair. The passer-by berates the hero late into the night and follows him to the front door of his villa. As soon as the entrance hall reveals its beauty the hero says to his servant, 'Find a candle and see this gentleman home.' Plutarch's stories always have hidden meanings.

Any bank carefully vets everyone who applies for an account. You know the name of my bank and even my credit card number. Do you think I would have six credit cards and five bank accounts if I was interested in the tiaras strewn on the seashore? It's time you came down off your high horse and admitted you were wrong.

Over the last 30 years I've often given you a helping hand – children need to be cosseted. I'm not asking for a reward. And yet I think you could send me a present to express your eternal gratitude. Well, I need neither your present nor your gratitude. I need your silence and

understanding. Why do you talk about me to everybody? Do you remember what Tolstoy said before dying? 'There are so many people in the world. Why does everybody talk about me?' Why do you talk about me? I am neither Iago nor Tolstoy. And I am not on my deathbed.

Whatever I did for you, I did it out of kindness – I am a disinterested observer of life and death. I would have done much more for you, if you hadn't rejected all my proposals out of hand. So many people suffer in the world and I help them because I can't do otherwise. My heart aches with pity for you and I think about your flat as if it was my own flat, the only dwelling where I could live and die in peace. The other day I took pity on a stray cat and fed it. Life is everywhere and one shouldn't turn a deaf ear not only to its harmony but also to the dissonance that resounds through it day and night. The jarring dissonance of life's musical score is all the more tragic since we aren't always in a position to counteract its laws or terrorist ideas. The police seem powerless to prevent terrorist attacks and we have no alternative but to teeter on the edge of numerous disasters. Don't we see and hear too much suffering around us, in our midst? Why do you add a finishing touch to the tragic spectacle of life?

I derive great satisfaction from helping other people. But I will not help you this time because I'm badly hurt by your insults, intrigues and spite. In Holland I was subjected to the most vicious calumny, but I never complained and never sued. You have nothing to worry about.

Why did you buy this flat in Saint Petersburg? Do you still believe that the streets of the former capital of Russia are paved with gold? Why don't you say to yourself, 'I'll believe that when I see it'? You knew it was highly dangerous to venture into the unknown. Russia is a mysterious country and she will always remain shrouded in mystery, whatever you buy on her territory. Even if you buy the Winter Palace you'll be unable to understand her moods and tricks. She pulls faces and generally clowns around. She gabbles away at you in Russian and you don't understand a word. I'm speaking about you now. Did you understand what Turchinskaya meant when she said 'Mekitopalatapu'? Actually it was a key component of her plan. Do you know that Turchinskaya is a key figure in the international drug ring? The word 'Mekitopalatapu' was a key factor in tackling the problem of the flat and you didn't understand it. So you missed the point of her argument. And now you talk about the flat which no longer belongs to you and your future inheritors.

I understood the word 'Mekitopalatapu', but despite my knowledge of Russian I was robbed as well. Even the word 'Mekitopalatapu' didn't help me. Turchinskaya inveigled me into giving her the money for a number of flats and I have never seen either the money or the flats. I would have owned half of the city I love so much, but for Turchinskaya's plots and ploys. This woman is the devil incarnate. I hate her but – give the devil her due – she works incredibly hard. Her career has been on the up and up since she moved to Saint Petersburg. She has amassed a huge fortune from her robberies and some of her colleagues envy the enormous wealth she has amassed. I think I should count on her colleagues to recover my flats and the money I paid for

them. This time I'll have my cake and eat it – this is the only way to punish Turchinskaya and her stooges. The two sisters are her stooges, no doubt about that. Incidentally, they also uttered the word 'Mekitopalatapu' several times in a row. What a pity you don't know the Russian language.

Why did you go so often to my former wife's house? Did you talk about me? I'm sure you did. And what did you say? She said I had been an awful husband. And of course she accused me of lying. Did she say I had robbed her? When I married her, she was a wealthy woman. After all, she belongs to an illustrious family whose members didn't lose anything in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Even the Bolsheviks spared them for some obscure reason. So she was a multimillionaire in those days, in the golden age of our love. What does she say about me? 'When he started he was just a poor boy from the slums – now he's a multimillionaire.' And she points to the bare walls of her castle. 'For years and years he's been removing my precious pictures from these walls. Where are these pictures now? In his collection? In the Hermitage?' The same goes for her furniture, jewels and bank accounts. Does she ever speak about the fortune-teller to whom she has been giving huge sums of money over the last 14 years?

My former wife can't live without fortune-tellers – she is afraid of the future and wants to know everything about it. What can you know about the future? Just take a newspaper and read it through. Have you ever heard about eternal recurrence? 'In Europe, the DAX index in Frankfurt, one of the region's strongest performers last year, closed down 3.2 percent, while the Euro Stoxx 50, an index of euro zone blue-chip shares gave up 2.4 percent.' Are you satisfied? That's what will happen over and over again. You need no fortune-tellers to predict the bankruptcy of the world.

At some point you had invested extensively in stocks and got your fingers burnt when the market collapsed. I always talk about the end of the world. Why don't you listen to me? On my advice, our mutual friend bought a Vecherova picture – a good investment. And the property market collapsed once more. Vecherova, on the other hand, is very famous. And she will become even more famous in the near future because two of her pictures have been bought by the Guggenheim Museum. You need no fortune-teller to learn everything about her future.

I've never said to you, 'Trust your instincts and do what you think is right.' What I can say to you now boils down to this, 'Don't trust your instincts and do what you think is wrong.' You think it's wrong not to buy a flat in Saint Petersburg. So don't buy it and you won't be ruined. But I'll never say to you, 'Don't trust your long-standing friends.' How many years have we known each other? Have I ever betrayed your trust? Well, I was obviously wrong to put my trust in you, my dear Marussya. You want me to help you out. Didn't the Soviet Union withdraw its soldiers from the Afghan imbroglio? You always speak about the Soviet Union in relation to what I do or think. So you expect me to get you off the hook once again. 'Even the Soviet Union

was humane enough to save its soldiers. Why can't you save me from Turchinskaya's clutches?' Is that what you say to yourself round the clock?

You have a dream and no one forbids you to dream as often as you like. But permit me not to take part in your dream which is as absurd as the rest of your ego and persona. Do you really think I'll help you after what you have done? I used to have a reputation for open-mindedness and original thinking. What did you do with this reputation of mine? Didn't you destroy it four years ago? Of course, you'll deny my accusations. You'll say to everybody, 'His reputation was destroyed when he was caught stealing my money and property.' You're mistaken, my dear! It is you who destroyed my reputation, but I can't follow Othello's example and strangle you in your bed, on your sheets. Indeed, I would have to come to your house in order to strangle you in your own bed – for nothing in the world would I strangle you in my house, in my bed. Well, I've grown allergic to you and your house, your beds, your divans, your armchairs, your chests of drawers. So you'll never see me again, either in your bedroom or in your living room. In your dreams perhaps.

Adieu, adieu, adieu.

Your Vassya

Here is the letter I *might* have written:

Dear Vassya,

Vecherova is a very good painter, according to my Russian friends and her fellow artists. In 1982 she became a professor and academician in Moscow. Even the Soviet regime had to acknowledge her as a genius in her field. When I said I had paid only 11,000 euros for her oysters, all these people answered in unison: 'Very cheap.' A man said, 'I'd pay you five times more if you agreed to sell me her oysters.' I told him I didn't have the oysters. 'So I can't sell you anything apart from a few paintings you won't buy.'

'How come you don't have it?' he asked.

'Erreur d'aiguillage,' I said.

'Did you see it?' he asked.

'Only in a catalogue.'

'But did you buy it or not?'

'I did.'

'So where is it?'

'One of my friends must have it.'

'Why don't you ask him to give it back to you? Don't you like the picture?'

'I do. But I don't think he'll return it. Actually we shouldn't use the verbs "to give back" and "to return" – don't forget I've never had this picture.'

'But you bought it, didn't you? Did you pay the amount they'd asked for?'

'I did. And yet I didn't get the picture.'

'Who did? Your friend? Did he steal it?'

"You should have picked it up in Brussels." He trots out this argument whenever I try to discuss the matter with him.'

'Is he still your friend?'

'You ask too many questions and I've got only one answer – I don't have the picture.'

Other people also questioned me about the swindle as if there had been no other topics in the world. They seemed to have forgotten about stock markets and terrorism. They talked only about my lost picture and about how you had stolen it. 'Did he put a few sleeping pills into your champagne?' they asked. 'Breaking and entering?' said a woman. 'It would be pointless to engage in hypothesis before we have the facts,' said a composer. But I was unable to supply any facts. I said I didn't even know whether you had stolen the picture or not.

During my recent trip to Moscow I also told the story of the Saint Petersburg flat, and the people to whom I told it didn't seem to be surprised or shocked. I don't mean to say such things happen daily, but they may happen and if they do happen, people just shake their heads, saying, 'Such is life.' When I tell the story of my picture, no one says, 'Such is life' and the heads don't move at all. People stare at me as if they couldn't believe their ears, as if I had been stolen and found, contradicting the laws of logic and nature. 'Where did it happen?' they ask me. 'In Moscow?'

'In Brussels, of all places,' I answer.

'In Brussels?'

'Yes, in Brussels.'

'Not in Moscow?'

'Not in Moscow.'

'Of course not. Such things don't happen in Moscow. You can buy a phoney house, but no picture has ever vanished into thin air.'

'The flat Marussya bought isn't phoney – Ms Fuksovik lives in it. You can live in it too, providing you pay Ms Fuksovik a huge sum of money. But if I were you, I'd make sure Turchinskaya isn't within shouting distance.'

Dear Vassya! You often start your questions with the words 'Do you remember'. I remember a discussion you had on the phone at the end of my last visit to your castle. You spoke to one of your Petersburg friends after asking me to stay in the room. Obviously you wanted me to listen carefully to your discussion. I was close enough to hear his voice too. You said, 'How are you?'

'The doctor has said I can start stepping down my medication in a few days' time,' your friend answered.

'Have they arrested Turchinskaya?' you asked.

'Not yet.'

'Why not? Did she escape by jumping out of an upstairs window?'

'No. She's in Kiev, I'm told.'

'What's she doing in Kiev? Selling flats?'

'You may well ask. She has occasionally dallied with the idea of starting her own business.'

'Has she really?'

'But she doesn't seem to have done anything about it.'

'Do you know that Marussya doesn't believe I was robbed as well?'

'No.'

'I'm tarred with the same brush as Turchinskaya. Do you know that Marussya accused me of lying, stealing her property and making life hell for her?'

'No.'

'What do you know then?'

'I know you're an honest man.'

'Not as honest as Iago, I hope.'

'Not at all.'

'What else do you know?'

'You were acting in good faith for Marussya.'

'I didn't have the heart to tell her we'd been robbed. For a while I even sent her 2,000 dollars every month – as if I'd been living in her flat. I paid a higher rent than the other tenants because her flat was bigger. Then I stopped sending her money – I can't face the hassle of moving house again.'

Why did you want me to listen to this dialogue, dear Vassya? 'Will you tell Marussya about this phone call?' you asked, once the discussion was over. What do you take us for?

Do you remember Dinussya? Suppose I fall in love with another young woman and ask her out on a date. As you might have noticed, Dinussya is very jealous and consequently I run the risk of hurting her feelings, if I flirt with another woman. So I call one of my friends – you, for instance – and ask him or you to have a chat with me on the phone. 'I'll call you in Dinussya's presence and you'll say to me you remember our dinner on Tuesday night.' I know my example is complicated and difficult to follow but I count on your intelligence and experience.

Dinussya accuses me of betrayal and I pick up the receiver with a view to calling you or another friend of mine in front of Dinussya. She listens to our dialogue and draws some conclusions from what she hears. She realises I spent a few hours in your company and not with a woman she suspects of putting a spoke in her wheel. She is reassured and I put down the receiver. Next day I call you or another friend of mine to thank you or him.

You showed me a photograph of a tall dignified woman and said, 'My mother. Marussya thinks my mother was a concierge. Does this woman look like a concierge?' I said, 'She doesn't.'

What else could I say? You showed me the photograph of a beautiful woman. Of course a concierge can be beautiful – I've come across a few beautiful concierges in my life. So have you, I suppose. (The same goes for hotel porters, by the way.) But I can show you any photograph, saying, 'This woman is my mother' or 'This woman is my favourite concierge' or 'I'll marry this woman the day after tomorrow.' What does your photograph prove anyway? If your mother is a concierge, it doesn't mean you're a thief. And vice versa. And if your mother is a countess, nothing prevents her from stealing pictures. Of course her mother might have told her, 'You'll be a countess in the not too distant future. So don't get used to stealing – it's a bad habit.' But suppose your mother didn't listen to her mother's advice. What then? Can't anyone say about your mother, 'She was a problem child, always in trouble with the police'?

I'm very sad this morning. I switch the TV on and watch the Japanese coast and the ruins that remind one of the Second World War. Why should anyone be reminded of the Second World War? Is that what Freud calls the 'death instinct'?

I buy yet another issue of International Herald Tribune. Thursday, March 17, 2011.

In part because the earthquake had just lowered the level of the land by two feet, the wave rolled as far as six miles inland, killing thousands of people. In a stupefying demonstration of its power, as *The New York Times* has reported, the earthquake moved parts of Japan 13 miles eastward, slightly shifted the earth's axis and actually shortened each day that passes on earth, if only infinitesimally (by 1.8 milliseconds).

The earth's axis has been shifted; each day has been shortened. The end of the world is drawing nigh. And you continue to steal furniture, pictures and flats. The axis of your soul hasn't been shifted, alas. Your days are as long as they used to be, allowing you to accumulate a great amount of wealth. 'I'll tell them I sold it for \$200, not \$250, then I can pocket the rest' seems to be your motto. You're a multimillionaire, but if you can pocket \$50, you do it without hesitation. If you have to swindle your intimate friends in order to get \$50, you go ahead and put the money in your piggy bank. 'The festival is now going ahead as planned,' you say to your soul, feeling a warm glow of satisfaction. And your soul doesn't blush with embarrassment – far from it. Your soul is continually gloating over your credit card frauds and other crimes you commit. Your soul says about Vecherova's picture, 'I know I shouldn't gloat, but it really serves him right.' Does it really serve me right? Have I done you a great wrong? When? How? Anyway, two wrongs don't make a right. In other words, you shouldn't have stolen the picture. Will you ever try to right the wrongs of the past?

You can start with Marussya's flat and my picture. If you restore the flat and the picture to their rightful owners, I'll keep quiet about the amount of money you stole from us and other people. Yes, there are others, my dear. Your criminal activities aren't limited in scope – far from it. On

the contrary, they appear to be growing in scope and intensity. But I won't talk to you about others today. If you maintain the status quo, however, I may talk about them tomorrow. Let it be a warning to you!

Three days ago I saw a programme on the Russian channel. They were talking about Japan and the way the Japanese had coped with the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami. Do you know that prices haven't risen? You go shopping and do not spend more money than last month, the Japanese being loath to profit from the tragedy. They never profit from other people's misery. What do Westerners do under the circumstances? They become multimillionaires.

I know you've got no television set in your castle. Do you buy newspapers?

The workers are performing what have been described as heroic tasks, like using fire equipment to pump seawater into the failing reactors in an effort to avert meltdowns. They are operating in places that have been contaminated by radioactive isotopes from the damaged reactor cores. And while officials have released measurements only of radiation levels at the plant gates, conditions inside are such that technicians will no doubt reach their yearly limit for exposure, perhaps in a relatively short time.

In highly radioactive environments, the higher limit can be reached quickly. During the Chernobyl accident in the Ukraine in 1986, when the reactor caught fire, operators and fire-fighters received high doses of radiation without being made aware of the dangers. More than two dozen of them died of acute radiation illness.

International Herald Tribune, Wednesday, March 16, 2011

'I don't know and I don't care,' says your soul. All right. And what about the following piece of news I lighted upon in the same newspaper?

Analysts at Credit Suisse and Barclays Capital have estimated that the quake and tsunami may have caused up to 15 trillion yen, or 183.5 billion dollars, in damage. Mr Sasaki said that while that figure was 'very large', in the long run the stock market should instead reflect the prospect for corporate earnings. 'But right now there's no arguing with panic,' he said.

I have no idea what the expression 'corporate earnings' means, but I'm sure that 'earnings' are better than 'losses'. Yet earnings and losses often go together – you earn what others lose.

Yours

PS You know whose letter it is, don't you? You don't steal pictures every day, do you?

The world sinks into ruin: yes! but shameful to say our sins still live and flourish. The renowned city, the capital of the Roman Empire, is swallowed up in one tremendous fire; and there is no part of the earth where Romans are not in exile. Churches once held sacred are now but heaps of dust and ashes; and yet we have our minds set on the desire of gain. We live as though we were going to die tomorrow; yet we build as though we were going to live always in this world. Our walls shine with gold, our ceilings also and the capitals of our pillars; yet Christ dies before our doors naked and hungry in the person of His poor.

St Jerome, Letter CXXVIII

I'll dedicate my next concert to Japan. To her ruins and inhabitants. To her gardens, temples and prints. To Prince Genji and Mount Fuji.

*The end of the world's in my room.
There are many ends. Japan is one,
Indivisible. The ruins are a garden.*

*A hillock about half a kilometre
From the Pacific Ocean. The survivors
Come and go, searching for the dead.
The dead are Japanese history,
Mount Fuji and Hokusai. I'd been looking
Everywhere, but I couldn't find them.*

*They're everywhere, everyone:
Prince Genji, Bach, Shakespeare.*

I'm asked to stand in for a pianist who is afraid to go to Japan. I'm not afraid because there's no difference between comings and goings, tomorrow and today. Today I'm in my flat which is also Japan, one of its gardens, one of its temples. The Japanese are aware that life is indivisible. You can't say, 'Life hangs on a wall, death sprawls in an armchair. There was a concert today, but there'll be no concert tomorrow.' What I hear is a symphony in which there's only one movement.

As the scale of Japan's nuclear crisis begins to come to light, experts in Japan and the United States say the country is now facing a cascade of accumulating problems that suggest that radioactive releases of steam from the crippled plants could go on for weeks or even months.

Pentagon officials reported Sunday that helicopters flying 100 kilometers, or 60 miles, from the plant picked up small amounts of radioactive particulates – still being analyzed, but presumed to include cesium 137 and iodine 121 – suggesting widening environmental contamination.

International Herald Tribune, March 15, 2011

The exodus from Japan grew Friday as foreigners sought to flee the threat of radiation from the stricken Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Some 20,000 resident foreigners have indicated their intent to leave the country by requesting re-entry permits from the Tokyo Immigration Bureau, according to Kyoto news agency. Tokyo is about 140 miles, or 220 kilometers, south of the plant.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

When you read this excerpt, you might think that radiation doesn't spread beyond the limits assigned to it by a few journalists and my Japanese friend who told me on the phone, 'When the Americans threw two atom bombs on us, the disease struck only those who lived in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. No one died in Tokyo.' You may wonder, however, why foreigners don't go to Tokyo but are bent on leaving the country.

Ticket agents said flights out of Tokyo to South Korea and China were booking up quickly. A representative of China Southern Airlines, which flies from Tokyo to the Chinese coastal city of Dalian, said its flights were sold out until April. A representative of China Eastern Airlines, which flies to Beijing and Shanghai, also said seats 'are in short supply'. An Air China agent said that the airline added two flights from Tokyo to China on Thursday and that some seats remained on its flights from Tokyo to Beijing.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

Does this piece of information concern only the Chinese? They must know their neighbours better than anyone does. Even Europeans are aware that the Japanese never say 'no', whatever happens and whoever dies. Why should they disclose the truth if the truth is tantamount to NO written in capital letters on every wall in Japan? The whole world is covered in this graffiti so we say NO and read it out loud. The Japanese do not. If asked, 'Do you think your life is *not* in danger?' they say 'yes'. 169 ayes to 14 noes – the ayes have it. (There were 14 foreigners amidst those people.) I see eye to eye with the Japanese and Nietzsche who said 'aye' as often as he could.

I have many friends in Japan among whom there's a samurai – at least within the scope of his genes. And he often says 'aye' to his genes, otherwise he wouldn't have resigned from his company for the sake of independence and personal choice. Why should you say 'aye' to someone with whom you disagree on most things? He records my recitals in Japan and the CDs he has already released go

like hot cakes. At least one of them does. Two weeks ago I received a tiny parcel inside which I found the first edit of a concert I had given in Tokyo last November. I listened to it and called my friend to say he had done a wonderful job. There was no answer and only his fax machine saluted me by a few beeps. So I sent an email to him. Yesterday I got his answer:

Thank you very much for your kind message. Sorry for our absence, we've been out of Tokyo for about one week. After the serious accident of the nuclear plant we left Tokyo area. It seemed to be very dangerous indeed. We were in such a hurry that we could just send you the test edit of the live recording which we hadn't checked very carefully. We really didn't know if we would be able to come back to Tokyo, and wanted to save the recording even if it is unfinished. Now the situation seems better and we decided to return to Tokyo on 25 March for a few days. We're seriously considering if we should move to Kyoto – Osaka area in the nearest future.

What would a samurai do under the circumstances? We shouldn't however overlook my friend's marital bliss: he is married to a Russian pianist who might have insisted upon their departure from Tokyo. Since the Chernobyl catastrophe, the Russians have taken no chances in the domain of nuclear energy.

My last professor's daughter died in Moscow at the age of 43. I wasn't in Moscow at the time of her death, but I met her husband who told the story of her illness. He thought she had been a victim of the Chernobyl catastrophe: at the time of the accident, she was in the area adjacent to the plant. One morning, she called her husband to say she was staying in a wonderful town where a number of special contraptions were cleaning the streets for hours on end. 'This town is spotlessly clean. Wherever I go, I see these contraptions. Ordinary cars are few and far between; so are animals and humans. For whom do they clean the town? For a delegation from the White House? For the Martians? Do you think the Martians are so particular about order? Everything has to be perfectly clean and in its place.'

'She was so fussy about our flat – everything had to be absolutely perfect,' said her husband. 'That's why she liked that area. She even stayed there after her concerts. She didn't fall ill at once. And then she began to throw up and had to go to hospital for several weeks. "Are you going to operate on her?" I asked the doctor. There are doctors who never answer your questions. They say neither "yes" nor "no". And it's a nurse who walks out of an office and says, "Your wife died." For two years the hospital was carrying out tests to pinpoint the cause of her illness. From time to time she stayed at home, but she was getting used to the hospital where she could eat and sleep.'

Xiao Er, a Chinese businessman temporarily working in Inner Mongolia, said he had tried for three days to secure airline tickets to China for his Japanese wife and daughter, who live less than 170 miles from the crippled nuclear plant.

'Right now my family is extremely panicked,' he said by telephone Friday. 'Nobody is going outside. Everyone is hiding in their rooms, afraid of coming into contact with the radiation.'
He said neither he nor his wife had been able to buy tickets to China for her and their daughter. Finally, a relative of his wife secured two tickets for about \$1,500 each. An air ticket out of Japan at the moment is almost 'something that money can't buy,' he said.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

Some people are offered a lot of money for a visit to Tokyo. The Russians to whom this offer was made said unanimously, 'Heath is far more precious than money.'

'Would you like to be healthy and poor?'

'We'd like to be alive at all cost,' sings a Russian choir.

'How much would you pay to stay far away from Japan?'

'Two thousand dollars, three thousand dollars.'

'We'll give you ten thousand dollars for a short visit to Japan.'

'No,' sings the Russian choir. 'Even brief exposure to radiation is very dangerous.'

'There's nothing to worry about.'

'The events in Japan have rekindled stark memories of the Chernobyl disaster from the Soviet era,' sings the Russian choir. 'We are sceptical of official pronouncements, especially during crises. When a reactor at the Chernobyl power plant exploded, the Soviet authorities waited days to inform people of the danger, worsening the loss of life. And when they did inform people of the danger, they said there was no danger. They didn't even say, "There's some danger of low-level radiation."' "

When the Chernobyl disaster struck the Soviet Union and Europe, I was in the States and Marussyia in Indonesia. I postponed my departure from New York in the hope that the atmosphere would dilute radioactive substances and public fears. Marussyia stayed in Indonesia for almost a month, allowing nature to cope with the disaster at a snail's pace. She came back to Europe and took a walk in the woods situated in the vicinity of Brussels. Actually I don't know where she walked and how she was dressed; nor am I sure she was sheltered from radioactive rains by a dense foliage or an ordinary umbrella she often carries around, anxious to protect herself from the sun. She might have been walking in some plain or other, and the rain isn't far from any plain. This time she was attacked by a radioactive shower, and she had no inkling of what was happening because she thought the atmosphere had diluted everything during her long-drawn-out stay in Indonesia. Perhaps it was just a cloud and a few drops that almost every cloud hides in its bosom: clouds are not finicky about what substances they welcome as they float across the sky. 'You're soaked! Did you get caught in the shower?' said her former husband as she finally opened the front door and removed her raincoat.

A few years later, she began to feel tired for no reason at all and well before her bedtime. She wasn't in the habit of taking a nap after lunch, but our habits don't keep us company till our dying day, for all their tenacity and loyalty. So she would sleep for several hours, leaving her bed only for dinner

after which another set of dreams awaited her. ‘A good massage will relax your tired muscles,’ said her doctor. ‘What about my brain?’ she asked.

Another year elapsed and she found out she had a rare disease which had been caused by the Chernobyl disaster or rather by its aftermath. Immediately she joined a sort of club whose members suffered from the same disease and were determined to sue whoever was responsible for it. They all took pills prescribed by their doctors to whom they put the question on which their wellbeing seemed to depend, ‘Is there anything stronger you can prescribe?’ ‘Without these pills I would already have died many times,’ said Marussya recently. She spoke in a tired voice.

Why did I agree to play in Japan? ‘Right now my family is extremely panicked. Nobody is going outside. Everyone is hiding in their rooms, afraid of coming into contact with the radiation.’ Is that what I’m supposed to do during my stay in Japan? A taxi, a train, a plane, a concert hall. Back to my hotel room where a divan or a bed will protect me from an earthquake – not from the radiation, mind you.

‘My family is extremely panicked.’ Its members reside ‘less than 170 miles from the crippled nuclear plant,’ according to the head of the family. Tokyo is also less than 170 miles from the crippled nuclear plant.

Some are stuck in their homes, fearful of radiation, heeding government warnings to stay indoors, cut off without electricity or phone service. Some who want to leave cannot do so because they do not have gasoline for their vehicles. Many others, whose homes were ruined, wait helplessly for evacuation from crowded refugee shelters. All face dwindling supplies of heating fuel, food and water.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

Where do these people live? The issue of the *Herald Tribune* I’m holding in my hands doesn’t say anything about their whereabouts, as if the journalist had been forbidden to disclose this piece of information. Why? Because they all live more than 500 miles from the crippled nuclear plant? This would mean that no area in Japan, however distant from the crippled plants, could be regarded as a ‘safe haven location’.

In Russia, official pronouncements have done little to reassure residents in the country’s Far East, the region closest to Japan. ‘People are in a panic,’ said Dmitri Mukhotin, a spokesman for Pharma Premium, a chain of pharmacies in the region, where there has been a run on iodine products and other items that are thought to protect the body from fallout or from radiation sickness.

‘We are trying to calm people and in no case are recommending that they use these medicines,’ Mr Mukhotin said.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

These Russians live more than 700 miles from the crippled nuclear plant.

The Russian State Orchestra is scheduled to tour Japan in October this year – more than six months after the nuclear disaster. (I shouldn't say 'after' in this context, should I?) Dinussya, who used to play in this orchestra, rang her friends to suggest they talk their boss into cancelling the tour. I'll be flying to Japan on April 6, 2011. This year, not next year. Not in the 23rd century.

This week, Russian officials have repeatedly declared that radiation levels in the Far East were normal. The Emergency Situations Ministry said it had put 237 monitoring stations on alert for abnormal increases in radiation. To back up its claims, the ministry has set up a live video feed of radiation readings from one of its monitoring devices on its Web site.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

Shall I carry one of these monitoring devices in my pocket? How am I supposed to find out what is going on in the atmosphere, in the streets of Osaka and Nagoya? And the last concert will take place in Tokyo which is less than 170 miles from the crippled nuclear plant. Shall I watch these videos during my concerts? Shall I install a screen on the piano? Fortunately, I don't need a music rest so there's enough room for two screens right above the keyboard.

Mr Jaczko, the U.S. official, said, 'We would recommend an evacuation to a much larger radius than has currently been provided by Japan.' This assessment seemed bound to embarrass, if not anger, Japanese officials, suggesting that they had miscalculated the danger or deliberately played down the risks.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

They play down the risks and I'm supposed to play concerts on their territory. 'A much larger radius.' How much larger? How much? How much? Does Mr Jaczko mean the whole country should be evacuated? According to the Russian TV channel, some people residing in Saint Petersburg are prepared to take in Japanese refugees. All right, I'll stay in Saint Petersburg after my recital. (I haven't disclosed my overall schedule yet.) On April 4, 2011, I'll give a recital in Saint Petersburg. I was planning to postpone my departure until April 9, staying with Dinussya at the Kempinski Hotel and in her flat; but my manager called me to say one of his artists had cancelled her tour in Japan. I thought I should help him out: every cancellation poses a serious problem for managers and other people involved in show business. (Today, classical music is part of showbiz, I'm sorry to say.) I also thought about Japan, about how some people were discouraged by the hiatus in their cultural life that had been so intense before the meltdown. I thought I might partly restore their confidence in Western musicians

who don't *always* cancel their tours because of natural disasters. I didn't expect to become a hero overnight, but I knew that many of my colleagues would regard my determination as an act of heroism.

Some of them said: "Why are you always acting the fool?" Others joined in: "Why are you always acting the martyr?"

On Thursday evening, the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo began offering seats aboard chartered flights to Americans wishing to evacuate from Japan. Americans who showed up at the two main airports serving Tokyo, Narita and Haneda, would be flown to still unspecified 'safe haven locations' from where they would be expected to arrange onward travel on their own, said Karen Kelley, a spokeswoman for the embassy.

The U.S. move followed advisory notices from several European countries urging their citizens to move away from Tokyo or leave Japan altogether.

International Herald Tribune, March 18, 2011

Conservation measures were in widespread use in the capital. Lobbies in most large office buildings and hotels in central Tokyo were chilly and dark – the better to save electricity – and some department stores closed early. All across the city, escalators stopped running, banks of elevators were shut down and the huge, iconic message boards in Tokyo's shopping and nightlife areas faded to black.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

Lines of vehicles stretching a kilometer or more were common as people waited for gasoline. Power outages continued, and propane for heating and cooking became ever more scarce. At one hospital that had lost electricity, patients were given bottles half-filled with pebbles to shake as improvised call buttons.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

Japan's nuclear safety agency raised the assessment of the crisis to 5 from 4 on a 7-level international scale.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

PART TWO

1

What happened in Japan stood in stark contrast to my petty worries and I resolved to think big, accepting to go to the country from which everyone seemed to be fleeing like Fleance in *Macbeth*. At the Moscow Art Theatre II Michael Chekhov staged and played *Hamlet*. His rival, who did all he could to evict him, Diky, staged *The Flea* inspired by a Leskov story. Let us forget about Leskov and his famous story to focus exclusively on the word 'flea' and its meaning as reflected in art. Mussorgsky wrote a song entitled *The Flea*; this song was based on Goethe's *Faust* where Mephistopheles sings about a flea that was a king's favourite – a lusty flea. A tailor made a dress or a suite for her; moreover, she (or he) enjoyed an unparalleled freedom at the court, which wasn't everyone's prerogative.

Let us forget about Goethe as well and focus our attention on the flea, on the word which denotes a very small jumping insect. This insect feeds on the blood of animals and humans and so may be justifiably compared to Vassya, to his way of dealing with humans. The author of the programme I saw on TV pointed out that both plays were necessary for the theatre's welfare: not only tragedies were to figure in their repertoire. 'The time is out of joint,' says Hamlet. Today, the Earth is out of joint. So are the Sun and the Moon, according to Dinussya. The Sun sends us poisonous vibes and the Moon has got too close to our continents. Dinussya thinks I should say to the Moon, 'Please, go away. We like you very much, but you should realise that your beloved Earth is in danger. Do you want us to perish? What would you do without the Earth and humans? Our walls and partitions crack and our roofs collapse in a series of earthquakes that are partly due to your proximity to our cities. So we are saying goodbye to you, which doesn't mean we'll never invite you to dinner or lunch. The point is we don't have to sit at the same table and even in the same room. Let us speak on the phone or via the Internet: space is no impediment to a romantic candlelit dinner.'

Horatio speaks about how the sky and the Earth behaved before the assassination of Julius Caesar – 'a little ere the mightiest Julius fell'. One could hear the dead gibber in the streets of Rome: they had asked for leave of absence to attend Caesar's funeral.

*As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.*

The moist star Horatio touched upon is the Moon whose pallid light is partly responsible for this bizarre and portentous definition. Furthermore, the Moon is said to draw up moisture from the sea. It has power over 'Neptune's empire' through its control of the tides.

*And even the like precursor of fear'd events,
As harbingers preceding still the fates
And prologue to the omen coming on,
Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
Unto our climatures and countrymen.*

On the end of the 13-Baktun cycle of the Mayan Long Count (December 21, 2012 AD), the winter solstice sun will be in conjunction with the 'Dark Rift' in the Milky Way. This is actually a rare event, slowly culminating over a period of centuries and millennia, and is a function of the precession of the equinoxes. Beginning with another fact, that this Dark Rift in the Milky Way was known to the ancient Maya as the xibalba be (the Road to the Underworld), additional connections between astronomy and Mayan mythology present themselves.

The 9.0 quake that hit Japan on March 11 was powerful enough to shift the earth on its axis and make it spin a little faster, shortening the day by 1.8 millionths of a second. It shoved the island nation one parking space to the east. But what felt like the end was just the beginning.

The sturdy buildings that survived the quake were ravaged by the wave that followed. The three-story wall of water dissolved coastal towns, dry-docked boats on the roofs of buildings and shuffled houses like playing cards. There were so many aftershocks that people stopped diving under tables. Those who made it safely to higher ground waited in the dark, in the cold, in lines that stretched for hours for water and food. In a society seen as the most stoic on earth, the closest thing to chaos was a man cutting in line.

Time, March 28, 2011

On the other hand, however – on the other side of the coin – you must deal with a flea that crawls up and down your trousers, shirt and jacket. Then it jumps and you suddenly feel it all along your body: now in your groin, now on your shoulder blades and spine. The flea drinks your blood; and yet you didn't say to it, 'Would you like a drink of blood?' If you ask the flea why it took the liberty of meddling in your body's private life, it may answer, 'I've received permission to go ahead with the meal in spite of opposition from local residents.'

'But I'm not a local resident,' you say to the flea. 'I'm the only owner of my body. And my body owns my blood – to some extent.'

'Do you have any proof of ownership for this body?' says the flea.

'If it weren't for my will, this body would be unable to move and act.'

'Do you have any proof of ownership for the will you're talking about?'

'I'm sure it's my will to power.'

‘And what about God’s will?’ says the flea. ‘You do what the Almighty wants you to do.’

‘Does He want you to drink my blood?’

‘Of course, otherwise I wouldn’t be drinking it. You can’t do anything without God’s permission.’

‘Are you sure you’ve been granted permission to invade my body?’

‘It’s just God’s will, His instinct and innermost thought. I’m part and parcel of God’s body. Have you ever given your body permission to move? You just will yourself to move and your body executes your will’s order without knowing anything either about the order or the will.’

‘So you admit this body and will are mine? You said, “*Your* body, *your* will.”’

‘Your body is my body now, if only in part,’ the flea rounds off.

Does Vassya reason along these lines? ‘I wouldn’t have stolen this picture had God decided otherwise. When God created Adam, he knew that one of his descendants would steal your picture in Brussels. He also knew the identity of the thief. Actually I’m not a thief because God wanted me to steal your oysters. Would you accuse God of the theft? This is no theft, my dear – it’s part of the world order. Some talk about the *new* world order. They’re mistaken – there’s only one world order and it’s as old as God and tough as old boots.’

‘And what about original sin, my dear Vassya?’

‘Was I Adam’s keeper?’

‘And free will? God knew about your theft, but He didn’t act in your stead.’

‘His foreknowledge of my act stood me in good stead when I was stealing the picture.’

I’m re-reading Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*. At some point Russell can’t help voicing his surprise at St Augustine’s disproportionate and even abnormal sense of sin. He quotes the *Confessions* – one of the chapters dealing with a theft which was to become a bountiful source of St Augustine’s repentance. The incident occurred in the saint’s boyhood when, along with his playmates, he despoiled a neighbour’s pear tree; yet he wasn’t hungry and his parents had more succulent pears at home.

Behold my heart, O God, behold my heart, which Thou hadst pity upon in the bottom of the abyss. Now, behold, let my heart tell Thee, what it sought there, that I should be gratuitously wicked, having no temptation to that evil deed, but the evil deed itself. It was foul, and I loved it; I loved to perish, I loved mine own fault, not that for the sake of which I committed the fault, but my fault itself I loved. Foul soul, falling from the firmament to expulsion from Thy presence; not seeking aught through the shame, but the shame itself.

Vassya doesn’t need Vechevova’s painting, given the majesty of his collection and his relative aversion to contemporary art. But he must know what a professional artist can experience when plunging into his work separated from crude reality by his own fantasy. This variety of creation is

usually defined as ‘art for art’s sake’ and Vassya often does justice to this notion, judging from the theft under discussion. Stealing is a fine art and one may devote one’s whole life to it, provided one doesn’t go too far, flouting convention and common decency. Vassya went too far and his theft – one of his masterpieces – has grown into a bitter dispute of which he is probably unaware. In the light of my discretion, he might think I don’t really care about the picture and even about the money I paid for it. The dispute, if any, is taking shape in this book which he hasn’t read because I’m determined not to put him in the picture about my intention to write it and, at this stage of my work, to finish it in two months.

There are other people in this story – not only on account of the frequency of Vassya’s thefts. The point is, I wished to get back part of the money I had paid for the picture, which would have been easy had I been a Belgian resident: one third of it went in tax. It was a charity sale and so one might count on the government’s charity, on its members’ desire to restore the tax to someone who is willing to rescue his or her fellow creatures. Five years ago I was already a French resident and so I had to resort to the help of a man or a woman who could legally get the tax back so as to give it to me – to the man who bought the picture. This is an involved account and those to whom I speak about the matter don’t seem to grasp why I blame the man in whom I put trust at that point. What’s more, he doesn’t understand it either. Let me tell the whole story which isn’t over yet.

At the end of our discussion focused on the auction (or charity) sale I heard my dear Vassya’s remark: ‘You’ll get back the tax – one third of the amount – if you ask somebody to buy the picture for you. Of course you’ll have to make out a cheque to this person. Anyway you’re supposed to pay for the picture.’ He laughed again, but in those days his laugh wasn’t yet sending a shudder down my spine; so I smiled in return.

A few days later I called Marussya to ask if she could do me a favour. She said my explanation was too involved and consequently she didn’t know what to do and how to proceed. I called a businessman, Jeremiah de Durdom, who didn’t seem to be fond of the art-for-art’s-sake approach to life; he said he could give me a hand and I thanked him for his thoughtfulness. I sent him a cheque and he paid for the picture. ‘Please make sure you’re given a certificate,’ I said.

‘What do you take me for?’ he answered.

‘I often forget certificates,’ I said.

‘You’re an artist. You’re not cut out for an office job. I’m a businessman.’ I burst into laughter. ‘Please don’t laugh – I’m being serious. I’m so bored at work, I wish they’d give me something I could really get my teeth into.’

Two months later I asked him if he had got the certificate. ‘My secretary must have it,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to change jobs – after 15 years here I feel I’m in a rut.’

‘Could you please ask her to send it to me?’

‘Of course. She’s on holiday now, but as soon as she comes back –’

The secretary never came back: I still don’t have the certificate.

Several months later I called Jeremiah to ask if in his declaration of income my picture had taken pride of place. 'But I don't have the certificate,' he said, bursting into laughter. 'My secretary must have mislaid it. I've got another secretary now and she doesn't know anything about my previous secretary. In her presence I never speak about her colleagues, even about the women who no longer work in my office. In a moment of jealous frenzy, she may cut the sleeves off all my shirts.'

'Do you need the certificate to put my painting in your declaration of income?'

'There must be a copy of it kicking around the office somewhere. My secretary has been hunting high and low –'

'Your new secretary?'

'Anyway, I no longer pay taxes. I retired a few years ago.'

'But you still have secretaries, don't you?'

'We keep up appearances for the sake of my son.'

There's another man in my story and I can't go on without talking about him, if only for a few seconds: he was in charge of the charity sale and consequently of my picture. Some time ago I already touched upon the part he had played in the story, calling him the 'auctioneer'. (His name is of no importance.) I phoned him two or three times before the sale and he said I shouldn't be worried about inflation biting into this investment of mine. 'Vecherova's very famous already. You'll be able to sell this picture for an astronomical sum of money, if you don't get rid of it immediately. This is a charity sale and the prices are very low. So I'd ask you not to sell the picture next year. You can wait, can't you? You're not very old, are you? Not on your deathbed, anyway. It wouldn't be decent to sell the picture at once. We shouldn't defy convention by selling our pictures, should we?'

After talking to Jeremiah, I called the auctioneer again and he said it would be hard to make another certificate. 'I'll do my best,' he said. A few days later I called Jeremiah again and he said he had got the certificate. 'But I don't know what to do with it,' he said.

'Don't you wish to recover the tax?'

'It's not my picture, not my tax. I haven't had much income from my stocks and shares this year. And I've no other income, as I told you. Well, I'll do what I can.'

A few months later I called Jeremiah again and he said he owed me 50 euros. 'I haven't had much income from my stocks and shares this year. So I can give you only 50 euros.'

'Why 50 euros?'

'Because I haven't had much income from my stocks and shares this year.' He burst into laughter. Then he stopped laughing and said, 'I've got another secretary, you know. She lives in Paris. You must have met her – she's also a pianist. She's giving a recital the day after tomorrow. I'm coming to Paris to attend her recital. Don't you want to join me? I think she's playing Beethoven's sonatas. Or Scriabin's etudes. Do you like Scriabin? Do you play his etudes? She does. Listening to music is one of my greatest joys, you know. I find Schubert's impromptus deeply moving. By the way, my neighbours are very inconsiderate – they're always playing loud music late at night. And their

music is bad. I wouldn't mind listening to Brahms, for instance. But their music is bad. By the way, my secretary composes and performs her own music. This time she'll play Chopin's mazurkas, if I'm not mistaken. She dances beautifully. Last time I was in Paris we went dancing at a nightclub. What sort of music do *you* like dancing to?'

In Japan, it is not normal to bury the dead, much less to lay dozens side by side in a backhoe-dug furrow. Cremation is both universal – at nearly 100 percent, the cremation rate here is the world's highest – and an important purification rite in an elaborate funeral tradition deeply rooted in Buddhism.

But across coastal northeast Japan, cultural tradition has collided this month with mathematical reality. The number of dead and missing from the earthquake and tsunami March 11 has climbed past 22,000, and in the small towns and rural villages where most people died, there are by far too many bodies to burn.

Hashi-Matsushima, a seaport of 43,000 people, has recovered 680 bodies since the tsunami hit, and nearly 500 more are missing and presumed dead. The town's single aging crematorium can accommodate but four bodies a day.

'If we buried all the bodies, it would take a very long time,' said the city spokesman, Takashi Takayama. 'The bodies are being kept now in two places, and we're concerned that they might decompose.'

International Herald Tribune, March 24, 2011

Along with Vassya, Jeremiah seeks the shame itself or the pleasure one might experience when having fun at someone's expense. Vassya buys paintings at auctions and then resells them at a vast profit to collectors. Let me put it this way: Vassya *used* to buy paintings at auctions. Now he *steals* them, which doesn't prevent him from selling them at a vast profit to collectors and museums. Jeremiah hasn't got hold of my picture so he can't sell it either to a collector or a museum. Had he stolen it, he might have hung it in his flat or sold it to Vassya. I have already asked myself the following question: 'Did Jeremiah steal my picture?'

He might have done that easily: after all, he paid for the picture and had every right to enjoy its qualities either directly or indirectly – by selling it to a Russian oligarch. I wasn't likely to conjecture the picture was hanging in his castle, for everybody shouted from the rooftops: 'Jeremiah is an honest man.' (There are only *honest* men in my story. And women are beyond suspicion.) Nobody said, 'He's a big fat slob of a man – I can't stand him.'

Had I asked Jeremiah about the picture's whereabouts, he might have answered: 'What picture? What are you talking about? *Your* picture? My secretary must have mislaid it. I've got many pictures in my castle. Vassya's got two hundred pictures, but I've gone one better – there are *three* hundred pictures in my castle and my pied à terre. One of these pictures may belong to you, but I dismissed my

secretary last night. I still love her, but I should dismiss love and its components from my mind – they're crazy and not worth thinking about. She dances so beautifully. She sings as well. By the way, she started to sing professionally after leaving college. She doesn't paint, but she loves the pictures I've got and she often removes them from the walls to play with them to her heart's content. I say to her, "These pictures aren't cards – you shouldn't shuffle them." She doesn't listen to what I say to her. She dances with the pictures. She might have danced with your oysters or rather with your waiter. Whenever I invite my friends to dinner, she flirts with just about every man in the room. She flirts with waiters too, if we go to a restaurant or a brasserie – otherwise I wouldn't have dismissed her.'

A portable trailer at one end of the incinerator grounds housed a small shrine with candles and two vases of daffodils, where friends and relatives of the dead could light incense and shield themselves from the wintry wind.

Each coffin was unloaded by a crew of 12 soldiers in camouflage and white gloves. Six soldiers carried the coffin with military precision to its resting place; six marched in silent escort. Seven more waited at the grave. A silent salute followed the lowering of each body into the trench.

It was the bureaucracy's best effort to imbue the interments on Wednesday with the dignity of genuine funerals rather than what they were: an unavoidable response to a potential public health problem. Later in the day, Buddhist monks would come to the site to pray over the graves.

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Jeremiah *might* have stolen the picture because the certificate was in his name and I didn't turn up either at the auction or elsewhere; and yet I paid for the picture and no one questioned my financial participation in the ritual. I didn't feel like talking either to Jeremiah or the auctioneer, so I asked Marussya to call the latter to find out what exactly had taken place after the auction. Of course I knew only too well that Vassya had appropriated the picture, but the role played by Jeremiah was ambiguous and I wanted to complete my collection of monsters. (You can always collect monsters, for want of anything better.)

Marussya complied with my wish and rang me up after talking to the auctioneer. 'You shouldn't accuse *him*,' she said.

'Vassya?'

'The auctioneer. He gave the picture to Vassya. He doesn't remember when he did it, but he did it – that's for sure. Vassya said something about a doctor – your mutual friend. He said the doctor would give you the picture because you often met her in Charleroi.'

‘Yes, I know. I spoke to Vassya about the doctor and he said, “I asked this doctor to give another picture to another friend of mine. She lives in Charleroi. It’s a pity you’ve never met her. She’s beautiful, but not very rich.”

‘He also said,’ Marussya went on, ‘that Vassya might have got the picture two years after the auction. It doesn’t really matter *when* he got it. He *got* it and that’s what we should talk about.’

‘Vassya told me he’d never seen the picture,’ I said.

‘He doesn’t remember the oysters because he sold the picture at once,’ said Marussya. ‘Anyway the auctioneer has nothing to do with it.’

Another woman, Genevussya de Rotfront, disagreed with Marussya on this point. (No wonder she disagrees with Marussya on *every* point – she is much more intelligent.) I was speaking to her on the phone and she said I should take the auctioneer to court. ‘Why did he give *your* picture to Vassya? He should have given it to you or the person who paid for it – to Jeremiah.’

‘Jeremiah is very charming but I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him,’ I said. I like this idiom and often use it just for the sake of using it: I don’t *always* incriminate the person to whom I refer when uttering these words.

‘Jeremiah is above suspicion,’ said Genevussya.

‘Not quite,’ I said. ‘He owes me 3,600 euros.’

‘How so?’

‘Thirty percent, the tax. He was supposed to recover the tax I’d paid to the state. He said he didn’t work any more and so paid no taxes. The sale was tax deductible, you know. But if you pay no taxes you can’t deduct anything from them.’

‘So he must give you 3,600 euros – out of his own pocket. And Vassya should give you the picture. If I were you, I’d ask the auctioneer to call Vassya as soon as possible. They’ll thrash the problem out. It would be very difficult to prove that Vassya’s guilty. You can take the auctioneer to court, but you’d better talk him into trying to settle the dispute out of court by calling Vassya, by meeting him.’

There are many red herrings in this story and some of them are related to women. Vassya thinks I forget the arts and my own life as soon as I spot a woman in the vicinity of my body. Even if one just *talks* to me about a beautiful woman, I forget everything – that’s what Vassya thinks as he plans another evasion or excuse. So he talked to me about a very beautiful woman living in Brussels. ‘Very rich too,’ he added raising one eyebrow in a meaningful way. For some reason, he always raises only one eyebrow. I wonder if he can raise both eyebrows. Or does he think this *double* sign wouldn’t be as meaningful as the one to which he resorts so often?

Last November I played a recital in Luxembourg. In France, some people were striking for a reduction in the working week and improved safety standards; I couldn’t go back to Paris by train. My manager was driving back to Brussels and I joined him in his car, hoping I could meet the lady in question the next morning. I rang her up – Vassya had given me her phone number – and she agreed to

lunch with me in a cosy restaurant: like many women, she thinks about restaurants in terms of atmosphere.

I didn't find her beautiful. She was by no means ugly, but not being ugly doesn't necessarily mean you're a very attractive young woman. Her Belgian accent wasn't unbearable and we talked about politics, wisely avoiding the topics I cherish: philosophy and art. We also spoke about ideal cities and I said we should exclude the City of God from our discussion. She said she wouldn't live in Tokyo, for all its luxuries. 'The language barrier would spoil the pleasure I might derive from local delicacies,' she said.

'Lausanne seems an ideal place from this point of view – from every point of view, as a matter of fact,' I pointed out. 'Shall we move to Lausanne?'

I said it half-jokingly, but she answered we should wait until her children come of age and get married. 'What if they get married in 20 years?' I said.

We paid a visit to her son and daughter; I saw the house where the family had lived for more than 10 years. I didn't like the house, the furniture and the pictures I saw on the walls and even on the floor. My picture wasn't among them. 'So Vassya isn't hiding it at *her* place,' I thought. She phoned her travel agency to find out how I could get back to Paris. In France the strike was over, but in Belgium it had just begun as if the world couldn't live without a series of strikes. 'If we don't go on strike today,' the Belgians thought, 'the world may come to an end. There should be no gaps in our eternal strike.' So they decided to bridge the gap between the French rebellion and the Italian turmoil scheduled for the end of the week.

She said, 'I can drive you to Lille. And then you'll take a train to Paris. In France the strike's over.'

'I don't want to put you to any trouble,' I said. Out of politeness I habitually say a lot of nonsense. When a scientist tells me he is bound by a scientist's code of ethics, I don't believe him. But I respect him for touching upon the code of ethics to which his colleagues are supposed to bow without a murmur – at least in their speeches.

She drove me to Lille. I don't remember what we talked about in the car because she hardly said a word and I uttered many words for the sake of uttering them. I said to myself that Vassya had won another round of our game by arousing my curiosity about a woman who didn't deserve my attention: I had altered my itinerary and stopped over in Brussels for nothing. I listened neither to what she said – she did utter a few words in the course of our drive – nor to my interior monologue that was supposed to make up for the triviality of my exterior monologue.

My interior monologue was tuned in to Vassya's thoughts. I said to myself, 'He made me waste my time and alter my itinerary for the sake of a woman I'm prepared to forget before saying goodbye to her. I pin my hopes on another woman – the agent whose influence must propel me to international stardom in the domain of literature. I'm sure she doesn't exist; and if she does live somewhere – in

France or in the States – she’s a prominent political figure unable to distinguish an iamb from a trochee, as Pushkin said about Eugene Onegin.’

‘I should make him forget about the picture,’ Vassya said to himself. ‘He talks about it too often as if he really liked Russian contemporary painters. He doesn’t love his native land, otherwise he wouldn’t have left it forever – the Russians can’t live without their soil, their countrymen. They go abroad only for a few months, and if they have to stay in France or in Germany till doomsday, they shoot themselves or jump from the Eiffel Tower. He’s still alive, so he doesn’t love his motherland. Why should he love Russian painters? He thinks of Russia as a backward country – no industry, no machines, no painters. There are *some* painters, but they imitate their western counterparts. Kandinsky and Malevich are gone. They created their masterpieces before the Russian Revolution. Now there are only provincial painters. Some Russian composers are very good – Shostakovich, for instance. But there are no Russian painters of note. That’s what he must think and so he doesn’t deserve Vercherova’s painting. He doesn’t want to admit it or rather he does admit it, otherwise he would have come and fetched the picture after the auction. He did nothing of the sort. And now he wants to sell it in order to get 50,000 euros. It’s the money he wants, not the picture. Why should he get it? He doesn’t deserve it either.’

That’s what Vassya must have thought all along the line. But how make me forget the picture or rather 50,000 euros? Now it must cost 50,000 euros at least, according to what Vassya and the auctioneer said six years ago. Shouldn’t I take into consideration the crisis and whatever influence it must have had on the art market? I didn’t think about the crisis when talking to the woman who had failed to awaken my sexual curiosity and the instincts related to it. I didn’t think about Japan either. It was too early to think about the earthquake and tsunami that were to take place several months later – on the 12th or 13th page of this book. I mean I was already engrossed in writing this book when this natural disaster shook the world.

Now I’m thinking about both Japan and Vassya. My stream of consciousness, however tedious it may sound, devotes to them a part of my time which is not so precious as to prevent me from doing justice to the Japanese people’s valour and endurance: even Dante would have devoted a lot of his time to the Japanese tragedy. Vassya, on the other hand, may count only on the fleeting glimpse of a clown in search of inspiration. And yet I’ve been writing this book for more than a month. I would have given up this worthless enterprise, if Japan hadn’t come to my rescue. Does that mean I shamelessly exploit her disaster?

These nuclear refugees tell tales of trips made with great difficulty, of scrounging to find gasoline amid post-disaster shortages, and arriving with just the clothes on their backs. Many are already traumatized by the tsunami last week that swept away entire towns in northern Japan, leaving more than 15,000 dead or missing.

International Herald Tribune, March 18, 2011

As they flee, they enter a life in limbo, camped out on gym floors with hundreds of others, uncertain when or whether they will ever be able to return to their homes.

International Herald Tribune, March 18, 2011

Japan warned Wednesday that infants in and around Tokyo should not drink tap water, adding an unexpected new dimension to the crisis gripping the country ever since an earthquake and tsunami hit the northeast coast this month. The government also issued a starkly higher new estimate about the costs of rebuilding.

The announcement added to the growing anxiety about public safety posed by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, which was severely damaged by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, and it prompted a run on bottled water at stores in Tokyo. Prime Minister Naoto Kan said earlier Wednesday that the public should avoid additional farm produce from areas near the power station because of contamination, according to the Japanese news media.

International Herald Tribune, March 24, 2011

In Russia's Far East, residents are ignoring official assurances that there is no danger, and are beginning to stockpile food, medicine and facemasks. Similarly, Chinese across the country are emptying supermarkets of iodized salt, even though government health officials said that the salt would not protect people exposed to radiation.

International Herald Tribune, March 18, 2011

I used to idolise James Joyce. 'The interior musings he gave prominence to explore the innermost nature of human beings to such an extent that even Shakespeare with his poisons and swords seems to lag behind him as they both advance towards absolute truth,' I wrote in my juvenile essay. However, this method has its limitations and is rather deficient in comparison with poetic license that doesn't rely on someone's brain and whatever comes into it. You walk along the streets and think about Lucy or Peter who ignore your life, let alone the love poems you compose during your walk. And then a bar of soap makes its appearance right in the middle of your ecstasy to remind you of a shop where you should buy it – otherwise you won't be able to wash your hands upon coming home. Then you hear a dog barking in the distance and say to yourself, 'A dog. Barking at an intruder. Or did he spot a rabbit? At least he's not barking up the wrong tree.' Then you resume your love-oriented stream of consciousness out of which there sticks the bar of soap. Why should I read about it? I've got my bath salts, my cat, my love poems and the streets along which I walk on sunny afternoons.

But I need Beatrice and the paths along which Dante is walking with Virgil: I don't have *them* at my disposal. Even if Dante had acquired a bar of soap in the underworld, I would have been delighted to use it. Leopold Bloom's memories and the parallels he draws when walking along the streets of

Dublin leave me cold and I have no wish to spy on them as I turn the pages of *Ulysses*. So I stop turning them and put the novel back on the shelf from which I seldom remove it now, opting for other excitements, ecstasies and dreams. Humdrum slices of life are within my reach elsewhere and I resign myself to their intrusions into my sunny mornings only when I can't do otherwise.

My present interior monologue is far more complicated than whatever Leopold Bloom might have encountered in the course of his wanderings through Joyce's native city: I have to take into consideration not only Vassya's train of thought but also Japan, the end of the world and the state of affairs I'm facing on the 31st of March, 2011. I was thinking of my lost picture when I was sidetracked by the radiation about which the Chinese are greatly worried, according to the newspapers I peruse. Vassya doesn't talk to me about the earthquake and tsunami I've discussed at length on the last pages of my book: he's got his own way of dealing with my obstinacy and desire to recover the picture. He describes a beautiful woman and suggests I should go to another country and meet her in a cosy restaurant where one may seduce anybody, provided the food hasn't gone off. He says he'll get in touch with a renowned literary agent whose influence is not confined to France and Europe in general: all American publishers listen to her ideas and rave over the novels she recommends whenever she takes the trouble to talk to them on the phone.

In this chapter, however, Vassya enlarges upon the Japanese tragedy and even touches upon the Russians who stockpile food, medicine and facemasks to protect their bodies from the aftermath of the Earth's uncontrollable fury. Nor does he forget the Chinese draining supermarkets of iodised salt.

'It's unfortunate, but the radiation is clearly being carried on the air from the Fukushima plant,' said Yukio Edano, the chief cabinet secretary. 'Because it's raining, it's possible that a lot of places will be affected.'

There has been frequent rain in recent days and the watershed for Tokyo's tap water lies almost entirely to the north and northeast of the city; the nuclear plant is about 225 kilometers, or 140 miles, to the north.

International Herald Tribune, March 24, 2011

'Do you really understand what's going on in Japan?' Vassya said leafing through the newspapers I buy every morning. 'The radiation has already been carried on the air from the Fukushima plant. And you are going to Tokyo of all places. Yesterday I spoke to an American nuclear scientist. He's not urging panic, but he's not too reassuring either. He's quite clear about the fact that comparing this kind of radiation exposure to chest X-rays and airplane flights is completely bogus. The authorities reassure us by saying there's no immediate danger. When you hear these words you should run away as far and fast as you can. As many as 985,000 people have so far died as a result of the Chernobyl catastrophe. All in all, the road to a secure future is strewn with awkward obstacles. I suppose you'll drink only French mineral water throughout your stay in Japan. But won't you perform your daily ablutions in the

course of your visit to the country of Sei Shonagon? You might think what's outside will never get inside, but you're mistaken. As above, so below. As outside, so inside. Don't forget that water is not a stone. Even stones penetrate the human body, otherwise we wouldn't suffer from kidney stones. And water lords it over other elements within the human body. Don't you know that your body is made up mainly of water? If you play in Tokyo, this ordinary water will turn into pure radioactivity. Women will never kiss you any more. They'll keep away from your radioactive lips, from your saliva. So will men and even domestic animals, including your cat on whom you dote. What will you do if your cat forsakes you? If he doesn't, you'll contaminate him as well. Your cat will die in your arms. And you're thinking about the picture you've lost forever. Do you want me to put it in your coffin? Is this second-rate picture dearer to you than your cat? You shouldn't look for the lost picture – it's on your wall, in your room, in your living room. Instead of looking *for* it, you should look *at* it. If you persuade yourself that you *have* this picture, you'll have it on one of your walls.'

The nuclear safety agency also said that some of the water used to douse the damaged reactors had reached the ocean nearby, and that officials were investigating radiation levels in the water.

International Herald Tribune, March 22, 2011

I saw a programme about an icon found in Kursk. The icon cures those who find it in a deserted attic, in a wine cellar. Their friends say to them, 'Well, you've made a miraculous recovery since last night!' Every picture is an icon. Its status depends on how you look at it – if you look at it at all. So much energy has been focused on my lost picture it must possess magical powers in March 2011. If I look at it now, I'll be cured of all my real and imaginary diseases. Dinussya says I can cure the pain in my knee by putting manual pressure on the joint. My picture is a better cure – I'm sure of that. I should ask Vassya to lay it on his piano tonight, if only for a few seconds. I'll walk with a limp across his castle and say to him, 'Only Vercherova's picture can cure me of this fatal disease. The infection will go up, attack my brain and whatever depends on it.'

After the announcement Wednesday, at the Lawson's convenience store in the Tsukiji neighborhood of central Tokyo the shelves were about half-stocked with water. But a clerk said he had just restocked them an hour before.

'People came in and cleared us out in the first hour after the announcement,' he said, asking that he not be identified because he did not want to anger his boss. 'They were taking 20 or 30 bottles at a time.'

International Herald Tribune, March 24, 2011

Dinussya says that Vassya must have installed a mechanism in my brain – something akin to what she calls the ‘25th shot’. You watch a film and shed a few tears because a woman throws herself under the wheels of a motorcar. But your emotion isn’t as chaste as you might suppose because a foreign body has been inserted into it. A washing powder or a bar of soap is embedded in your brain and unconscious; whenever you walk past a shop, you feel an urge to buy the product you own intellectually, if not spiritually.

A few drops of water poison my brain to the extent of making me forget my picture, my shame and loss. I need to devise some sort of system whereby I can recover Vecherova’s masterpiece hidden in Vassya’s attic or somewhere else – in a Russian oligarch’s villa. Instead of coming up with a bright idea, I think about how difficult it is to get pure water in Japan. And during my stay in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya I’ll need pure water even more than my picture. Only pure water will be in a position to purify my body and soul, making them immune to radiation. Water is not as forgetful as one might presume because it remembers whatever you do or say. And you’re likely to lose your memory if the water you’ve got in your brain dries out without being replaced by fresh water. Or you may realise some day that only stagnate water fills your brain; you grow old and the smell of decaying meat pursues you wherever you go and whatever you think about.

The spread of at least a small amount of radiation is inevitable, considering the steam that is generated as emergency workers spray water on damaged reactors and cooling pools at the Fukushima complex. Government and power company officials were nonetheless expressing growing optimism that the crisis was closer to being brought under control.

But in a new problem at the plant the cooling system for the Number 5 reactor stopped working Wednesday afternoon, said Hiro Hasegawa, a spokesman for the Tokyo Electric Power Company, which operates the plant.

International Herald Tribune, March 24, 2011

3

I’m already in Saint Petersburg and my forthcoming trip to Japan looms large as I walk along the streets of my favourite city.

I picked up my suitcase at the airport and immediately thought about my future destination. Paris, Osaka or Tokyo?

I’m not tempted to write a poem about my predicament; and yet nothing really flows in my brain as if its water had already dried out or grown stagnant. What is left reminds me of a Japanese poem – a collection of snapshots related to a feeling of sadness or joy.

Here is a poem about water:

The children enjoy floating their boats on the pond in the park.

Now the pond is covered in a brittle layer of ice.

A stagnant pond.

Several large fish live in the pond.

No more fish in the pond.

I sailed upriver. Effluents from nuclear plants

Are finding their way into the river.

Dinussya talks about the end of the world as if there were only ends in her life – no bits, no beginnings. She says the Japanese tragedy is a landmark in the history of our apocalypse, but the end itself will come as a surprise to those who don't believe in extraterrestrial fighters.

There's a planet of which I've heard nothing and consequently it doesn't exist in my conscious life. I've had continual problems with the Earth and so there's no room for other planets in my brain. There might be some amoebas lost in the vastness of the universe, but I don't care about them and their fellow creatures.

The planet Dinussya talks about is inhabited by belligerent robots who need our gold to survive in their inhospitable world. They also need our diamonds and other precious stones: their women are keen on jewellery and go to balls twice a day. How long are their days? I have no idea if there are nights in their atmosphere, but I do know they depend on our raw materials to sustain human or plant life, even if the names they give to whatever can be found in their midst do not correspond to our notions and catalogues. So they come to *our* planet in order to rob it of oil, for oil can be processed into many different products, including plastics. They fill up their canisters and fly back to their bare lands where nothing except them and their pets will ever grow. But they're weary of these comings and goings; anyway, they prefer the Earth and our water, nature and atmosphere where they breathe in deeply and breathe out slowly. On their planet they hardly breathe, being allergic to their so-called air. No wonder they don't call it 'air': the substance they're dealing with doesn't deserve this gracious, dignified name.

Apparently they'll attack the Earth in December 2012, as if they had consulted the Maya calendar and agreed with the numbers one finds in it. Or do their politicians want to ensure fair play between their and our armies during the forthcoming war? For some reason they're sure the end of the world foretold in the calendar will be interpreted as a declaration of war.

'You don't believe me, do you?' said Dinussya. 'Where are the diamonds *our* fellow creatures dig up every day? Do you see them in our shops, on our necks and fingers? And what about our gold? Is it in our banks and pockets? The greater part of our treasures is stored on that planet and we can't do anything about it. Do you think we can reach their atmosphere and poison it with our nuclear plants? Do we have an appropriate spaceship equipped with bombs and Martian rays?'

‘We might use a white hole, an interstellar tunnel,’ I said.

‘You don’t take star wars seriously,’ she said. ‘Anyway we’re bound to lose. The Earth will be inhabited by other creatures, by anti-humans.’

‘In our times it’s better to be an anti-human than a human,’ I said.

‘Those times won’t be *ours* any longer,’ she said.

‘We don’t deserve time,’ I rounded off.

With no time to mourn for their missing loved ones, they were immediately thrust into the struggle to stay alive in the frigid winter cold, amid a hushed, apocalyptic landscape of wrecked homes, crushed vehicles and stranded boats. They had scant food and fuel and no news from the outside world – not even the scope of the devastation.

International Herald Tribune, March 24, 2011

On Dinussy’s advice I’m watching a film entitled *Apocalypse How?* I don’t think humanity will ever resort to nuclear weapons which have been acting as a powerful deterrent to would-be offenders ever since the advent of the atomic bomb. A kamikaze attack may involve several people, but an army is sure to capitulate, if faced with an unavoidable defeat. Even the Japanese are no longer ready to sacrifice themselves en masse for the sake of patriotism: our notion of democracy must have weakened if not destroyed their hara-kiri-oriented spirit. So I discard the second part of this documentary and concentrate mostly on its beginning, devoted to super volcanoes.

The mightiest of these volcanoes may wipe humanity off the map, if it awakens and gives vent to its fury. We are all used to watching erupting volcanoes on television. ‘Lava from the volcano is flowing down the hillside,’ explains a voice and we see the lava and a group of people running away in fright. We know this is a virtual image; and yet we are frightened and tempted to switch our TV sets off. ‘We can’t switch off a super volcano,’ explains the voice. ‘Some of you may think that a dormant volcano is as helpless as a human who sleeps in her bed. You can murder a heavy sleeper and get away with it. You can’t murder a super volcano. Nor can you pacify it, cooling its dormant lava by means of cold water. Nor can you put it to sleep if it feels like erupting and discharging massive quantities of dust into the stratosphere. And it doesn’t only discharge dust into the stratosphere – there are stones and boulders among the specks of dust. And these stones and boulders will fall on you as soon as they get weary with the stratosphere and the sky in general. “There’s not a speck of dust in my house,” says an exemplary housewife. What would she say if she saw a number of stones in her living room and a boulder on her bed? What would *you* say if you didn’t see the sun any more? You wouldn’t see it if a super volcano erupted and discharged the contents of its bowels into the stratosphere. A scientist says on television, “On Wednesday there will be a total eclipse of the sun.” So you buy a pair of glasses designed to protect you from the sun whose partial defeat you’re eager to contemplate from one of your windows. You sit down at the window and enjoy the spectacle that lasts a few minutes only. How

long does a total eclipse of the sun may last? Three minutes, five minutes. The eclipse I'm talking about will last forever. An eclipse caused by a super volcano may last for years and years, but you'll see only a part of it. You can't say to the Earth: "You'll feel cold if you don't wear a coat." If you do say that, the Earth will answer, "Feel my toes – they're as cold as ice. It's freezing cold today. It was freezing cold yesterday. My body and soul are as cold as ice. Why don't you put a coat on my body? I feel like wearing a heavy winter coat." You say to the Earth, "Fur coats have gone out of fashion." And the Earth answers you, "I couldn't care less about your fashions. I'll freeze to death if you don't put a fur coat on my body. You'll freeze to death too." As usual the Earth is right – you *shall* freeze to death. There are many winters in your destiny's repertoire: an ordinary winter, a nuclear winter. The winter I'm talking about may be called a "volcano winter". No fruit, no vegetables, no roast beef, no Yorkshire pudding. All the rivers and lakes are covered in ice. You drill three holes in the ice and prepare a fishing line in the hope of providing your wife and children with food. The first hole doesn't react to your demand; neither does the second. You pin all your hopes on the third hole, but after a while its imperturbable stance gets the better of your persistence. So you come home empty-handed and your wife bursts into tears. Your children die of starvation and your wife says to you, "We should bury them in our garden." You say to yourself, "Digging in the garden is good exercise." So you pick up a spade and go to your garden. An hour later, you meet your wife in the dining room. "Are the graves ready?" she says to you. "The ground was frozen hard and was impossible to dig," you answer. "I thought you had dug a shallow pit and thrown the bodies into it," she says. "I'm sorry," you say. So you return to the garden with your wife, lie down on the frozen ground and wait for the end of the world.'

Dinussya switches her computer on and I watch an interview during which a bearded man answers two questions about the turning point – December 21, 2012. The bearded man speaks about the parallel worlds which, according to him, are available to everyone at the push of a button. 'The disaster that struck the Japanese is just another parallel world,' he says. 'You can step out of it.'

The order came a day after the government barred all shipments of milk from Fukushima Prefecture and shipments of spinach from Ibaraki Prefecture after finding new cases of above-normal levels of radioactive elements in milk and several crops.

Abnormal levels were also found in spinach from Tochigi and Gunma prefectures to the west, canola from Gunma Prefecture and chrysanthemum greens from Chiba Prefecture, south of Ibaraki.

A spokesman for the World Health Organization said Monday that the discovery of radiation in food was a more serious problem than the organization first expected, Reuters reported. The spokesman, Peter Cordnigley, said in Manila that there was no evidence contaminated food from Fukushima Prefecture had reached the export market.

International Herald Tribune, March 22, 2011

‘And if the radioactive food has reached the export market, you just keep away from the export and the market,’ says the bearded man. ‘You shouldn’t say, “Japan exports a huge quantity of food around the world.” You should think, “I export a huge quantity of health around the world. I export a huge quantity of serenity and optimism. And I import only health and generosity. I import energy from foreign suppliers. Importing death is a capital offence. I am the spokesman for the World Health Organisation. My happiness is exported to many different countries.’

Japanese officials began encouraging people to evacuate a larger swath of territory around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant on Friday as new signs emerged that parts of the crippled facility are so damaged and contaminated that it will be hard to bring the plant under control soon.

The authorities said that they would now assist people who want to leave the area from 20 to 30 kilometers, or 12 to 19 miles, outside the plant and that they were now encouraging ‘voluntary evacuation’ from the area. Those people had been advised March 15 to remain indoors, while those within a 20-kilometer radius of the plant had been ordered to evacuate.

The United States has recommended that its citizens stay at least 80 kilometers away.

International Herald Tribune, March 22, 2011

‘No point in going so far to escape the poison,’ says the bearded man. ‘Even if you stand close to the plant, to the tube from which the radiation flows, you can resist death by saying, “I’m far away. I’m on another planet.” Or you say to yourself, “This liquid is my mother’s milk. Antibodies from this milk line my intestines and prevent infection. Let me add two cupfuls of the milk to the mixture of my life. They say it’s hard to bring the plant under control. It’s easier done than said. Those people don’t know what to say and how appropriate words should be uttered. They can *do* something, somewhere, but they don’t *say* what should be said to avoid the destruction of the world. They should say, day in day out, “The plant is under control. The plant isn’t controlled by a thermostat. The plant is controlled by our thoughts.”’

‘Don’t you think this nuclear plant is an evil genius who wants to control the world?’ asked a journalist.

‘Every nuclear plant is an evil genius,’ said the bearded man. ‘You should say to every evil genius, “I don’t believe that human beings are innately evil. And you’re a human being, aren’t you? You’re not a nuclear plant because there are only humans in this world of ours. You’re not an evil wizard either. You’re just an ordinary man or woman. Do you want to be a man or a woman? All right, you’ll be both. I like your face because it’s a good-natured face. Your parents brought you up as a Buddhist. And Buddhists don’t kill human beings. Some of them don’t even kill flies and other insects such as spiders and cockroaches. Or were you brought up as a Catholic? A Catholic may kill a

cockroach, but no good Catholic will ever kill a human. The Spanish Inquisition was mentally and physically active from 1542 to 1834. It doesn't exist any more. So why should you punish people whose religious beliefs are considered wrong? What's more, you're said to punish those whose religious beliefs are *right*. In other words, you punish *innocent* people. You punish *everybody*. You should renounce the use of violence. You should publicly recant your views.”

Prime Minister Naoto Kan dodged a question about whether the government was ordering a full evacuation, saying officials were simply following the recommendation of the Japan Nuclear Safety Commission.

‘The situation still requires caution,’ Mr Kan, grave and tired-looking, told the nation. ‘Our measures are aimed at preventing the circumstances from getting worse.’

‘The state of the plant is still quite precarious,’ he added. ‘We’re working hard to make sure it doesn’t get worse. We have to ensure there’s no further deterioration.’

In the latest setback in the effort to contain the nuclear crisis evidence emerged that the reactor vessel of the No. 3 unit may have been damaged, an official said Friday.

International Herald Tribune, March 26-27, 2011

4

For two days I stayed at the Kempinski Hotel which is just a stone's throw from the Winter Palace. Then I moved to Dinussy's flat where I found a scrap of paper on a windowsill: 'I salute the sky, the sun and the stars! I know you're kind and your light will never forsake humankind. Please watch over us!'

Dinussy says, 'Beyond every image lies a labyrinthine network of tunnels. We should communicate with these tunnels to keep in touch with the world. Take your picture, for instance. Why did you lose it? Because you weren't in touch with the tunnels leading to it. No one can steal an object rooted to the spot. Your picture's in touch with the network of the world, and you're out of touch. I put a book on my writing desk. You'll be able to remove it if I don't arrest its future movement. Let's assume for a moment this book is a sportsman. You may say about a sportsman, "His torn ligaments will keep him out of action for the rest of the season." So this book is out of action – no one can use it, let alone remove it from where I put it. Your picture wasn't out of action so someone stole it.'

'Should I have put this picture out of action by cutting it into pieces?' I asked. 'No one would have stolen just a *piece* of Vecherova's masterpiece.'

'You should have made this picture invisible to the naked eye,' said Dinussy. 'You should have said to yourself, "This picture is invisible unless viewed with a microscope or a telescope."'

'Did Vassya steal it?' I asked.

'He tried every trick in the book to seduce me because he felt I was longing to live in his castle. Didn't you notice I'd fallen in love with his castle?'

‘You said so several times. What does this have to do with my picture?’

‘At some point he even asked me, “Whose side are you on?”’

‘All right, he did his best to win you over. But did he steal my picture?’

‘You were in the wrong tunnel. You were afraid somebody might steal your picture. You attracted the theft.’

‘I merely didn’t want to have the picture in my flat.’

‘So you repelled the picture.’

Dinussya thinks I’m always afraid of being robbed, cheated and double-crossed. According to her, I’m concerned only with money that disappears from my purse because I’ve become its slave. Slaves never own anything so they can’t have a lot of money in their purses; nor are they allowed to hang Vecherova’s pictures in their living rooms or keep them in their banks. She told me a story about how she had been robbed on a train. She thought only about the dollars she had in her purse and therefore someone stole them while she was asleep. On the other hand, she told me once I had to think about money in order to have it. ‘One should create a money network,’ she said.

‘By robbing one’s friends?’ I asked. ‘Vassya will find himself with no friends at all if he carries on behaving this way. Do you think he’s nice?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘He had a demonic gleam in his eye, didn’t he?’

‘I don’t think so,’ she said.

‘Why did he steal my picture? Suppose you ask him, “What line of work are you in?” Do you think he’ll answer, “I’m a thief”?’

‘You meet some very interesting people in his line of business,’ she said.

‘Thieves?’

‘Why not? You’re a thief too. You’ve stolen my time, my good looks, my hopes.’

‘Let’s talk about Vassya,’ I said.

‘He’s a businessman,’ she said. ‘If he sees money, he takes it. Taking money is second nature to every self-assured businessman. You put Vecherova’s picture in front of Vassya and he picked it up.’

‘Do you think he sold it?’

The interest in Russian art shown in recent years by collectors both in Russia and abroad shows no sign of abating. An auction held by Sotheby’s auction house in December saw Russian works of art, including Faberge items and icons, go under the hammer for a total of three million pounds (\$4.8 million), and a similar auction held in London in June 2010 raised more than five million pounds.

Russian collectors in particular have started to actively participate in international auctions and buy works by masters of their native country. This is one of the current market tendencies

being observed by Olga Vaigatcheva, head of Russian works of art and the Faberge department at Sotheby's.

'During the crisis there was a small decline,' says Vaigatcheva, 'but nowadays the market of art development is gathering pace and the results of the last sales are very good.'

The St Petersburg Times, March 30, 2011

I picked this newspaper up in the lobby of the Kempinski Hotel; no one accused me of theft. This morning I asked for the latest issue of the *Herald Tribune* at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Osaka. A young woman brought two newspapers; she didn't say I would have to pay for them on the day of my departure. Was Vecherova's picture lying in a lobby of some hotel?

5

I'm already in Japan. My presence at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and elsewhere – in the streets of Osaka, for instance – has dispelled much of the uncertainty enshrouding the Japanese tragedy. There are many cars in the streets of Osaka and the passers-by I come across are not afraid of inhaling the air which might have been poisoned by the spread of radioactivity. Ever since my arrival I haven't felt for an instant that my life is in danger.

I have just read in the latest issue of the *International Herald Tribune*:

U.S. government engineers sent to help with the crisis in Japan have warned that the troubled nuclear plant there is facing a wide array of fresh threats that could persist indefinitely and that in some cases are expected to increase as a result of the very measures being taken to keep the plant stable, according to a confidential assessment prepared by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Among the new threats cited in the assessment, dated March 26, were the mounting stresses placed on the Fukushima Daiichi plant's containment structures as they fill with radioactive cooling water, making them more vulnerable to rupture in one of the aftershocks rattling the site after the earthquake and tsunami of March 11.

International Herald Tribune, April 7, 2011

The measures taken by the Japanese are designed to improve the plant's safety, assuming the word 'safety' is 'juste' in the circumstances. These measures jeopardise the plant's 'future' – just another wrong word – and the people in charge are eager to obliterate their effect. They stop plaguing the plant and let it carry on with its work. But the plant's work (or life) is so vicious they resume tampering with it and once again their measures prove to be counterproductive.

The report on which the author of the article draws in his eagerness to show how dangerous life in Japan will be in the near future dates back to March 26, 2011. At the time I was still in Versailles,

writing this book and buying every issue of the *International Herald Tribune*. In Petersburg I found only one issue of this paper – an old issue I had quoted in a chapter devoted to my fears and doubts. No longer were they fuelled by the rumours throwing light on nuclear problems. (I mistrust Russian rumours.) I asked myself once again if I *really* wanted to go to Japan where a number of concerts had been cancelled on account of the threats described in the *Herald Tribune* and revealed by TV personalities. I even wrote a letter to myself: a train of thought is not as persuasive as the written word.

Before you make up your mind, you'd better analyse the situation once more. If you go to Japan, you run the risk of being contaminated. Usually you can say to yourself and others, 'I'm out of danger.' This time the danger may keep you company for years and years. The incubation period varies depending on how much radiation one inhales and consumes during one's stay in Japan. Of course you're not likely to check into a hotel situated near the crippled plant, but the entire Land of the Rising Sun might have been poisoned over the last four weeks. Even the grass is poisoned perhaps. You wouldn't let your cat eat the Japanese grass, would you? And what would you eat, may I ask? Suppose you refuse to eat beef. But don't forget that spaghetti sauce is made with minced beef. So you won't eat the spaghetti sauce either. And no spaghetti is delicious without spaghetti sauce. No spaghetti sauce, no spaghetti. What about sashimi? If I were you, I would find a fish tank and make sure its residents have been kept there for more than a month.

Do you wish to demonstrate your audacity to your colleagues and rivals? Are you burning to give moral support to the whole nation? When a maestro helps a young musician, he doesn't stick his neck out. Yet he is universally acclaimed for his contribution to our culture and future. The images of your own death will haunt you for the rest of your life. 'None of the produce found to be contaminated has been shipped to market,' said a government official. But he admitted that contaminated-but-untested produce could have slipped through. What if it bluffs its way into your mouth and intestines?

Government and council officials are reluctant to tell humankind the truth and nothing but the truth. If they do tell it in newspapers and on television, a wave of panic will sweep across the Earth. People will start running away from TV sets and newspapers. They'll run away from nuclear plants, from plants and water, from animals and fish, from clouds and mountains. They'll run away from the Earth. They'll say to themselves, 'There are no nuclear plants on Mars. Let's live on Jupiter.'

Why are you running towards these nuclear plants? A few workers were trying to connect an electrical cable to a pump in a turbine building next to some reactor or other. They were burnt when water poured over the top of their boots and down around their feet and ankles. Do you want to be burnt in a bath?

This text might have been influenced by a heartrending email I received from my former girlfriend; I haven't seen her for more than 40 years.

My dear Pussichka,

How are you? Where are you?

Are you watching TV? Don't you see what's going on in Japan?

The Russians don't tell us the truth because they don't want to send the crowd into a panic. The Japanese crowd isn't better than ours – all crowds are alike. Japanese officials keep things to themselves because they won't be able to move one half of the country to the other half of the island.

An act of heroism? Nonsense.

Going to Japan and getting paid for concerts seems incongruous. Can't you see anything shameful in what you're about to do? There are only two bottles of water for every Japanese kid.

But if you go there and get nothing for your so-called act of heroism, you'll dramatically increase the quantity of nonsense in your life. A perilous amount of radioactivity has been released into the environment. This amount is a million times higher than what an ordinary human being can endure.

You always make snap decisions and never think about their consequences. Anyway, all consequences are located in the future, not even in the present. You won't say in December, 'I went to Japan last April, and look at the consequences!' This doesn't mean that if you do go to Japan, you won't suffer the consequences. Thirteen years after the Chernobyl disaster, the incidence of pediatric thyroid cancer was 52 times the region's pre-1996 level. In Belarus, where the fallout blew, it was 113 times higher. In the immediate area surrounding Chernobyl, the incidence of pediatric and adult thyroid cancer remains the highest found anywhere in the world – more than 500 times the pre-1986 levels for the region.

Will you perform Beethoven in the region where people have suffered so much for many days? Do they care about Beethoven now? Millions of lives will be at stake if emergency aid doesn't arrive in Tokyo soon. Are you a man they're waiting for? Will Beethoven save them from radioactivity?

At least bring a few bottles of mineral water for the Japanese kids. Don't go to Japan empty-handed!

I don't want to lose you. I'm still in love with you, dear Pussichka! Your emails and phone calls are dearer to me than anything else.

And what about their earthquakes? If you perish in Japan, please ask your ghost to haunt me as long as I live.

I also received an email from Vienna:

I really think you should go: from all I read the health risks are not present. Moreover, your visit would reaffirm this message, that in Japan life will go on. And that the cultural life will go on. The concert halls should not be silent.

I think your presence would be a very strong gesture of support for a people very much struggling to regain their confidence.

I put these emails in my suitcase but they're a thing of the past, even though I can read them whenever I feel like it. Yesterday I went to the nearest supermarket and saw a splendid array of food and water. My manager invited me to dinner and I heard a group of people laughing in a restaurant where I ate some fish and beef. Perhaps I'll be haunted by the articles and emails I read and re-read this afternoon in order to enhance my image in my own eyes. After all, I braved the disaster and its consequences by ringing my manager up to say I was ready to play Beethoven in Osaka, Nagoya, Fukuoka, Kumamoto and Tokyo. I joined the people whose stoicism and self-sacrifice are proverbial. The quiet bravery in the face of drama seems almost woven into the national character. I am a Tokyoite.

6

Memories, memories. The past is a lost picture; so is my life. I remember my lost picture or rather its photograph I saw in the catalogue that Vassya no longer keeps in his castle. Am I still in the Book of Life? There are people who walk up and down the streets of New York and Berlin; yet they're *not* in the Book of Life that draws on God's Constitution, ignoring our feats of valour.

*What's the Book of Life? A number of commas,
Gestures and grimaces. I rode my bicycle
Without lights at night. The lights are in my pocket;
So is the Book of Life. I'm riding
On a large black horse. She's black and red,
White and blue, shy and frisky.*

*Clip-clopping along the road,
Singing two songs by Schubert.*

I had a bizarre conversation with Dinussy. All our conversations are bizarre to some extent: she is in a class of her own. She speaks about networks, labyrinths and tunnels. She may be right, judging from how promptly I awaken when someone is about to give me a phone call. I abandon my nightmares and listen to the silence unpredictably broken by a telephone ringing. From which tunnel does it come to my room? Am I in the same tunnel?

This morning I must have been cooped up in the tunnel dug by my manager: he rang to inform me about an interview I shall give tomorrow afternoon. First he said the interview might take place at 11 a.m. I said it was too early, considering I was determined to stick to Versailles time. No more jet lag, in other words.

I recorded my conversation with Dinussya. I'm listening to the recording now. Another lost picture. I can't see her despite the technological improvements she takes advantage of in her Petersburg flat: her mother appears on a computer screen whenever Dinussya calls her.

'If you buy a picture just for fun, one can steal it from you,' she said. 'Vassya didn't need it, but he stole it just for fun.'

'A fun-loving businessman,' I said.

'Everybody's entitled to have fun,' she said.

'It's not much fun losing a picture. I might have bought it just for fun, but this theft took all the fun out of it. It's not right to treat another human being like that.'

'Why not? It's your fault. No one said you shouldn't go to Brussels and pick it up. Somebody *had* to pick it up – it couldn't have been stored in the Louvre. Do you remember the carpet you didn't buy? I did all I could to prevent you from buying it.'

'Do you think Vassya would have stolen it, had I disobeyed you?'

'Someone else would have done it – Vassya isn't the only businessman in the world.'

'So you think one's allowed to appropriate other people's property on condition that it's not hidden in a bank, under a mattress or in a pair of wellington boots. But I don't take a precious object even if it lies within my reach and no one aims a pistol at my heart. Do you regard Vassya as a thief? And what about your obedient servant? Are we both thieves? Or do you think he's clever with his hands and I'm not?'

'Your jobs are different.'

'I think Vassya's at last managed to hold down a steady job. He used to be a designer, a stockbroker. Now he's just an incorrigible thief. Has he always been a thief? Do you think every businessman is a thief?'

'I do. You buy a ruby for nothing and sell it for a million euros. I wish my nail polish wouldn't keep chipping.'

'You buy some flowers that are going cheap and offer them to a Texan oil heiress,' I said, kissing Dinussya on the nose. I heard the kiss and switched the Walkman off.

If you intend to buy a ruby you're supposed to pay for it. Of course its owner can give it to you, but in this case you shouldn't dream of buying it – just wait and flatter the ruby's owner. And if, contrary to your expectations, he doesn't say, 'This ruby is yours, my dearest friend,' you'll have to buy it or relinquish the very idea of having it in your possession. The best way of summing up the situation is to say that Vassya didn't buy my picture because I had no intention of selling it to him. I might have sold it to him had he agreed to pay at least 20,000 euros for it. (Buying a ruby and selling

it, to use Dinussya's example.) I would even have offered him an ice cream had he bought the picture for 30,000 euros: I remember paying 11,000 euros for it. (I have an excellent memory for the value of lost pictures.)

The point is, Vassya had no desire to buy the picture, otherwise he would have bought it at the auction – as *I* did in point of fact. Of course a businessman doesn't have to buy whatever he intends to get rid of. He may open up an ordinary-looking tomb and find treasure beyond his wildest dreams. Has he no right to put it up for auction?

Vassya found no treasure unless one regards Vecherova's picture as a treasure he found by stealing it from its rightful owner. The picture wasn't lying in a tomb where no one had ever been looking for it. Many art lovers saw it in the catalogue and I counted on its value to raise my standard of living. So Vassya is a thief. Dinussya thinks otherwise.

'All right,' I said. 'He thought I didn't need it. But he ought to have spoken to me about this affair. "Could I keep your picture for a while?" He said nothing of the sort.'

'He thought you'd forgotten about it. He took care of it instead of letting it rot in some attic or tool shed.'

'He might have informed me about his rescue operation. Instead, he claims to have never seen my oysters.'

'You have to be willing to see other people's points of view,' said Dinussya. 'I appreciate that from *your* point of view it's an unwelcome development. And from *his* point of view he told no lies. Actually I'm not sure he lied – he might really have forgotten about the picture. Or he thinks a business as poorly managed as this one doesn't deserve to succeed.'

'What business?'

'He views human existence from a different angle. He's got a business-oriented mind. Why did you buy the picture? Business before pleasure. You failed once more – no pleasure, no business. He thinks he should treat your remarks with the contempt they deserve.'

'Whose side are you on?' I asked.

'He asked me the same question,' she said. 'Do you know what he said to me in the garden? "I'll have to butter you up a bit before you'll approve of my conduct." At some point he said, "If he doesn't marry you, I'll do." He's a real flatterer.'

'Didn't it strike you as a bit insincere?' I asked. I could almost hear the blood coursing through Dinussya's veins.

'It's easier to accept an insincere declaration of love,' she answered, a look of intense concentration on her face. 'His flattery lulled me into a false sense of security. But I was really embarrassed by his smutty jokes. And then he spoke about ghosts. It's easy to believe in ghosts if you're staying in a medieval castle. He used the old trick of attacking in order to defend himself. When he saw I was scared, he made flattering remarks. Just another old trick. I love the contrast

between the sharpness of anxiety and the sweetness of flattery. A nice fellow – not like that other friend of yours.’

‘Who? Nikolenka?’

‘A little man with a stiff, pompous manner. He’s potty about antiques.’

‘Do you think I’m a pompous old fart?’

‘Vassya doesn’t just hobnob with the rich and famous. He would be less successful if he lacked the common touch. He always springs to his feet when I walk in the room.’

Once again Dinussya voiced the suspicion he had been eavesdropping on our conversations all throughout our stay in his castle. She said every medieval castle had a network of tunnels, pipes and tubes. ‘Every medieval castle is a spy network,’ she said.

‘I was scrabbling about in the sand,’ I said.

‘What for?’

‘Just another nightmare.’

‘You’re always searching for Vecherova’s picture. Even when you touch my body –’

‘A lot of knives instead of pictures and treasures. My hands were bleeding.’

‘Flogging a dead horse,’ she said.

7

I’m cooped up in my hotel room which I’m reluctant to leave for fear of getting in touch with the so-called fresh air. There are many medieval castles in Japan, but no one spies on me at the hotel where only few people are staying in April 2011 when an earthquake can happen at any spot, however secluded. This morning I took the lift, which I’m not supposed to do during an earthquake, and went down to have breakfast in the lobby or rather in a room designed for this purpose. Two men were speaking about an earthquake I felt neither in my sleep nor upon awakening. Usually you hear the floorboards creak as an earthquake creeps closer and closer to your bed. This time I heard nothing as if I had resolved not to take notice of sinister events with the exception of those directly related to the disaster’s aftermath. Only about radiation am I speaking today and the newspapers I get in my room are in no mood to fall silent either, as far as I can judge from what I’ve read.

NATIONS FRET OVER PLANT’S WATER DUMP

VIENNA – Nations participating in a conference sponsored by the International Atomic energy Agency expressed concern Wednesday over the discharge of water containing a relatively low level of radioactive substances into the sea near the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

The atmosphere of the meeting clearly illustrated other nations’ critical attitude toward Japan, against a backdrop of delays and other problems with the disclosure of information by Japanese organisations and institutions, sources said.

The Daily Yomiuri, Friday, April 8, 2011

It's too late to warn me off going to Japan. It would be irresponsible to ignore these warnings, but I'm already here and there's no point in saying I'm irresponsible and stupid. The discharge of water, radioactive substances, the sea, the nuclear power plant. What am I having for breakfast? Three slices of salmon, among other things. Last night I ate a lot of fish whose origin was shrouded in mystery and secrecy, according to *The Daily Yomiuri*. 'The meeting was not open to the press, so precise details of the exchanges between the delegates are not known.' All right. Does this piece of information throw any light on the fish I'm going to eat tonight at a sushi bar? My manager invited me to dinner and I didn't decline because I like sashimi in spite of everything.

What do the delegates talk about? What do they say about us, I wonder? 'They're going to die, but we shouldn't tell them anything.'

'The Japanese side didn't bring up the issue of discharging contaminated water.'

'But other participants expressed concerns.'

'Did *you* express concerns?'

'I did.'

'They shouldn't drink coffee with milk.'

'They shouldn't eat muesli with milk.'

'They shouldn't eat mushroom omelettes, scrambled eggs, sausages, tomatoes and cucumbers.'

'We shouldn't tell them anything, otherwise they'll die of starvation.'

I'm not allowed to spy on those people, to eavesdrop on their conversations. Why doesn't Vassya invite them to Brittany? Oysters, lobsters. They're not contaminated, are they? He would flatter their egos in his medieval castle, lulling them into a false sense of security.

Whenever I partake of fish in my manager's company, he explains to me where they come from and what they look like. I listen to him out of politeness and eagerness to find out whether the Fukushima nuclear plants have already become my destiny – or my body, to be exact.

I'm looking out of the window to find out whether it's raining or not.

Rain is forecast for tomorrow.

Rain is forecast for tomorrow.

My dearest rain, please refrain

From washing my body and soul.

It *was* raining when I put my jacket on and joined my manager in the lobby. He showed me an umbrella and opened it as the hotel's roof half-heartedly deprived us of its loving care. Some drops fell on my fingers and I thought I should wash my hands before touching any food or chopsticks.

Where is the tube from which so much radiation has already flown? Is it suspended right above my head, hidden within one of these innocent-looking clouds? The tube has already harmed a lot of

birds and animals. I might have eaten some of them. Had they been dying, I would have recognised the symptoms of their common disease. But they were dead when I ate them at my hotel or in one of the restaurants where my manager talked with gusto about their shapes and origins.

Why did I come to Japan, to Osaka? Did I attempt to capture the moral high ground and teach my colleagues a lesson? I still wonder why pop artists don't enhance their public image by performing near the crippled nuclear plants and donating \$100,000 in emergency aid to regions affected by the earthquake and tsunami. Of course it's safer to sing at Princess Diana's funeral.

A senior nuclear executive who insisted on anonymity but has broad contacts in Japan said that there was a long vertical crack running down the side of the reactor vessel itself.

The crack runs down below the water level in the reactor and has been leaking fluids and gases, the nuclear executive said.

International Herald Tribune, March 26-27, 2011

'There is a definite, definite crack in the vessel – it's up and down and it's large,' he said.

'The problem with cracks is they do not get smaller.'

International Herald Tribune, March 26-27, 2011

Stephen Mahin, a structural engineering professor at the University of California at Berkeley and the director of the Pacific Earthquake Engineering Research Centre, said that he and others had been planning to go to Tokyo but that the university had cancelled their travel insurance.

International Herald Tribune, March 26-27, 2011

'Radiophobia' was a term coined by the Russians for the syndrome in which people across the region feared every morsel they ate, every drop they drank, and the very air they breathed, regardless of how far away from Chernobyl they lived. The denialists were the opposite: They claimed all radiation concerns were mere hysteria, and continued living and working in or near the Alienation Zone, drinking the water and eating locally harvested (and highly radioactive) mushrooms.

International Herald Tribune, March 25, 2011

'Now you know all the facts, you can make an informed choice,' I said to myself. 'Are you a denialist?'

'I wouldn't claim all radiation concerns are mere hysteria,' I answered. 'On the other hand, I'm told only 50 people died after the Hiroshima explosion. Only 50 or 500 people died in the *aftermath* of the explosion. I'm not sure I know *all* the facts and figures.'

‘Some of your facts are questionable, others are plainly wrong: 50 or 500?’

‘I can’t quote you chapter and verse but I think –’

‘Two opposed interpretations of the facts have been presented. Which one do you choose? Are you prepared to eat locally harvested mushrooms?’

‘I don’t have to.’

‘Will you bring a few mushrooms from Saint Petersburg to Tokyo?’

‘I can live without mushrooms.’

‘Can you live without food?’

‘I’ll eat canned fruit and tomatoes.’

‘What about the air?’

‘In my childhood I read a novel entitled *The Air Dealer*. A man was stockpiling the air.’

‘I remember the story,’ I said to myself. Do I still remember it? (Does radiation shorten one’s memory? There’s an incubation period of 8-10 years between initial infection and first symptoms of amnesia.) The protagonist intends to remove the air from the atmosphere. What would remain in the atmosphere if one did remove the air from it? The void. No longer would meteors disintegrate while getting closer and closer to the Earth. They would hit the Earth and crack the Earth’s crust.

Only a small amount of air remained around the Earth; human and animals suffocated as if God had been holding a pillow over their heads. The protagonist was about to sell the air to wealthy sufferers, but a group of Soviet citizens attacked his stronghold and killed him. The author concluded his book with the following sentence: ‘There is increasing demand for the Soviet Union to intervene in trouble spots throughout the world.’

‘I hope there’s an air dealer in Japan,’ I said to myself five days ago. What am I saying to myself now? I’m not likely to forget I’m already in Japan. In my later life I may suffer periods of amnesia, but now I remember my whereabouts so clearly I don’t need to touch the walls to find out where I am. It is a hotel in Osaka I was conveyed to three days ago. ‘Staying as few as 10 nights a year at The Ritz-Carlton can earn you Elite membership status, thus allowing your experience with us to grow more memorable.’ This experience has already grown memorable; and yet I checked into the hotel only two or three days ago. Why should I spend 10 nights in the immediate vicinity of nuclear reactors? The Chinese have been wearing masks for more than three weeks. Lying naked in my hotel room, among some old-fashioned pieces of furniture, I can’t help feeling I’ve communed with radiation. In a few hours I’ll leave this hotel and go to another Japanese city. I won’t go to the South Pole or the Moon. A journey to Mars was planned for June 2022, but Obama has just called the whole thing off. What am I supposed to do?

Hydrogen explosions. High levels of radiation. Thousands of liters of contaminated water dumped into the sea. Another powerful aftershock. With the drumbeat of bad news, it will take

months, if not years, to stabilize the reactors and spent fuel pools that were damaged at the Fukushima Daiichi power station by the earthquake and tsunami last month.

International Herald Tribune, April 9-10, 2011

Which aftershock are they talking about? I've lost count of how many aftershocks and aftermaths one should cope with, if one stays at the Ritz-Carlton or somewhere else: even in China people wear masks and buy prophylactic iodine.

I've forgotten about the earthquake which would have destroyed the hotel I'm staying in, had it taken place on the square adorned by a fountain. On the day of my arrival in Japan I walked through this square in search of mineral water. It crossed my mind this afternoon that I might have died on the spot, had I drunk one litre of water from the fountain: after two hours in the taxi I was extremely thirsty.

'At least three people died and 132 were injured late Thursday night by the strongest aftershock to rattle Miyagi Prefecture and its vicinity since the devastating March 11 temblor' (*The Japan Times*, Saturday, April 9, 2011). Where's Miyagi Prefecture? I know where the Ritz-Carlton is located, but I've no idea where all these earthquakes strike innocent bystanders among whom there are lots of animals and insects. 'The 11:32 p.m. quake, with a magnitude of 7.1, measured upper 6 on the Japanese seismic intensity scale of 7 in northern and central parts of Miyagi Prefecture, the area hardest hit by last month's magnitude 9.0 quake.' All this looks and sounds like the book on the Maya calendar I read in Versailles. Figures, figures, figures. I read them out loud, counting on their music to make me decipher what they hide in their network. 9.0, 7.1, 7, 7, 7. What does '7' have to do with northern and central parts of Miyagi Prefecture? 8, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0, 6, 7, 9. I can also shower the world with figure-overloaded presents. 650908987567465345790897645459900. I'm just playing a sort of sonata on my computer keyboard.

And here are two graphics I found in *The Japan Times* this morning. I can't reproduce them on this page or anywhere else except on a sheet of paper I won't insert in this book. Just a few letters and figures. 'Maximum radiation levels in eastern Japan. Aomori Pref. 0.036; Tochigi Pref. 0.080; Gunma Pref. 0.046. Niigata Pref. 0.06; Kanagawa Pref. 0.062.' I might have been to these prefectures, but my present itinerary doesn't seem to include them; and yet the cities I must visit on my way out of Japan can be part of such and such a prefecture, the name of which nobody utters for fear of scaring me out of my wits. There are only fears and their synonyms in my heart and brain as if other words and notions had been excluded from them until my return to France. Will I ever get rid of fears or should I rely exclusively on death, on its aptitude for obliterating earthly worries?

'Effects of radiation exposure over time. 4 mil. – 50% fatality rate in 30 days.' I should stay 30 days at the Ritz-Carlton to find out if I'm fatally ill or not. But there are many employees at the hotel; some of them must have been hired before the advent of the tsunami. Shall I ask the owner to send me a list of his subordinates – the owner is a man, I suppose – to enable me to determine which of them

will die first. And what about the owner himself? He didn't buy the hotel *after* the disaster, did he? Why not? He might have owned a hotel in Fukushima Prefecture, but as soon as the news reached him, the hotel he owned was abandoned like a sinking ship and he bought a new expensive toy in Osaka – in another prefecture. Actually he shouldn't necessarily live in the city where he owns a number of hotels and bars: the wealthy spend their lives on tropical islands or in Switzerland. So I won't ask him when he bought the hotel which may be run by his right-hand man. I'll ask him to send me a list covered with dates: names are of no importance. 2010, 2009, 2008, 63, 62, 64, 65. I'll exclude from the list all those who are much younger than I am so as not to purvey a message of optimism. After all, a young individual is likely to hold out much longer under this radioactive bombardment.

I should stay at this hotel until someone dies or begins to vomit food and blood. And then I'll sue the owner for compensation. 'Your employees should have prevented me from staying in Osaka. They should have told me in plain English, "Run away! Take the next flight to Paris or any other European city. What you've read in the *Herald Tribune* isn't just an empty threat. Our best driver is waiting for you." Instead, one of your employees told me, "Please would you check in at the reception desk and sign your name in the book." When I had checked in, the desk clerk gave me a key. What's more, the key she gave me was *my* key. Had she given me someone else's key, I would have been unable to enter my room. So I would have returned to the reception desk and said, 'It's not my key. I regard your mistake as a bad omen. I shouldn't stay in Japan. I'll leave for Paris at the earliest opportunity.'

On the same page of *The Japan Times* there's a photograph with the following caption: 'Good omen: A rainbow appears over the city of Kailua, Hawaii, on Dec. 30, 2009.' Why didn't I go to Hawaii? Or was it a short-term omen?

'500.000 – lymphocyte cell count decreases. 100.000 – cancer risk increases by 0.5%. 600 – X-ray of stomach in detailed exam. 190 – Tokyo-New York round trip (level is high due to increase in radiation from space).' What about Paris-Osaka round trip? But I'll return to Paris from Tokyo, not from Osaka. 'Tokyo – 0.085.' If I compare Tokyo-New York round trip with my stay in Tokyo, I'm relieved. Why not live in Tokyo for the rest of my life? But I should never fly either to New York or to Paris. '50 – X-ray of chest.' I shouldn't let them X-ray my chest. Even lung cancer is better than radioactivity.

I'd prefer not to stay in Japan but I don't have much choice. In other words, I have no choice but to stay in Osaka for another night and leave for Fukuoka at 10.30 a.m. I can't go back on my decision to make this tour.

Am I free to come and go as I please? Could I have said 'no' to my manager and stayed in Versailles, near my wine cellar? If I remember rightly, Kant says that freedom exists only insofar as we take into consideration our will and the voice we hear inside our body. But as soon as we cast a glance at any landscape, we realise that trees and bushes have no choice. Their growths depend on

meteorological conditions and human actions. Let us not forget that, to some extent, nature is increasingly at our mercy. (Let us forget for a while tsunamis and earthquakes.) ‘*Es gibt Freiheit...Es gibt keine Freiheit*’ – such is the conclusion Kant draws from his analysis. Freedom, no freedom; a trip to Japan, no trips to Japan.

It is humans who are at the mercy of nature. (Even for a moment am I unable to forget the Japanese disaster.) And we beg for mercy as the blows fall on us.

A report by an engineer at Tokai University in Shizuoka, south of Tokyo, was more anecdotal, with photographs of roads blocked by landslides or warped as the ground underneath them subsided; rail lines tossed about like strands of spaghetti; collapsed electrical pylons; sewage plants buried in debris, and, in Sendai, huge storage tanks toppled over at a brewery.

International Herald Tribune, March 26-27, 2011

*I don't want to go to Japan,
But a tree falls on my roof
And my house collapses under
Its weight. My house, my
Past and present; my faith.*

*And a voice says, 'Go
To Japan. Only in Japan
Will you find another roof
And another tree which
May not fall on it.'*

*You should give your destiny
A chance to speak. What
Can it tell you? Any chance
Is necessity and vice versa.
Pick up an apple and eat it.*

*Are you dying? Another
Question. And there are
Two answers: 'Yes' and
'No'. Which one do you
Choose? What is yours?*

*A birch tree, a house, a ceiling,
A destiny, a bunch of grapes,
A piece of news, another life?*

Let my life finish this poem. Time may help it.
I was given another poem last night. Here it is:

*Strong in the rain
Strong in the wind
Strong against the summer heat and snow
He is healthy and robust
Free from desire
He never loses his temper
Nor the quiet smile on his lips*

This is a Japanese poem written by a sick old man. An earthquake left him paralysed from the waist down. He wrote about himself or another man whom he admired and endeavoured to imitate despite his infirmities. This is not the end of the poem; it is not unfinished. The end sounds thus:

*That is the kind of person
I want to be*

Was he this person *before* the disaster struck his native land?

*He does not consider himself
In whatever occurs...his understanding
Comes from observation and experience
And he never loses sight of things
He lives in a little thatched-roof hut
In a field in the shadows of a pine tree grove*

Do I consider myself in whatever occurs? I don't know. I don't understand this poem. I lose sight of things all the time. There are lots of things around me, but I think there's nothing new under the sun; and the old things are irremediably dead. No resurrection, no eternal recurrence. My understanding doesn't come as if it had been delayed by a natural disaster or a power cut. It may never come again. If I lived in a thatched-roof hut, a pine tree would fall on it. The protagonist nurses a child who suffers and the child's mother thanks him from the bottom of her heart. I see no children around me; they're

neither sick nor healthy. And yet they might shoot small and big stones, using their sophisticated catapults.

He weeps at the time of drought

He plods about at a loss during the cold summer

Despite the wind and the rain, he plodded on until he reached Fukushima Prefecture.

Does he eat radioactive fish? I've already eaten a lot of fish during my stay in Japan.

Why were radioactive materials detected in fish caught off Ibaraki Prefecture?

Marine life can roam, and then there are tides and currents. The sub-Arctic Oyashio current, which flows southward along the Pacific coasts of Hokkaido and the Tohoku region, and the Black current, which flows northward from Kyushu and Shikoku, collide off Choshi, Chiba Prefecture, during this time of the year.

Thus the currents could have carried contaminated water from the Fukushima plant to Ibaraki, or radioactive materials carried by winds could have fallen into the sea in the area or were carried there by fish.

Life can roam the city streets and countries. There are tides, currents, cars, pedestrians, planes, rockets and raindrops. A current flows from Saint Petersburg to New York; another current carries radioactive materials northward and southward. Choshi and Moshi collide at the crossroads. Fish swallow whatever they come across and end up in a kitchen, in a restaurant. A man sits at a dining table and says to himself: 'I'll drink the sub-Arctic Oyashio current. I'll eat the fish carrying a few atomic bombs. A nuclear bomb could wipe this dinner off the map, so I'll swallow the bomb. I've already swallowed a dozen oysters. Why not swallow two nuclear bombs? Do nuclear bombs go well with oysters? What wine should I drink?'

What are points to be careful of when cooking fish?

For vegetables, it is effective to wash or peel them because radioactive materials stick to the surface. For fish, however, radioactive materials ranging from iodine and cesium to highly toxic plutonium could be drawn into the body through seawater or via the food chain. These can be eliminated significantly by removing the insides. It is also important to wash the fish because there may be radioactive material on the skin, which the authorities now advise not to eat.

The Japan Times, Friday, April 8, 2011

If I lose my memories, I'll have nothing to fall back on. Will I ever lose my picture and the flat Marussya bought in Saint Petersburg? A long time ago she asked me to try and visit the flat where somebody had been staying for almost five years. I might have met Ms Fuksovik or somebody else, had I taken the trouble to comply with Marussya's wish. I didn't and I certainly regret my light-heartedness: I had no idea I would be short of something to fall back on in the Land of the Rising (and Setting) Sun where only currents and other carriers pursue me round the clock. I might have recalled Ms Fuksovik's words and conduct which are of no interest to those who don't buy flats in Saint Petersburg and have no wish to walk in a radioactive area.

I asked a friend of mine to recommend a lawyer. He said he knew a state agent whose wife was a solicitor and I thanked him after noting down the agent's phone number and address. I gave a recital to which my friend had invited the agent and his wife, but they didn't come: though omnipresent, music doesn't pursue one like a radioactive fish. After the recital I saw my friend who said he was too tired to join me for dinner. So I dined with some other friends of mine among whom there were no estate agents, no solicitors. I felt like talking to them about Marussya's discomfiture, but I easily reined in this desire and we talked about something else – about my performance, among other things.

Next day I went to the Kempinski where a man with an envelope awaited me patiently: I'm always late for business appointments. He gave me the envelope inside which there was my fee accompanied by a card. I saw another phone number and resolved to call no one except the agent whose address was in my pocket and even in my mind. I no longer remember it, but I know that his office was opposite a huge building embellished and somehow animated by the word AEROFLOT: old houses die if nobody bustles around inside them.

I was given another envelope at the Kempinski and I realised I had to pay a visit to the Japanese consulate in Petersburg before dialling the agent's number and ringing his doorbell. To perform in Japan, I always need a certificate which is supplied by the Japanese authorities on condition that you've got a dozen sheets of paper to show them. On the sheets there are names – Beethoven, Bach – and also an incredible quantity of Japanese words the shapes of which remind me of the shrines and gardens I enjoy visiting in the course of my concert tours. Two weeks before my departure for Japan my manager said he had no time to prepare these documents because the whole procedure required 15 days. 'You've got 14 days,' I said. 'Why don't you say to the people in charge, "I think you need to speed up a bit"?''

'But you'd have to get the visa in Saint Petersburg. Your fellow citizens are always slow.'

'I'm no longer a Russian citizen,' I said. 'Besides, there must be some Japanese employees inside *your* consulate.'

'Anyway it's too late,' he answered. 'If an immigration officer questions you about the purpose of your visit to Japan, you'll just say you've come to enjoy yourself.'

'A plausible explanation?'

‘You can always enjoy our culture, our history – even during an earthquake. All immigration officers are aware of that.’

Ten days later my manager sent me an email to say there was a man in his rival’s office. ‘Here is a run-down of our conversation. This man told me on the phone, “You must observe the rules. You must not break the rules. Artists complain that they’re subjected to too many petty rules and restrictions. Nevertheless, these rules must be followed at all cost. Before you start your own business you should be familiar with the government’s rules and regulations. You’re a manager so you must be familiar with the government’s rules and regulations.”

“My artist won’t get any fee for his performances,” I said.

“What’s the purpose of his visit?” he asked. “Pleasure?”

“He wants to boost our countrymen’s morale.”

“A morale booster, eh?”

“Something like that.”

“He’ll be deported for entering our country under false pretences. Never again will he play in Japan.”

‘We have no alternative but to stick by our decision. Please say to the immigration officers, “I’ve come to Japan to give a much-needed boost to your countrymen’s morale.” You can also say to them, “I’ve come to Japan to give a much-needed boost to your confidence.”’

I answered this email as follows: ‘No immigration officer needs my moral support. No one will be happy or relieved if I tell lies about the purpose of my visit. The people to whom I’m supposed to speak about my moral support are likely to be sacked if I succeed in entering your country under false pretences. So let’s abandon the project. Better luck next time.’

Next morning I received another email from my manager. ‘You’re wrong. Even an ordinary immigration officer needs harmony and music or rather their precious help to overcome all obstacles and cope with disasters. I’ll prove my thesis to you during your stay in Japan. Anyway I’ll call a high official tomorrow morning. I’m sure he’ll straighten the problem out. And once we get this problem straightened out, we should be all right. I’ll send your certificate of eligibility to the hotel. You’re staying now at your friend’s, aren’t you? Is her name Dinussya? I remember our meeting at the Salzburg Festival. What does she think of your forthcoming tour in Japan? What’s her opinion on the matter? Children should be insulated from the horrors of radiation leaks and also from the rumours linked to natural disasters. I know that your friend is very young. But she is no longer a child, is she?’

Dinussya was vigorously opposed to the tour. She said we wouldn’t be able to have children for five years. ‘Do you think my personal radioactivity might finally vanish into thin air? In April 2116?’

‘I’ll be 41,’ she said.

‘I won’t eat fish.’

‘No sashimi this time.’

‘I won’t do anything dangerous.’

‘You promise?’

‘I promise.’

Prime Minister Naoto Kan said Sunday he regrets Japan failed to provide notification overseas of last week’s release of water containing radioactive materials into the Pacific Ocean from a crippled nuclear power station.

‘We released low-level radioactive water into the sea in a bid to contain higher-level radioactive water. We should have explained that matter more thoroughly,’ Kan told reporters, after being asked to comment on other countries’ complaints about the lack of advance notification.

The government allowed Tokyo Electric Power Co. to dump some 9,000 tons of contaminated water from the Fukushima No. 1 power plant into the sea to make room for more toxic water on the premises that is preventing workers from getting the plant under control.

Neighbours South Korea and Russia blasted Japan for not notifying them in advance and for the ocean contamination itself.

The Japan Times, Monday, April 11, 2011

How do they dare to complain? South Korea, Russia. They’re far away. Overseas, overseas. I’m in the sea itself, in the middle of the sea of trouble. I’m at the centre of the disaster; and I go on eating fish. I should have said to the waiters, ‘I wish to make a complaint – your fish are poisoned.’ I had breakfast this morning and as usual I was tempted to eat fish, but the slices I saw were not *naked*. There may be radioactive material on the skin. I ate neither the fish nor the skin. Does that mean I’m not contaminated? When did they dump 9,000 tons of their water into the sea? They didn’t notify their neighbours; nor did they apologise at once. They must have committed this crime two weeks ago. And I was eating fish in Petersburg, at Charles de Gaulle Airport, on the plane. (I flew to Osaka via Paris.) All this time I was blissfully unaware of the situation. What will I say to my manager tonight? Again I’m invited to dinner. Again I’ll be unable to resist sashimi and sushi. Shall I say to him, ‘I’m sorry, I’ve got an upset stomach’? Shall I upset the apple cart? He would answer, ‘Didn’t I tell you last night, “You’ll give yourself indigestion if you swallow your dinner so quickly”? Eat slowly, this time.’

The story of my meeting with the estate agent was a welcome change, but I left it unfinished. And now I’m no longer in the mood for resuming it. The television set, which is the centrepiece of my hotel room, displays a choice of second-rate films. *INCEPTION*. ‘In a world where technology exists to enter the human mind through dream invasion, a highly skilled thief is given a final chance at redemption which involves executing his toughest job to date: inception.’ An enticing description: dream invasion, the human mind. And then you see a quantity of guns and watch a series of explosions. Earthquakes, crippled nuclear plants? A man runs, staggers and collapses in a heap. So

does his house, although it neither runs nor staggers. There's a Japanese temple at the beginning of the movie the end of which I'll never watch. Wherever I go I always seem to land up in Japan.

My manager spoke about a shrine I might have visited a long time ago. Perhaps I've never set foot in it. Anyway, he suggested I should go and enjoy it today. I woke up at 2.30 p.m., drew the curtains and saw many radioactive clouds. There were no radioactive drops in the air, on the windowpane and on the roofs, but I said out loud, 'It looks like rain.' I made up my mind very quickly and when my manager called me to find out if I was ready to go to the shrine and the Kyushu National Museum, I said, 'No, I've got an upset stomach.' My manager said he would be waiting for me at 7.30 p.m. in the lobby and hung up.

In the bathroom I found a sort of tea bag on which there were a few words I took at face value: 'SALT, Algae Salt'. I emptied the bag into the bath and turned to the washbasin where a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste were lying in wait for my hand. Suddenly I turned back and looked at the water filling the bath at a leisurely pace. I picked the bag up again and read the inscription carefully, trying to penetrate beyond its enticing exterior. 'SALT, Algae Salt. A Sea Salt bath provides a medium for deep relaxation, as well as a feast of minerals for the skin.' A feast of minerals indeed! Where did they find this salt? Not in the Black Sea, not in the Baltic Sea. In my childhood and youth I enjoyed the smell of *other* algae. This thought filled me with nostalgia to such an extent I was unable to bear the sight of the water contaminated by an alien salt. Do they expect me to relax in this water whose very tint makes me sick to my stomach?

I screwed up my courage and put my body into the water, handling it as a foreign object of no value. Yet I was curious to know what would happen to this object – to my former body – in the long run. 'Will it disappear in the poisonous water which is said to dissolve most animal tissue?' I asked myself. I couldn't remain in the bath for more than ten minutes, but I feared that even short contact with the algae might do untold harm to my skin, internal organs and brain.

To an outsider, much is striking about Japan's response to two weeks of serial disaster: the stoicism and self-sacrifice; the quiet bravery in the face of tragedy that seems almost woven into the national character.

International Herald Tribune, March 26-27, 2011

Japan's list of casualties, already long, could soon include two of the country's iconic brands: sushi and Kobe beef.

International Herald Tribune, March 21, 2011

I saw many Japanese in the restaurants I went to in the hope of enjoying sashimi and other delicacies for which this country is justly renowned all over the world. The aboriginal inhabitants ate whatever was served to them without casting doubt on the food's innocence. 'Don't they just adore lying in a

hot bath?’ I asked myself as my body was getting used to the poison. As soon as it got used to the poison I left the bathroom and called Dinussya after glancing at my alarm clock. ‘This afternoon I went for a swim in the ocean,’ I said.

‘Are you crazy? Actually you must have swum in the Sea of Japan – I consulted the Internet last night.’

‘Really? I thought I’d never go away from the Pacific.’

‘The Sea of Japan may be poisoned as well. Water is unpredictable.’ I heard a sigh.

‘There was no French mineral water in the fridge and I was too lazy to go out. So I drank some tap water. Don’t worry – the water supply is being tested for contamination.’

‘That was a rather foolish thing to do. You promised not to do anything foolish. You’re lazy and unreliable.’

‘I’m not being lazy – I’m just conserving my energy for later. I’ve got a concert tonight.’

Of course I didn’t go so far as to drink tap water; I just tested Dinussya’s love.

Actually my next recital will take place tomorrow and not today, contrary to what Dinussya might think. But she is used to my having her on and I hope she didn’t believe me.

I went downstairs and got a brochure on the shrine I was to visit in the afternoon. ‘Home of the Chikushi Manyo Poetry. Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine.’ C. G. Jung thinks that no book can replace a conversation with a remarkable person. No description will ever replace the Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine or Borobudur.

1,300 years back in Dazaifu history, there was a government office to manage the entire Kyushu for a long period of 500 years at the present Dazaifu. There are numbers of historical sites which reflect to the ancient history of Dazaifu, including ruins of the Dazaifu itself, ruins of Mizuki, ruins of Onojo, Kanzeonji Temple, ruins of Chikuzen Kokubunji Temple and Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine.

Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine is dedicated to the Michizane Sugawara, ‘the God of Literature’. In 901, Sugawara was abruptly exiled from Kyoto as the Dazaifu official by the Emperor’s court, and he died two years later. The shrine was built over his grave, and the main shrine, as it stands today, was constructed in 1591 A.D. (Tensho 19) and is registered as Important Cultural Property.

All I can do is dedicate a poem to the God of Literature.

The fear got the better of me this afternoon.

I thought it would rain hard. The sun

Contradicted my thoughts. They’re fragile and

Unreliable. I often hear the sound of breaking thoughts.

*They break into pieces and in every piece
 There's your exile, my exile. You lost Kyoto,
 I lost Moscow and Petersburg
 When I left Russia in 1974. A self-exile. No one
 Banished me: the Emperor had died
 Many years before. And yet my grave is also
 Under this shrine.*

*There's a sunbeam
 In every piece of my thoughts,
 In every piece of music I'll play for you
 Tomorrow night.*

9

I called the estate agent and he said I could come and visit him whenever I wished. I was at the Japanese consulate; so I knew I wouldn't be free until one or two in the afternoon. I received my passport and was asked to check the visa. 'SANKT PETERBURG 05 APR 11 05 JUL 11 SINGLE 11A00795 15 DAYS (E) ENTERTAINER.' 'You won't be deported from Japan,' said a Russian employee. I greeted a Japanese man who showed up by her side and nodded meaningfully from behind a glass partition. I bowed once again and left the consulate.

At last I stood in front of the agent's office; a corpulent man saw me eyeing up the bell I had to ring in order to learn the truth about Marussya's flat. He came up to me and I recognised the agent I was to talk to; yet I had never met him before. The agent uttered my name, adding a question mark to it. This time I didn't disavow my past and birth – Gogol used to do it all the time – and we headed for a small room where an employee was mishandling a computer. I fished Marussya's documents out of a plastic bag and the agent looked at them disapprovingly as if he had already guessed what kind of secret they were on the point of revealing to the world. 'What's the name of *your* agent?' he asked before reading the documents.

'Ms Turchinskaya. Do you know her?'

'The name rings a bell.'

'Does it?'

'She used to work for me. I kicked her out. I checked my files and realised she'd diddled me out of \$10,000. She was working for me in the early Nineties. Now she'd have diddled me out of \$100,000.'

'You got rid of her just in time.'

'That's right. As a crook, she was up there with the best. But don't be too hard on her – in the late Eighties she worked her fingers to the bone to provide food for her mother and sister. I sacked her

17 years ago, but she had the last laugh when she went to work for my rival for twice the pay. She presents such a cheerful front you'd never know she has diabetes. When I saw her in Cairo I did a double take.'

'My friend put her trust in a dishonest Dutch collector.'

'What does he collect? Crooks?'

'Lost pictures.'

'I see. Now Turchinskaya diddles other dim-witted blokes. "We have an open-and-shut case," as my wife puts it.'

The agent began to read the sheets of paper I had brought to Saint Petersburg. 'I'm acquainted with this notary, but I don't recognise his signature. I can imitate his signature with my eyes shut. Do you want me to try?' He picked up a pen and closed his eyes. A few seconds later he showed me two sheets of paper or rather two signatures that looked alike as if they had belonged to the same estate agent or the same notary. 'What do you think?' he asked.

'Wonderful,' I said.

'Which signature is mine?'

'No idea.'

'Do you recognise *his* signature?'

'I do.'

'Which one is it?'

'Both. I mean, they both belong to the notary.'

'And they're also mine, aren't they?'

'They are.'

He smiled with satisfaction and continued to peruse the documents. 'Where's the Agreement?' he asked at last.

'What agreement?'

'Our dispute must be settled by an agreement that satisfies both sides. But to satisfy both sides we must consult a *previous* agreement. There are two agreements in every case. There's a good case for bringing in new regulations, but for the moment we've got an old set of regulations and we can't ignore them. You say Turchinskaya has broken the terms of the agreement on this flat. But there's no agreement to speak of. Where is it? Did the two sides reach an agreement in 2005?'

'I think they did.'

'What kind of agreement *did* they reach?'

'Ms Turchinskaya sold this flat to Marussya de Dragunevska.'

'Date of birth 19 July 1941, passport date P BEL ED673923, issued 12 October 2001,' said the agent. 'I can't read the address. Is it necessary?'

'I don't think so.'

'Let me ask you once again, 'What kind of agreement did they reach?'

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did Turchinskaya sell the flat?’

‘She did.’

‘To whom?’

‘To my friend.’

‘Where’s your friend?’

‘In Belgium.’

‘On which sheet of paper is she?’

‘On the Agreement.’

‘It’s the wrong agreement. And there’s no other agreement. The agreement you’ve brought is more or less correct – the only snag is we can’t use it. Nobody can.’

‘So it’s not correct.’

‘It’s not – I agree with you on this point.’

‘What should be done?’

‘Nothing doing. So Turchinskaya put one over on your friend good and proper. Let’s go and see the notary. It’s only a stone’s throw away. Actually his office’s on the way to the flat you’re staying in.’

The agent made a speech as we walked along Nevsky Avenue. He recounted the story of Turchinskaya’s first swindle and then summed up his analysis by saying, ‘Trust your instincts and do what you think is right. Do you always trust your instincts?’

‘Sometimes I do.’

‘I *always* trust my instincts. I wish I’d trusted them in 1992 when Turchinskaya first diddled me out of my money. I had a hunch she’d rob me sooner or later, but I felt suspicious of my hunch. I was wrong. Then I read her file and realised she’d diddled me out of a huge sum of money. “\$62,000 for that flat? That’s a complete rip-off,” I said to her. At the time I wasn’t rich and I suffered a lot. I had to find some new employees to beef up my company. I used to lie awake at night worrying about how to pay the bills. I phoned the same notary and he said the flat she’d sold didn’t exist. The address was wrong. Everything was wrong. But I succeeded in putting the business back on an even keel. Now everything’s right – I’ll never allow anyone to diddle me or my clients. And I’ll never diddle my clients myself. I have a clear-sighted vision of my company’s future. I can afford to be picky about who I hire. Well, one man’s meat is another man’s poison. Some like stealing, others do not. Murder is just another example of man’s inhumanity to man. And stealing is murder. Don’t you agree? At least it’s a mortal sin. Why didn’t your friend get in touch with *my* office?’

‘She didn’t know you.’

‘Does she know our mutual friend?’

‘She does.’

‘Did she know him six years ago?’

‘She did.’

‘Why didn’t she ask him to recommend an estate agent? You did, didn’t you?’

‘Frankly speaking, I asked him to recommend a lawyer.’

‘My wife’s a solicitor.’

‘I know.’

‘So you’ve got both – an agent and a solicitor. Are you planning to buy a house in Petersburg?’

‘No.’

‘You’re wrong. The prices are set to rise again. We’re aiming to deliver an upbeat message in our advertising. We pamper our clients with good music. Do you like good music?’

‘I do.’

‘I’ve had to unlearn the way I played guitar since I started taking formal lessons. We’re different from other agencies and companies, from their policies. They’re always cadging free meals and free trips off their clients. How do they entertain them in return? Talent isn’t thick on the ground. Year after year they wheel out the same third-rate celebrities. Their benefactors dance to sloppy, schmaltzy love songs. We always say: “May the best person win.” Labutchevskaya sends us tickets for her concerts. Despite her behaviour off-stage her performances set a new benchmark for singers throughout Russia. Do you know *her* songs?’

‘I was born out of my time,’ I said.

‘Really? Can one be born out of one’s time? You can be born out of wedlock but time is different, isn’t it? I dabbled in philosophy when I was at school.’

‘Time’s everything and vice versa,’ I said.

‘What do you think about the end of the world?’ he asked.

‘The Maya calendar?’ I asked.

‘The 21st of December, 2011,’ he said.

‘I know. I lost a picture. I wonder if I’ll ever recover it.’

‘Before we come to the end of the road?’ he asked.

‘I wish I could see it at my place, in Versailles.’

‘You’ll see it *somewhere*.’

‘What about the flat?’

‘Slow down, you’re walking too fast. Here’s the office we need.’

One woman opened two doors; I saw a writing desk and a lot of files as if someone had just finished shooting another version of Kafka’s *The Trial*.

The notary looked at our documents and said, ‘Where did you find these sheets of paper?’

‘In Belgium,’ said the agent.

‘But they’re in Russian. Do they speak Russian in Belgium?’

The agent put his hand on my shoulder.

‘No. Only Russian émigrés speak Russian,’ I said.

‘Where do these documents come from?’ asked the notary.

‘Don’t you recognise your signature?’ asked the agent.

‘Is *this* my signature?’

‘I know it isn’t,’ said the agent. And he began to talk about the way he had imitated the notary’s signature to demonstrate he could do it with his eyes shut.

‘Which signature did you imitate? The false one or the right one?’ asked the notary.

‘I imitated *your* signature,’ said the agent, removing his hand from my shoulder.

‘You showed me *another* document,’ I said.

‘Not this one, you mean?’ said the agent, picking up my sheet of paper from the notary’s desk. He was holding it level with my eyes.

‘No,’ I said.

‘I showed you the *right* signature and the *right* document. Wasn’t I *right*?’

‘Whose signature is *this*?’ asked the notary, prodding at my sheet of paper with his pipe: the agent had already put it back on his desk.

‘Do you remember Turchinskaya?’ asked the agent.

‘Don’t start talking about ghosts – they give me the heebie-jeebies.’

‘Apparently she’s alive and well. Do you remember her?’

‘I’m not likely to forget this lady. But details of her criminal activities were expunged from the file.’

‘Everyone remembers her,’ agreed the agent. ‘She’s no longer part of my team.’

‘The recent economic crisis has led to massive layoffs,’ said the notary.

‘She’s built a new career for herself.’

‘Did *she* append my signature to this document?’

‘Someone else might have done it. But she was at the helm, if you see what I mean.’

‘I do,’ said the notary.

‘So it’s not *your* signature, is it?’ asked the agent.

‘It’s not. I wonder whose signature it is.’

‘I don’t care,’ said the agent.

‘I do,’ I said. ‘My friend and I should find the culprits.’

‘You’ve found Turchinskaya, haven’t you?’ asked the notary.

‘They haven’t,’ said the agent.

‘You should find *her*,’ said the notary.

‘What’s the use? She won’t give the money back, even if she’s left to rot in jail for most of her life. We should say to her, “Don’t be so grabby. Let the others have their share.” For a moment I thought the agent was being serious, but then he winked at me.

‘When you make a pledge, you should always try to honour it,’ said the notary. ‘I’ll call my secretary.’ A tall woman made her appearance near his desk. ‘Do you recognise my signature?’ The notary showed her my sheet of paper.

‘It’s not your signature,’ said the secretary. ‘The logo isn’t yours either.’

‘Do you call it a “logo”?’ asked the notary.

‘I don’t. Just a smudge of lipstick.’

‘It’s not red,’ objected the notary.

‘It’s a black smudge,’ agreed the secretary.

‘I don’t mind a professional fake,’ said the notary. ‘But you don’t have to call a team of experts in to realise this document is an *unprofessional* fake – if you see it the right way round.’

‘I said so without even looking at the document,’ said the agent. ‘When I heard the name of Turchinskaya –’

‘What a woman,’ said the notary. ‘How old is she now?’

‘Forty-five, forty-six. A blond bombshell, a sultry-voiced blond.’ With the back of his hand, the agent rubbed the stubble on his chin.

‘I wish I’d never seen her,’ said the notary. ‘By the way, they scratched Bianca from the race because she’d become lame.’

‘Really? What a pity they did!’ said the agent.

‘I’d *like* to see her,’ I said.

‘Who? The horse?’ asked the notary.

‘Turchinskaya?’ asked the agent.

‘I don’t think you ever will,’ said the notary.

‘This talk about finding Turchinskaya is all just pie in the sky,’ said the agent.

The secretary shook her head. ‘You’ll never see her,’ she chimed in.

‘Not even in her prison cell?’ I asked. The notary shook his head; so did his secretary. ‘There were two women in the flat,’ I said, looking at the notary: the secretary wasn’t really beautiful.

‘Turchinskaya has a lot of admirers,’ said the notary. ‘They often work for her. And it’s rumoured that her gang is working hand in glove with the police. But as soon as they saw we had guns, they turned tail and ran away.’

‘She used to bring my pulse up a beat or two,’ said the agent. ‘Do you know she was jilted two days before her wedding? There she sat, cowering against the wall, blubbering like a child. Borya’s always had dreadful taste in women. Once we went to the Summer Ball. She looked incredibly sexy in a black evening gown.’

‘I think I’d better go and take a cold shower!’ said the notary.

‘And her skirts,’ said the agent.

‘The skirt fits tightly over the hips and flares just below the knees,’ said the notary.

The secretary left the room. The agent rose from his chair. ‘Thank you, my dear,’ he said.

‘Not at all,’ said the notary. ‘Next time you’ll bring me a more valuable fake, I hope.’

‘I promise,’ said the agent.

‘Don’t forget to tell Turchinskaya she should keep her hand in,’ said the notary.

‘I won’t,’ said the agent. ‘She shouldn’t compromise her standards.’

We left the room but not the office: the agent couldn’t let me go without blessing. ‘I’ll give you my solicitor’s phone number,’ he said.

‘But I’ve got your home number,’ I said.

‘My wife won’t handle this delicate affair – she can’t stand Turchinskaya. They hate each other. Just wait till they get together, then you’ll see the sparks fly. I know dozens of solicitors. This one is the best of the bunch. And he must know someone on the inside.’ The agent held out his own card on which he had noted down the solicitor’s phone number. ‘Your friend’s solicitor may call him today or tomorrow.’

I entered a pub – there are several Irish pubs in Saint Petersburg – and ordered a pint of ale. I took all the documents from the envelope I had brought from Versailles and resumed my reading of the texts I already knew by heart – if only in part. ‘Madame Turchinskaya, 00078122332126, Kamenostrovsky Prospekt 272, Saint Petersburg.’ Marussya asked me to call Turchinskaya and pay her a visit on condition that she wasn’t opposed to it. ‘And even if she does mind, just go and knock on her door until she opens it.’ I’m allergic to the telephone and my friends often complain of my silence. But the people I’ve never seen or heard in my life have no grounds for complaint; so I feel no remorse when I don’t call them. And I’m certainly not under obligation to visit them.

‘Your email of 10.02.2008 proves that you don’t understand what I’m asking you to do. (Please consult my email of 08.02.2008.) You wish to know if you are in the city register and if everything is in order. You also ask me to let you know the number of this register and your own number. May I ask you to reread my email of 05.02.2008? **You are not the owner of this flat.** You ask me if it is possible to sell this flat and if I can agree to get my fee **after** the sale. Your question makes no sense – you are **not** the owner of the disputed flat and consequently cannot sell it. This is **not** within the realms of possibility, I’m afraid. Generally speaking, you cannot sell what you don’t own. Sometimes you cannot even sell what you do own.’

Her solicitor isn’t likely to call his Petersburg counterpart: Marussya dismissed him a long time ago. She wrote to the Belgian ambassador who didn’t answer her letter. Prince Gudrikoy advised her to get in touch with a member of the royal family, who was about to leave for Russia. ‘He’ll meet Putin,’ he said.

I returned to Dinussya’s flat and called Marussya to put her in the picture about what I had learnt during my stay in Petersburg. ‘Will I get my money back?’ she asked.

‘They’re having doubts about that.’

‘Why should I hire another solicitor if I haven’t got a ghost of a chance of getting my money back? I’m already borrowing up to the hilt. A penniless artist.’ Out of sheer boredom Marussya plays the piano.

*How beautiful the red plum blossom,
I wish to colour my cheek with it.*

A Waka by Michizane Sugawara. I wonder why Marussya doesn’t use the red plum blossom as a powder, if only once a week. She has grown old over 36 years: I made her acquaintance in 1975. The illness she contracted in the aftermath of the Chernobyl drama continues to sap her energy and confidence in the future and humankind in general. She might say about a friend or an admirer: ‘I don’t have much confidence in him after his behaviour in recent months.’ And yet the person in question is beyond reproach and above suspicion. Her friends, whom she no longer trusts, just shake their heads and say, ‘Marussya’s illness has really knocked the stuffing out of her.’ I think that Vassya’s betrayal has something to do with her brand new attitude towards her clan.

In some way, Marussya’s destiny mirrors that of Michizane. Once upon a time, he was a high-ranking government officer. But human destiny knows how to keep the audience – the gods or God – in suspense. (Like Ludwig II of Bavaria, God is probably the only spectator of our suffering.) There’s a gradual build-up of suspense throughout Marussya’s and Michizane’s lives, until they come to unexpected endings. Marussya was happily married to Count de Lost – Count de Lost Flat, as I call him now – and, her husband being appointed director of a bank in Thailand, she spent a lot of time in Asia, travelling to Indonesia, India and Ceylon. Then she divorced her husband who wasn’t always faithful to her: he thought Asian women had some say in the running of his *private* business. Ten years later she contracted the Chernobyl disease and her health along with other components of her life began to go downhill. Even her piano playing took a hard knock; her audience diminished substantially and the pianos she played went out of tune hourly, losing a few strings in the process.

As for Michizane, he was demoted as a result of the slander and political chicanery of his rivals – the Fujiwara clan.

He endured a life of extreme hardship and misery in exile at Dazaifu, yet preserved his character continuing his scholarly studies and never developing the hatred for those who had exiled him. He died in 903 at the age of 59.

His funeral procession was a melancholy occasion, attended only by his faithful follower Yasuyuki Umasake and a few neighbors. The coffin was carried on a cow carriage led by Yasuyuki. According to the legend the ox suddenly came to a halt and refused to budge despite threats and entreaties. The burial therefore took place on the spot, and this became the site of the Tenmangu’s main shrine visited today by so many admirers.

I wish I could be as tolerant of perfidy as Michizane was, according to this succinct account. I also wish my cat could decide on the whereabouts of my burial.

10

My computer's adaptor broke down last night so I was unable to take a note of my reflexions on the role Vassya's had played in the hardships endured by Marussya. Instead, I reread a few articles in the papers I had gathered in the course of my Japanese tour. I chanced upon an intriguing title: *A city's last geisha outruns time and tsunamis*. In a way, Marussya is the last geisha; so am I, although I don't know how to dance. But I am an entertainer – a pianist who plays Beethoven, Schubert and other European composers.

'At 84, she has survived 4 waves of terror, and performed for 70 years.' Of course she was no longer in great demand and progressively sad incidents cluttered her life with painful moments and memories. Over and over again did she colour her cheeks with the red plum blossom. She wasn't really in disgrace unless old age might be regarded as a form of ostracism and discrimination. She often sang for herself after putting on the white split-toe socks she usually wore with her kimono.

*My grandmother used to say: 'A tsunami
Is a wide-open mouth that swallows
Everything in its path.' I've lived through three
Tsunamis. They're life and death.
I'm still alive. The mouth's shut at present.
When will it open again, I wonder?
Will it be life or death? Will it just show
Its teeth? A tsunami is a mouth,
So is an earthquake. Will both of them
Open together? Which mouth will swallow my songs
And my dances? Will I survive again to sing
And dance for my fellow creatures, for
Myself, for my cat, my fish and stones?*

And then she sings another song:

*Victory comes to those who
Run away as fast as a cheetah.
I'll stay where I am at present.
I've already found my burial*

*And my death. I need neither
A cat nor an ox. I've found
My peace of mind and body.*

A woman carried her to safety at the time of her first tsunami. Her mother? She doesn't remember her mother, but she does remember the woman, her back and the mouth that didn't swallow her. This time, after her legs gave out, an admirer carried her on his back to higher ground. She survived her fourth tsunami, but the waves swept away her shamisen and kimono. She sings to herself:

*Another mouth spoke. I'm still alive.
Another hospital is my home.
How many hospitals are there in the world?
How many mouths? There are old
Women and men who survive earthquakes and
Drink sake if they're able
To drink, to open their mouths.
The smell of ruined buildings mingles
With that of the sea. What does my perfume
Smell like? There's a delicious smell
In here. I wish I could smell like the sea.
Am I a ruined building,
My own tombstone, a cloud overhead?
Am I a raindrop, a tsunami to come?
Everything comes and goes like
Waves, like lives and graceful wives,
Like kimonos and shamisen's strings.*

It was her intention to sing this song at Kamaishi's 117-year-old ryotel – a restaurant where she began working as a 14-year-old seven decades ago. 'I'd practised the night before, and after putting my thoughts together, I thought this song would be all right,' she said. But for the tsunami, the song *would* have been all right.

She is the only one who knows how to sing this song.

Was Vassya hand in glove with Turchinskaya? He may be a victim of this woman's diabolical mind and body. Selling flats is her toy and a profit she makes from it must satisfy her financial and spiritual needs to the point of excluding other enjoyments from her life. Even when she goes to a top restaurant,

she thinks only about another client who trusts her and doesn't question the authenticity of the documents she signs in his presence. The client also signs the documents she puts on her or someone else's table and the notary whose signature adorns the last page has no inkling of what goes on in the same district of Saint Petersburg. Was Vassya aware of Turchinskaya's toys, of the theatrical plays she would put on in the daytime when police officers and judges are wide awake and consequently are in a position to arrest any culprit, however ingenious and wealthy?

The agent I talked to was surprised to learn that Turchinskaya continued to swindle her clients in the 21st century when the Russian criminal justice system appeared to have reached its zenith. As an outsider, Vassya might have found a loophole in the functioning of the system: more often than not, loopholes can be seen from the outside and not from the inside. Unlike Turchinskaya, Vassya has far more expensive toys at his disposal, so he can play his games and perform his dramas on a larger scale – in a worldwide arena. But Turchinskaya may occasionally take part in these games and operas: not only kings are permitted to act on chessboards and in La Scala. Vassya must have a lot of servants outside his castle; and yet I saw none inside it.

I didn't question Vassya on the subject, but we did talk about swindlers and he said he was as vulnerable in this domain as any other man or woman. 'I totally misjudged the situation and behaved quite inappropriately,' he said.

'I know,' I said. 'You told me she'd robbed you along with Marussya.'

'How could she humiliate me by underestimating my judgment in front of everyone like that? Now everybody is aware of how stupid and blind I am. Only Marussya thinks my shrewdness exceeds her naïveté. She still doesn't believe I was robbed, does she?'

'She doesn't.'

'Well, I'd rather be a blockhead than a thief.'

'You speak Russian fluently, don't you?'

'I haven't explored the *nuances* of the Russian language. For instance, I don't have any experience of talking to Russian crooks. They've got their own language, haven't they? Their language, their intonations, their voices. This is an opera I haven't learnt by heart yet. I can sing *Don Giovanni* or *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, but I don't know *The Swindler's Opera*.'

'*Don Giovanni*'s more beautiful,' I said.

'Don't you like *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*?'

'Of course I do – it's one of my favourite operas.'

'Do you like *The Swindler's Opera*?' Once again I heard Vassya's laughter. I would call it 'laughter in the dark' if I revered Nabokov as much as I used to.

'I don't like Turchinskaya,' I said.

'Neither do I. A mouse doesn't like cats, does it?'

Is Vassya a cat, a dog, a crocodile, a tiger? Dinussya thinks she is a cat; at least she says so quite often. No wonder she is not afraid of Vassya: cats may gouge dogs' eyes out. Did I already mention

Marussya's dog? She took her to Vassya's castle because she couldn't part with her – not even for five days. Marussya's dog was afraid of Vassya's cats. There were three cats in Vassya's garden and also in the nether part of the castle or rather in the kitchen: I never saw them in my room. Actually I did. Another memory lapse. One of those black cats was lying on my bed; he shared this bed with me for an hour or two. I don't remember how long I slept that afternoon. Vassya's boyfriend had three black cats.

Three black cats,

Three black cats.

How they ran!

How they ran!

During my second visit to the castle I spoke to Vassya about those cats. Mentioning the black cats wasn't very tactful, given that they belonged to his boyfriend who must have forsaken him. At least I saw him neither in the garden, nor anywhere else. I came across him neither in my room nor in the kitchen. Or did *Vassya* forsake him? At some point he fell in love with a sailor, if I remember rightly. Did I already touch upon this sailor? I don't think so. Actually I'm not quite sure he fell in love with a sailor; he just said the person he had fallen in love with was quite different from us. I feel seasick even on a lake so I assumed he was in love with a man who could withstand the pressure of the sea and its sadistic onslaughts.

Didn't Vassya say he was on the point of committing suicide? At that point love was more important to him than money and art. Even Russia was receding in his mind; but his mind proved to be so large that Russia didn't manage to cross its border.

Or was the whole thing just another play, another show? Vassya cultivates an image as a romantic person whose inborn penchant for love and death is beyond suspicion. This is part of his personal charisma which enables him to charm his victims out of their paintings, money and jewellery.

Marussya has a strong bias against homosexual relationships which are associated in her rather narrow mind with dirt and wickedness. Once I spoke to her about the cats we saw in Vassya's garden. 'I spotted them cavorting beside the swimming pool,' she said.

'So did I,' I said.

'It was a shock to see them together.'

'Cats often play with each other.'

'I spotted *them*,' she said.

I'm not sure Marussya would judge Vassya's role in her life with such severity if he was a heterosexual churchgoer. I think she was more lenient with sexual mavericks in her youth.

Whenever I ring him up, he says he wants to have dinner with me in Paris or Versailles – somewhere in France, in Europe. Of course I say 'yes' and he smiles, I suppose: his voice reveals the

pleasure he must experience when talking about dinners, meetings and social life in general. He doesn't like being alone and I'm sure he'll never go into hiding, contrary to Marussya's apprehensions. 'I won't be able to find him,' she says. 'My cousin lives in the same area. He drove over to his place and didn't find him. He waited at the gate, but nobody let him in. Vassya was at home.'

'Why do you think he was in?' I asked.

'Because he was at home. He never goes out.'

'You're used to frozen food,' I said. 'He's not, as far as I know. He must shop for food. Actually he told me, "From my quiet home in the country I go into town on a sortie for shopping once a week."'

'But my cousin can't spend a week in front of his gate. Anyway, he was in, I tell you. He didn't want to speak to my cousin.'

'Your cousin had no proof of his guilt.'

'He didn't want to speak to *my* cousin. He never answers *my* phone calls. He must have changed his mobile phone. I mean, his *number*.'

'I called him yesterday and he talked to me,' I said.

'He talked to *you*.'

'This means he doesn't have a new number.'

'This means he doesn't want to answer *my* calls.'

I called him to say I was worried about my lost picture. He said he had called the auctioneer several times, but was unable to reach him. 'His wife said he was abroad. He'll come back at the end of the month.'

I called him at the end of the month to remind him of his promise. 'I've already called him,' he said. 'He'll come back at the end of the week. Don't you worry – I'll talk to him about the picture sooner or later.'

'He's buying time,' said Marussya. 'You should sue him for compensation. It's no skin off my nose if you don't take my advice. You should sue him for damages.'

I called Vassya again and he said he would come to Paris at the end of the month. 'Will you be in Paris?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Shall we have lunch together?'

'I'd be delighted.'

'And after lunch?'

'Nothing firm.'

'How about a walk in Versailles?'

'All right.'

‘In the park. This morning I received a lengthy epistle from Marussya. She’s petulant. “Don’t expect sympathy from me!” I’ll tell her. Running round like a headless chicken.’

I called him two months later. ‘Did you come to Paris?’ I asked.

‘I didn’t. I was taken ill, you know. I was very ill for a while but I’m all right now. I’ll come to Paris next week. Shall we have dinner in Paris?’

‘Why not?’

‘Would you be so kind as to book a table for two?’

I called him two weeks later. ‘I’m selling my castle.’

‘What about my picture?’

‘No point in talking about it over the phone. When I’m in Brussels I’ll meet the auctioneer and thrash the problem out. No one has solved the problem of what to do with radioactive waste. But a lost picture is another kettle of fish, isn’t it? We’ll find it – don’t you worry! Marussya won’t play in Egypt after all. The situation has become intolerable. Poor Mubarak. The revolt had nothing to do with his dictatorship. The Egyptians love classical music, you know. They just wished to prevent Marussya from playing in Cairo. Piano playing is meat and drink to her. All right, she can play a few bars from a Chopin nocturne. Her sound really grates on me. But why should she talk about what’s going on in Egypt? Does she have a degree in sociology and politics? She also talks about the war in Afghanistan. She doesn’t know that Afghanistan is a patchwork of ethnic, linguistic and tribal communities. And she doesn’t know the first thing about Russia. How could she make such an exhibition of herself in Saint Petersburg? I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. She was bundled up in coats and scarves. The Russian winter, you know. It was a surprisingly mild winter. By the way, what’s your opinion of Australian wines? They were quite popular for a while, but now they’re rather passé. I’ll never eat with Kostya again. Do you remember him? A famous surgeon. Do you remember Carussya? A famous pianist, your colleague. Don’t confuse him with Caruso! His finger was cut off when he caught it in a machine, but Kostya was able to sew it back on. A marvellous surgeon. If you have problems with your fingers, ring me up and I’ll arrange an appointment for you. He’s a fantastic surgeon but I always chide him for his bad manners. Last night he insisted on describing his latest operation in graphic detail while we were eating oysters.’

He talked about lunch, but left the date up in the air.

I called him three weeks later. ‘I was out on the tiles last night and I’ve got such a headache this morning.’

‘When do you want me to call you?’

‘Red wine gives me a headache. Must have been an Australian wine. Wine improves with age but I don’t remember how old this wine was and what I ate while drinking it. I remember a soup with vegetables and thin strands of pasta in it. When did I eat the soup, I wonder? I had dinner with an important man. He was elected to parliament in 1999. He’s the linchpin of national unity. His proposal will certainly spark another debate. I like the restaurant we went to, but I can’t bear their glasses. I

might drop all of them one day – accidentally on purpose. Marussya made such an exhibition of herself in Saint Petersburg. I was standing in the pouring rain. I said to her, “Okay, so you made a mistake – you just have to put it down to experience and carry on with your life.” Do you know that she agreed to dish the dirt on her ex-husband for a fee of 20,000 euros? By the way, Grusha de Dericossa died today just shy of her 84th birthday. Do you remember her?”

The estimates, however, only cover release by air, meaning the figure is likely to rise if leakage into the sea is included in the calculations. NISA said it will conduct a separate investigation on how much radioactive materials have been released into the Pacific Ocean.

Asked why NISA did not come forward with the data earlier if most of the release was made days after the disaster hit, Nishiyama said the agency wanted to gather a certain amount of data to make sure before making any assessment.

NISA says the amount of radioactive materials released from Fukushima No. 1 is about 10 percent of that from the Chernobyl plant. But the explanation creates a false sense of security. The amount does not cover radioactive materials released into the sea. The total amount of radioactive materials existing in the Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4 reactors at Fukushima No. 1 is much greater than that at Chernobyl or TMI. At Fukushima No. 1, a crisis involving four reactors – compared to the one reactor at Chernobyl and TMI – has been going for more than a month. The government and Tepco must find a way to sufficiently cool the reactors and spent fuel storages without releasing contaminated water out of the reactors.

The Japan Times, Wednesday, April 13, 2011

I called Vassya two months ago; nobody answered the phone. Only Vassya could have answered it: the number I had called was that of his mobile phone. His landline had been out of order for several months so I had no alternative but to try and reach him through his mobile. ‘You start by disconnecting your landline phone and then you disappear,’ said Marussya.

‘Before you vanish into thin air,’ I said, ‘you should get rid of your mobile phone or change its number.’

‘You can’t reach him, can you?’

‘I can’t.’

‘So he’s gone into hiding. Every dog has its day.’

‘Don’t you have a cousin in Greece?’ I asked.

‘So what?’

‘You may ask him to find Vassya – he’s got a villa in Greece.’

‘I know. He speaks Greek fluently. When he told me he could speak Greek, I didn’t believe him. I thought he was lying – as usual. I invited my cousin’s sister-in-law to test Vassya. She said a few Greek words to him and he understood them. What’s more, he spoke to her for almost an hour.’

‘He doesn’t *always* lie,’ I said.

‘But he lied to me in Saint Petersburg, in Brussels and in his castle. One lie may ruin your life.’ Marussya burst into tears: the word ‘ruin’ had triggered a lot of bad memories for her. And memories are often ghastly when they’re based on words, on idioms which are merciless: they leave no room for images and fancy. You play with words and forget not only facts but also your life and whatever is beyond idioms and their pernicious influence. ‘I’m penniless. I let my house go to rack and *ruin* because I’ve no choice. Soon I’ll become a bag lady.’

Radiation has risen to high levels above the spent-fuel pool at reactor No. 4 and its temperature is rising, the nuclear safety agency said Wednesday, indicating the fuel rods have been further damaged and emitting radioactive substances.

The radiation level 6 meters above the spent-fuel storage pool at the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant was measured at 84 millisieverts per hour Tuesday. Normally, it’s 0.1 microsievert.

The temperature of the pool was 90 degrees, compared with 84 before it caught fire on March 15 in a suspected hydrogen explosion, the agency said.

The Japan Times, Thursday, April 14, 2011

I called Vassya again; there was no answer. I left a message on his answerphone; and yet I knew he had never got my messages.

I hear his voice which says in three languages: ‘I’m not at home at the moment. Please leave your message on my answerphone. I’ll call you as soon as I’m back. Thank you very much indeed.’ And one hears a suggestive sigh.

I called him again to imitate the sigh. I also said I wished to talk to him about a personal matter.

I called him again to say I wished to discuss the crisis. And a personal crisis.

I called him again to say I was surprised he didn’t want to answer my calls. ‘I’ve left a lot of messages on your machine, but you don’t seem to pay attention to them. Why do you tolerate an answerphone in your wonderful castle? It’s no match for the masterpieces you’ve got in your collection. Throw it away! No point in keeping an apparatus you never use.’

I rang several times last week, but I kept getting his answerphone. ‘Suppose you play a game of chess,’ I said to the apparatus he had to get rid of, in my opinion. ‘I move a pawn and everybody thinks I’m a champ. What next?’ ‘You’re a happy-go-lucky sort of person,’ said Marussya.

Someone answered the phone. I can’t say I heard an answer: I heard the void which was the answer par excellence. Someone was holding the receiver without saying a word. Someone was waiting for me to say something. I said nothing. We both waited without saying anything. I’m used to playing this game and I don’t think it’s the most reasonable pastime one can hope for. The silence you listen to offers an impressive choice of expressions none of which tallies with the truth, whatever it is.

You hear as you hold *your* receiver: ‘Rob Peter to pay Paul’ or ‘What do you take me for?’ You hear: ‘The project will have long-term benefits.’ Someone hung up.

I said to his answerphone, ‘It’s clumsy, isn’t it? Is it worthy of our relationship, of our intelligent quotas? Anybody can go into hiding. Marussya thinks you’re in New Zealand. If you want to know what we say about you, Marussya and I, please answer my calls. You’re a skilful player, but you often underestimate your opponents. You think you can move your pawns and destroy their kings every day. Why do you underestimate me? I’m also a king. And I’m certainly not a pawn. You may wonder why I’m talking to you like that. If you’re curious to know what’s going on, please answer my call next time. You’ve read a lot. Why have we never talked about Montaigne? I’m dying to know what you think about his essays, his life and hedonism. Did Montaigne enjoy Russian paintings?’

Nishiyama also said that a seawater sample taken Monday 15 km away from the nearby city of Minamisoma, Fukushima Prefecture, showed that the concentration of radioactive iodine-131 was about 23 times the legally permissible level.

Highly radioactive water from the troubled Fukushima nuclear plant flowed into the sea until April 6. The operator also intentionally dumped about 10,000 tons of low-level radioactive water into the Pacific to empty tanks to hold far more toxic water from the crippled reactor buildings.

On April 4, radioactive cesium and iodine higher than the allowable standards was found in ‘konago’ sand lance caught off Kitaibaraki, Ibaraki Prefecture, sparking fears of radioactive contamination of fish.

The Japan Times, Thursday, April 14, 2011

I called him again and he answered the phone. He said he had been in Greece. ‘What did Marussya tell you? I’m not in New Zealand yet.’

‘I’m worried about the picture.’

‘You’ve got a real bee in your bonnet about this waiter. I’ll take care of him when I’m in Brussels. But I wouldn’t sell him now, if I were you. Is there really a market out there for another plate of oysters? Marussya has logged more than 30 complaints. She’s got some nutty idea about setting up a school for dogs. Nutty as a fruitcake. She says she’s been troubled by a stalker recently.’

‘I’m going to Japan.’

‘Good luck. Do you know that I talked her down after she’d been on my former castle roof for two hours? More than 20 years ago.’

Yesterday I had to leave the hotel room earlier than usual: my computer was broken and I was hoping to have it repaired before my departure from Japan. I asked my manager’s assistant to help me fix the

computer and she came to my room where a few cans of beer might have attracted her attention. They did as a matter of fact, for my manager said to me a few hours later, 'You've got a lot of beer in your room. I thought you were fond of wine.' I said nothing; I just hoped my computer would be repaired before I lose the threads of my book.

One of them isn't likely to get lost amidst other words and themes – on account of its tenacity and wickedness.

Distribution of prophylactic iodine – which saturates the organ's receptors, blocking attachment by radioactive forms of the element – was slow after the Chernobyl incident. The 2006 I.A.E.A. analysis found this mistake fatal for many, because thyroid uptake of radioactive iodides was very rapid, saturating the organ within days.

International Herald Tribune, March 25, 2011

But there are other themes, other shrines in my life within the period of time I resolved to devote to Japan, to our common effort to restore all Japanese castles to their former glory. My manager's assistant said my adapter was kaput and so I had to buy a new adapter to go on writing about my fears and the fish I'm not supposed to eat. I may look at them from time to time; I'm even allowed to cast a glance at milk which goes well with muesli and dried fruit in general, but I must keep away from their radioactivity, from their cancers.

So I woke up rather early in spite of my determination not to switch to Japanese time. My manager's assistant had given me a map with the help of which I might reach the shop where they sold adapters, computers and electronic appliances. I was getting away from Versailles time and I knew I would be unable to sleep until my departure for Kumamoto where I was to play another recital. This departure was scheduled for 1 p.m. and I looked at my watch to make sure I would reach the shop at 10 a.m.: I was planning to visit Dazaifu before boarding the train bound for Kumamoto. My thoughts, plans and times were chaotic and I had no idea how to sort them out.

I was already on my way to the shop when an employee of the hotel caught up with me to say my manager was on the phone. My manager said we could go to the shop together because it was near the railway station from which we were supposed to leave for Kumamoto. So I returned to my room and took my clothes off, relying on my weariness to put me to sleep for two hours. I slept for a while, but my dreams were of no solace either to my body or my mind.

The Japanese have also reported that some of the seawater used for cooling has returned to the ocean, suggesting that some of the salt may have flowed out again, carrying some radioactive material with it. But clearly a significant amount of salt remains.

International Herald Tribune, March 25, 2011

Concerns are growing about the possibility of a catastrophic release of radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station 140 miles north of Tokyo. Some governments have urged their citizens to consider seeking safety elsewhere in Japan or overseas.

Much like in 2003, when the SARS virus slowed business around Asia, those conducting business in Tokyo who have the means to leave the city are weighing whether to decamp, or wait to see if the disaster escalates.

International Herald Tribune, March 18, 2011

I woke up and realised I wasn't dreaming: the disaster I had watched in my dreams was more real than any reality. I dressed up and rushed downstairs to find out how long it would take me to get to the shrine I was planning to visit before my departure for Kumamoto. I didn't seek safety *outside* Japan; yet my dreams and the newspapers I had read encouraged me to leave the Land of the Rising Sun before the Sun would climb all the way up to the zenith. A receptionist told me I would spend an hour in a taxi or on a train, which amounted to the same thing. Everything seemed to amount to the same thing – to the radioactivity I was reading and dreaming about.

I returned to my room and heaved a sigh of relief. With the best will in the world, I couldn't visit Dazaifu because I would have missed my train, had I resolved to do so at all cost. The air was my enemy and my destiny had deprived me of the fresh poison I would have consumed, had I gone to Dazaifu. A foul smell of stale beer permeated my room and I was breathing it with relish: the beer I had partly drunk was above suspicion.

Every day I would buy a few cans of beer, but I drank only part of this wholesome liquid, letting the remnants permeate the air of my room. Now my room was filled with the reek of stale beer and cigarettes. I don't smoke, but somehow I assumed that cigarettes were not as deadly as radioactivity. 'These two substances can't coexist within one room, especially if the window is shut,' I said to myself. Every day I would buy a packet of cigarettes and smoke all cancers out.

And what about my visit to the Kumamoto garden? I had already seen it in 1983 and I was eager to walk around it once more, allowing my past to mix with my present and my despair. Don't gardens heal spiritual cancers in no time at all?

Actually the process took a lot of time. To some extent this visit was also poisoned by radioactivity and the cancers they talk about in newspapers.

What radioactive elements have been found so far?

Most measurements have focused on two, iodine and cesium. Radiation from iodine-131 dissipates quickly, falling by half every eight days and nearly disappearing after 80 days. If inhaled or swallowed, it can concentrate in the thyroid and cause cancer. Cesium-137 lingers far longer, 30 years to decay by half and 300 to disappear. Cesium can also build up in the body and is linked to cancers.

The Japan Times, Thursday, April 14, 2011

One of my favourite gardens. Strange as it may seem, I recalled it when I had seen its photograph in a brochure shown to me by my manager. Usually I forget the gardens I visit because they all look alike even if their hills and stones are different. ‘At least their fish are the same,’ I thought as I looked at the pond where many fish displayed their beauty and voracity: two boys were feeding them. I thought about my cat who might have jumped into the pond had he spotted their bodies. I looked and thought about the waste they were dumping into the ocean in Fukushima and probably elsewhere. But the fish I admired in Kumamoto were still alive and capable of eating what was thrown into the pond by two boys who laughed as they watched the outcome of their generosity.

I recognised the garden and asked myself the following question, ‘What’s the sense in walking around a landscape you don’t like any more?’ I wondered why I had been overwhelmed by the garden’s organic beauty many years ago, and the only explanation I could find in the inextricable maze or rather mess of various theories was linked to my decrepitude. The withdrawal of the garden’s beauty and juvenile ecstasies from my body had created a vacuum which had to be filled, but I was in no hurry to get down to this chore. My rehearsal was to begin two hours later and I was killing time by walking around the trees and hills that ignored my frustration, my shoes and the rhythm they created as I went on with this superfluous sightseeing.

From time to time I would stop and look at the images and objects I found on my way to the concert hall. There was too much to take in at once and I had no desire to take anything in. And then I realised that the vacuum I had been concerned with was coming to life. I felt my body and thought it might have been a tree, had it been permitted to grow in this garden for 100 years. I was also the fish snatching the crumbs from the surface of the pond. And the garden was the ruins I had seen on the photographs printed in numerous magazines.

Aside from the roof, which landed not far from his building’s foundations, there was nothing recognizable that remained of his home. A few mementos were scattered in the kaleidoscopic wreckage: his waterlogged family albums were lodged in the axle of an upturned car, while his daughter’s pink stuffed animal lay facedown in the mud.

I chanced on this account in an old issue of *Time Magazine*. Upon reading it tonight I recognised the garden once again: nature has a multi-faceted personality. It goes without saying that nature is a woman; and she has many facets to her personality. Dinussya is kind-hearted and tender; her face and body remind one of trim lawns and neat flowerbeds – the traditional features of a French garden. But when her face is contorted with fury, she has an uncontrollable urge to smash the Earth to smithereens. Once, in the middle of the night, she threw a glass of wine in my direction and smashed a glass door. Had she been outdoors, she might have smashed a window and overturned a few cars.

A few mementos scattered in the kaleidoscopic wreckage. Some waterlogged family albums lodged in the axle of an upturned car.

Haga ignored most of these keepsakes. His first priority was scooping up sodden rice to take back to his hungry family and neighbors, who had escaped the wave by scrambling to higher ground. Yet even as the fisherman packed the ruined grain into a sack, he displayed the fortitude and generosity that have so defined this devastated region of Japan. Haga was embarrassed that the rice was spoiled, but he invited me to take some. A neighbor had found a bottle of grain alcohol bobbing in a fetid pool. Would I like a fortifying gulp? The next day, Haga would join Akaushi's other survivors to begin the slow clearing and reconstruction of a village virtually wiped off the map. 'We'll all try our best to do this together,' he said, not a note of pity in his voice. 'That's the Japanese way, isn't it?'

Time, March 28, 2011

The garden and the tsunami; beauty and the beast. Two sides of the same coin. Beauty is in love with the beast and vice versa. Nature is in love with herself.

13

I took a taxi and soon entered the hall where I was to play a recital for several hundred people. I don't know how many people attended the recital; I might have been playing in an empty hall, for all I know. Yet I made my exit from the stage to rapturous applause. Had it been recorded before the disaster?

There are very few people in the streets where I walk in search of Volvic or Evian. I meet no foreigners in the hotels which, however, do not look deserted as if they had been inhabited by shadows or invisible birds. I hear something or somebody swish through the air. A few employees smile and bow as I head for the restaurant where breakfast is served.

In my room I heard another swish and twisted my head round so I could see what was happening. A newspaper was lying on the floor as if there had been something new under the sun. A garden, a tsunami, a hotel, a bow, a swish, a restaurant, an overturned car.

I'm in no mood for reading so I turn the light off: I know everything by heart. We can reconstruct the Japanese shrine if everyone does their bit.

Dear Guests,

Thank you very much for your patronage to the Nagoya Tokyu Hotel. Due to the Earthquake in Tohoku Area on March 11th, shortage of electricity has become a very serious problem. We are implementing a policy to save this situation by turning off the lights as much as possible.

Also, we would like to take this opportunity to discontinue operating our Fitness Club in the Morning; 7:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. starting from April 1st 2011.

It is important for us to contribute to producing power to rebuild after this Natural Disaster as a company.

We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

Thank you very much for your cooperation and understanding.

Management

I'm surprised to see how early light comes to Japan. Through a chink in the curtains the sun invades my room when I don't expect anything except night and darkness. If I draw the curtains my room becomes a collection of sunbeams, and no one is permitted to steal any item from this collection. I look at my watch and don't believe my eyes: in Europe I would be singing hymns to the night, Novalis and peaceful dreams. Of course my watch shows Japanese time, gradually forgetting what it was used to in Versailles, Paris, Venice, Weimar, Salzburg and other European cities. Even Saint Petersburg is no longer on its map; and yet I left Russia only nine days ago.

When I watch TV, I don't need electricity and I think the hotel management should thank me for my cooperation: I skip many pages in the books I've brought to Japan. So I might say Spinoza's philosophy is good in patches if I didn't read his works before embarking on this perilous journey. I remember the Kumamoto garden and my concert after which some people thanked me for coming to Japan. 'Finally, I'd like to thank everyone for coming this evening,' said my manager at the end of his speech. There was a kind of reception after the concert, but I was thinking about the garden and consequently I don't remember anything except the end of my manager's speech and the bow he made to the audience.

I don't feel like writing a poem; and yet something animates the void I felt at the beginning of my stroll in the Kumamoto garden. What I feel inside me is no longer the void I failed to describe when I mentioned it in the previous chapter devoted to one of the days I have already spent in Japan since my departure from Russia. How can one describe the void? One can feel it whatsoever one finds within one's reach. Yesterday I filled it with the garden and the ruins about which I had read in many papers and magazines as if there had been nothing else to read about.

The fuel will burn through the foundation of the plant, sinking into the ground and contaminating the water table. Pressure in the cores will climb high enough that the vaultlike vessels will no longer be able to withstand it. Before long they will erupt in a radioactive cataclysm, spreading a deadly, carcinogenic cloud across Japan and – depending on the whims of the wind – around the world.

Time, March 28, 2011

I also filled the void with the carcinogenic cloud I couldn't remove either from the article or from my life that wholly depends on this cloud's whims and frolics. How will I describe my life in five years, in ten years? 'It was all fun and frolics until it began to pour down with rain.' So my sunbeams will live side by side with the raindrops and their itineraries. On which internal organ of mine will you fall today, my dear raindrops? Why do you love my body? It's an old body one would never be able to sell at an auction. One wouldn't even be allowed to put it up for auction. You know what I'll say next, don't you? No one will ever be tempted to steal this body so I'm allowed to keep it until doomsday, both literally and figuratively. There are many other bodies in the world and you must be in love with them too. What a pity you chose our planet as an object of your curiosity and generosity. You said to yourself, 'These plants need to be watered every day.' And you began to water our woods, mushrooms, grass and bodies. For many years you've watered our skins and internal organs as if confusing them with flowers and wheat.

I also filled the void with fish. My body looks like a fish tank now and I wonder what kind of attitude my cat will adopt towards my body upon my return to Versailles. The past, present and future meet as if to take stock of my life.

'It is extremely important that seafood be carefully monitored,' she wrote in an email. 'This is because many of the radionuclides are concentrated in the environment,' she added. 'For example iodines are concentrated in kelp (a Japanese food, seaweed) and shrimp.

'Iodines, cesium and strontium are concentrated in other types of seafood,' she continued. 'Fish can act like tea or coffee presses. When you push down the plungers, the grounds all end up on one side. In this case, that is the fish.'

International Herald Tribune, March 28, 2011

Inside my body there are seaweeds and seafood; I no longer have to go to restaurants or eat anything at home. I wish I had stopped eating on March 10, 2011. However, I carefully monitor my seafood and seaweeds; my Geiger counter is always dancing to the beat of the drums.

Nagoya Tokyu Hotel is making the best effort to provide the safe environment with your understanding and Cooperation. We appreciate your concerns for the environment.

We believe that it is possible not only to protect the earth from the water pollution, but also to reduce the Wastage of water by decreasing usage of detergent.

I don't remember where I have to put the towels I have found in the bathroom to indicate I'm willing to use them again. Shall I throw them on the floor or hang them on a hook? And what about the sheet on which I had a lot of nightmares last night? Shall I throw it on the floor too? Or shall I tuck the

bottom of the sheet under the mattress? I think I'll hang it on the television set to cover the screen and its ineptitudes. Shall I cover my computer?

Shall I cover Vassya van Barabassa and whatever he stands for? A beautiful shroud, isn't it? Marussya and I are not the only victims of his perfidy. For a long time I've been longing to speak to him about others – other people, other thefts. According to Marussya, he might even have murdered an old lady with a view to inheriting her collection of pictures. Genevussya de Rotfront recounted a story about this lady whose money had been a bone of contention within her (and Genevussya's) family circle. The story is rather involved and I don't grasp how Vassya succeeded in the end: he always triumphs over his adversaries. Some of his swindles might be hailed as triumphs for democracy, if one takes into consideration his skill and others' naïveté and clumsiness. All people are equal, deserving the same rights as each other. Everyone has an opportunity to steal without being caught; some miss this opportunity, others do not. But if you do get caught after stealing successfully for years and years, you're demoted and Bonnie forsakes you.

Our Clyde was still successful; and yet he didn't *kill* for the sake of money and consequently there were no clashes between Vassya van Barabassa and the police force. Marussya accused him of murder, saying he wouldn't otherwise have got the pictures he finally did get after the lady's demise. Genevussya de Rotfront told me the story in graphic detail, but I remember neither the details nor the story, which proves once again that Vassya knows how to cover up all the traces of his crimes. I recall that Vassya spent too much time in the castle where the pictures hung and lived there to some extent. He didn't belong to the family and his presence was suspicious, all the more so since no one had really invited him to the castle; at least no one had allowed him to stay there for three years. Marussya couldn't tell me exactly how long he had stayed amidst her cousins – she does belong to the family – but Vassya himself had uttered a few words to this effect and the words 'three years' remain in my memory in spite of the shortness of this utterance.

'My aunt didn't need him,' Marussya told me.

'After all, Vassya isn't a male nurse,' I said.

'She wasn't really ill.'

'But Genevussya said, "Even at the end, when cancer racked her body, she was calm and cheerful." So she *was* ill, wasn't she?'

'I've never heard anybody say, "The Countess de Rotfront died after a long fight with cancer." She was *not* ill. She was a terrible hypochondriac – she was always at the doctor's. What she needed was peace and quiet.'

'Vassya *can* be peaceful and quiet. He's always there to smooth away your fears.'

'He didn't smooth away *my* fears,' said Marussya. 'I fear my flat has been lost forever.'

'He might have said to your aunt, "Would you like me to try to smooth things over between you and your children?"'

‘Their quarrels didn’t last for *years*,’ said Marussya. Her mind flashed back to the day of her divorce. ‘My former husband and I had a bitter quarrel over some money three years ago and we haven’t spoken to each other since. But my aunt wasn’t quarrelsome. She never bore any grudge against me and my family.’

‘Genevussya says he talked her into altering her will,’ I said.

‘Did he? Perhaps. And then he murdered her in cold blood.’

‘Do you accuse him of cashing in on her death?’

‘He was afraid she might make another will. Do you know that my uncle left me his racehorses in his will? As a young girl, I spent every weekend riding my pony, but I’ve never ridden a horse.’

‘You won’t have any trouble learning to ride a horse – I can see you’re a natural.’

‘Too late – I sold them 20 years ago.’

‘Do you think Vassya poisoned your aunt?’

‘He might have strangled her,’ said Marussya.

‘In her sleep?’

‘She slept like a log. And she ground her teeth in her sleep.’

‘Did you often sleep in her room?’

‘Her teeth became the stuff of legend.’

‘We have no proof,’ I said.

‘We’ll never catch Vassya red-handed – but we may catch him all the same,’ said Marussya.

‘How?’

‘Your picture may help us.’

‘How?’

‘We should find it first.’

‘What about your flat?’

‘We’ll never find my flat. I mean, I’ll never get my money back.’

There are no open signs of panic on the streets of Tokyo. But executives from a growing number of banks, law firms, consulting firms and other businesses have started to rent space in Osaka, Fukuoka and other cities more distant from the crippled nuclear reactors. Travel has increased on domestic airlines and bullet trains heading away from northern Japan and hotels considered out of harm’s way are filling up.

International Herald Tribune, March 25, 2011

The yen has been creeping upward since the devastating earthquake and tsunami that battered northeastern Japan last Friday. It climbed sharply to 76.53 yen to the dollar in New York as a nuclear official in the United States warned that the situation at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station was more serious than Tokyo has acknowledged.

International Herald Tribune, March 25, 2011

At the beginning of the Japanese crisis I called Dinussya to say I had been lucky enough to change my yens *before* the earthquake and tsunami. I thought about a dozen euros at the time when people were searching for their friends and relatives trapped beneath the debris in Ishinomaki and Onagawa. I know this sounds trite but I can't help saying what I feel, even though I lose the quality of my style when I let myself go and shed a few tears.

Planes, bullet trains. Foreign artists cancel their concerts. They do charity performances to raise money for those who lost their houses and live in emergency shelters. But they perform in Paris and London, cancelling their Japanese tours. Journalists praise their bounty and call them 'benefactors of humanity'.

Well, I didn't know the yen had crept upward since the advent of the tsunami: I'm a complete ignoramus where money is concerned. I wonder if Vassya has robbed (and murdered) many Japanese multimillionaires over the last 10 years. Did he change all his yens on D-day?

I gave yet another performance tonight. As usual, the members of the audience were queuing for my autograph. Some of them thanked me for having come to Japan. What do they feel when foreign artists cancel their concerts? They think, 'They refuse to come for a few days. We're living here in spite of everything. Do we really have no choice? Are we dying faster than other human beings? Are we dying at a tremendous rate? Anyway we're dying at our own rate, and there's no point in fighting destiny and its law.'

My manager laughs at me. Tomorrow we are leaving for Tokyo and he says I should wear a pair of rubber gloves and a mask during my performance at Suntory Hall. Today I'm staying in Nagoya to be further from Fukushima.

My manager told me yesterday: 'A series of aftershocks gets closer and closer to Tokyo. Let's stay in Nagoya until the very last minute. If something does happen in Tokyo, you'll go to Osaka and take the earliest flight to Paris. Tokyo is further from Osaka than Nagoya and an earthquake may disrupt our transport system.'

In the wake of the disaster, there has been no looting, no rioting. Even as people hoping for food, water and fuel wait in kilometer-long lines in freezing weather – sometimes without success – tempers have not flared. Rationing of basic supplies has been accepted with few complaints. The assumption is that everybody has to share the pain equally. At Masuda Middle School, one of hundreds of emergency centers housing some 450,000 homeless people, the loudspeaker emitted a crescendo of friendly announcements. 'Please come enjoy your piping hot rice now,' went one. 'Please be alert to the fact that the fish roe is a bit spicy, so it may not be suitable for small children,' went another. In the emergency shelter at Koizumi Middle

School, people not used to wearing shoes indoors constructed origami boxes made of newspaper in which to nestle their footwear.

Even the expressions of grief in Japan's worst affected zone have been restrained. For foreigners used to the keening anguish of natural disasters, the hushed sorrow must be mystifying. In Japan, tears do fall, but less noisily. When Masahira Kasamatsu, 76, found out after three harrowing days that his missing daughter was safe, he merely nodded and repeated slowly, 'She's O.K., she's OK.'

Time, March 28, 2011

In the West an army of psychiatrists is brought in to deal with the psychological aftermath of a natural or unnatural disaster. The Japanese cope with their suffering on their own.

14

How to cope with my nightmares?

I'm lying in my bed, but my thoughts wander around a small village where I've never lived because I was born on the outskirts of Moscow. You can be born on the outskirts of a big city and then go to a tiny village to spend the rest of your life with cows and horses. I've always lived in big cities and even Versailles is a big city in comparison with the village where I found myself last night. I couldn't speak the language I heard around me; nor could I understand it. So I thought, 'It's about time I went deaf and even mute – to complete my discomfiture.' I can't hear police sirens, even though they are loud enough to awaken the dead and the unborn. My nightmare is over; yet I can't hear anything.

I wander around the village, but I chiefly stay in a small wooden house to which I'm getting used because I have no choice. I must feel at home somewhere, and the Earth is too big to become a place I can share with my children and relatives, with my friends and teachers. So I live in a wooden house and I like it because it reminds me of woods and trees. It also reminds me of the animals I heard in my youth as I walked around the woods to which my parents took me whenever they thought I needed a breath of fresh air.

My house isn't on friendly terms with the waves I can't hear, but I pay no attention to this nuance. When I was young, I loved rowing and might spend many hours in a boat hired by my parents. Once a huge wave capsized the boat and I decided never to row again.

Last night I was surprised at seeing a massive wave bearing down on my house, on my bed. My neighbour informed me afterwards: 'You didn't hear the sirens.' (He wrote the sentence in my notebook.) Usually I don't listen to this kind of music because I'm not fond of it. I prefer Brahms' intermezzi, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and Schubert's piano sonatas. But sometimes one has to hear *this* music, otherwise one might perish in an earthquake or during a war. In no time at all the water was up around my waist, and I was trembling with cold and fear.

Once night fell I could see flames through the window and I felt explosions of gas or something. I don't want to remember it any more. Yet I remember everything as if my life had depended on my memories and not on tsunamis, earthquakes and wars. I spent an entire night cowering alone and terrified on the second floor of my home in the fishing village where I had found myself at the beginning of the nightmare. I heard a piece of music coming from the inside, not from the outside where only police sirens could be heard. I didn't recognise the piece, but the sounds had a soothing effect and you don't always recognise a man or a woman who offers you harmony.

There's an air-raid shelter in our village. When I came to the shelter, I had trouble communicating with other people. What could I communicate to them? I was shivering with cold in my thin cotton shirt. I didn't say I was freezing because I couldn't say anything. I made no signs. I was just shivering with cold and they gave me a blanket. I gathered the blanket around my body. I said to myself: 'I want to go back to my old way of life, to my cat I left at home.' And somebody wrote on a sheet of paper: 'Your cat was engulfed by the waves.' I cried for a while, thinking about my cat and the life we had together for many years. I hope some good can come of this disaster.

*Nightmares are real. A wave comes
And a picture is lost. I remember the picture
And the loss. I'm always losing
My car keys so I can't drive anywhere.
I'm stuck in a wooden hut, in a shelter of sorts.
I can't communicate properly with
Fellow survivors. You survive but your
Image is lost – your picture, your portrait,
Your future. I don't yet have a clear
Picture of how long I'll live or die. My house,
My wave, my cat, my blanket, my piece of music.*

The Sendai Philharmonic Orchestra, based in Sendai, temporarily suspended its regular concerts after the quake. Since late last month, however, it has been giving small ensemble performances of music on street corners and other places in Sendai. It plans to perform in the worst hit areas as well.

Even in adverse situations, culture, art and sporting activity enrich people's minds. They will certainly provide great encouragement to those who have suffered as a result of the quake and tsunami.

The Daily Yomiuri, Friday, April 8, 2011

I have another concert and I hope nothing will prevent me from playing Beethoven tomorrow or the day after – next Sunday, next Monday, next Tuesday. Day after day, week after week. Is that enough? Enough for what?

The director of the hall where I played last night said to me, ‘Thank you for coming.’ I answered, ‘I wanted to be with you.’ Does music really count?

So many pictures are lost forever. The picture of the Earth is lost too. Two days ago I watched a film entitled *Fourth Kind*. Another army of psychiatrists, extraterrestrial kidnappers. Under deep hypnosis people remember an owl. Convinced the owl is about to whisk them off to another planet, they’re sobbing and in hysterics. Why don’t they rejoice? ‘My daughter, my daughter! They took my daughter, my poor darling! Where’s she now? Oh, my God! I’m going crazy. Am I going crazy? Give me my daughter back! She’ll be unhappy up there, among the stars.’ Is the United States the only place in the universe where one can be happy? Where are these extraterrestrial kidnappers? Only in Alaska?

‘Fantasy land: People gather outside Cinderella Castle at Tokyo Disneyland on Friday.’ A photograph. Here is another photograph I lighted upon in today’s issue of *The Japan Times*: ‘Mouse magic: A mother takes a photo of her daughter posing with Mickey Mouse at Tokyo Disneyland in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture, on Friday.’ Saturday, April 16, 2011.

Tokyo Disneyland reopened Friday after a suspension caused by the March 11 quake, which caused liquefaction damage to its parking lot and created power shortages in the Tokyo area.

Disneyland’s operator, Oriental Land CO., decided to reopen the theme park on the 28th anniversary of its opening in 1983, but has shortened its daily business hours to close at 6 p.m., four hours earlier than usual, in an effort to save electricity.

After seeing how Disneyland fares, it hopes to reopen the neighboring Tokyo DisneySea.

A Parisian said to me once: ‘I’ll never see you again if you go to Disneyland.’ I’m not eager to meet this person every week, but I’ve never gone to *our* Disneyland that isn’t very far from Versailles. And I’ll have no time to visit Tokyo Disneyland unless I ask my manager to change our tickets. Last night he brought a bottle of Dom Pérignon to my room and I told him we would drink it today before having dinner in a famous Nagoya restaurant. But we can drink this bottle in Tokyo or on the train, provided we put an ice bucket and ice cubes in a huge paper bag supplied by the hotel.

Tomorrow morning I’ll go to Disneyland in order to bathe in the Fountain of Youth. I’ll pay a visit to Cinderella in her castle where I may find my lost picture. I’ll play with Mickey Mouse. Didn’t the late Japanese Emperor play with Mickey during his sojourn in the United States? Isn’t Disneyland far more efficient than all concert halls put together?

What about Vassya and *his* castle? Even now he's got more pictures at his disposal than Cinderella. Did Cinderella steal any pictures in her life? Did she murder her stepmother? Cinderella will give a lesson to Vassya. 'Why do you steal, my dear Vassya van Barabassa?'

'I've no choice. I like pictures, so I have to steal them.'

'Why don't you *buy* them?'

'You need money to buy pictures. I'm not married to a prince, you know. And to get money, you must steal either pictures or something else. I can't simply conjure money out of thin air.'

'I've never stolen anything in my life. Don't you like my castle? Isn't it more beautiful than yours? I've never hurt a fly either physically or psychologically.'

'I don't hurt flies either because they've got no money. No point in hurting flies or other insects. I hurt them only if they prevent me from enjoying life to the utmost.'

'I don't hurt humans either,' says Cinderella. 'Look at the people who visit my castle. I don't feel like hurting them. Why can't you adopt my way of life? You have a no-holds-barred approach to dealing with your friends.'

Shouldn't Cinderella speak to Jeremiah de Durdum? Why did I give him this name? He isn't one of the Bourbons, as far as I know. '*Durdum*' is 'loony bin' in Russian. 'Jeffrey de Brouhaha' would be more appropriate, given the sound of the culprit's real name. I can hardly remember him: I spoke about this man at the *beginning* of the book. He said he owed me 50 euros. That's a rather cavalier attitude, it seems to me. Marussya called him before my departure for Saint Petersburg. She reminded him of the picture and the tax he didn't receive from the state. He said he didn't pay taxes and so couldn't get anything from the state or from the auctioneer. He didn't understand what she was accusing him of.

'Why did you say you could do it?' says Cinderella.

'I wished to help him.'

'You didn't. He could have recovered the tax, but for your incompetence and light-heartedness.'

'I said I'd give the check to the auctioneer. What else could I have done?'

'Expenses were tax deductible, but your friend didn't deduct them.'

'It's his fault.'

'I can't get through to you just how serious the problem is!'

'It's his problem.'

'It's you who should have done that.'

'What are you talking about?'

'He says you owe him 3,600 euros.'

'I owe him 50 euros.'

'But you didn't even give him 50 euros.'

'I can give him 50 euros now or tomorrow.'

'It's wrong to treat animals as if they had no feelings. The same goes for humans.'

‘I don’t hurt animals.’

‘You hurt your friend’s feelings.’

‘I told him, “Don’t upset yourself by thinking about what might have been.” He didn’t get his money back. So what? Some people have no money and buy no pictures. They can’t get anything back. Do you know what’s going on in Japan?’

‘Of course I do. I live in Tokyo Disneyland.’

‘Men and women flee the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant. Evacuation centres turn them away because of unfounded fears they might contaminate others with radiation.’

‘They’re not poisonous, are they?’

‘They’re homeless. They need local government-issued certificates proving they aren’t contaminated before they’re allowed to set foot inside the centres.’

‘They can come to my castle.’

‘An eight-year-old girl from Minamisoma, Fukushima Prefecture, was refused treatment for a skin condition in a hospital in the city of Fukushima because she didn’t have a screening certificate.’

‘What can I do for her?’

‘And you speak about tax-deductible auction sales. Children have been rejected from evacuation centres. It’s really sad for them to be told, “Don’t come near, don’t come near.” If your protégé and Marussya de Dragunevska call me once more, I’ll say to them, “Don’t come near, don’t come near.”’

‘They’re not poisonous, are they?’

‘Marussya’s a real pain in the neck. So is her former lover. A tight-fisted old codger. He thinks he’s God’s gift to women. As an artist he’s cocooned from the real world. So is Marussya. They both tend to play on my feelings of guilt and compassion. They both need a shoulder to cry on. Marussya sees the business of making money as just grubby opportunism. Didn’t she try to make money herself by investing in stocks? She burnt her fingers badly because the market collapsed. She told me, “I want to bequeath my fortune to my niece.” The young lady’s no oil painting but she’s got a lovely personality. “She’ll be penniless if I die tonight! She could never measure up to her mother’s expectations!” And Marussya’s lover speaks about robbers and robberies. He’s actually a cradle snatcher.’

‘A cradle robber?’

‘That’s right. Beware of saying anything that might reveal where you live – he’s often in Tokyo.’

‘Some people live in shelters, don’t they?’

‘Many evacuees are worried about money and work. They’re experiencing psychological trauma almost a month after the disaster. They’re growing tired and angry over their murky futures. More than 150,000 people have been displaced by the disaster. “Without working and earning money for living, I’m getting closer to the limit of my patience,” said a woman. “I’m thinking about searching

for a job as I have my own family, but I don't have a house in the first place. I need money just to find a house," said a man. Your protégé has a house, doesn't he? What does he need money for?"

'He likes gourmet food.'

'What's wrong with porridge?'

'I ate a lot of porridge in my youth,' says Cinderella.

'Do you measure radiation in your castle?'

'I've got a Geiger counter,' says Cinderella.

'Geiger counters are ineffective for consumers in detecting hazardous levels of radiation in food and water at home.'

'I send my food and water to the nearest laboratory,' says Cinderella.

'Just pointing a measuring device at your food before dinner is pretty much meaningless,' says Jeremiah. 'Tap water and fish require special handling, isolation and concentration to get meaningful readings. You'd better store blood cells now in case you need them later as treatment for radiation overdose. High doses of radiation can destroy the blood-making cells of bone marrow, a potentially fatal outcome that can be treated with transplants of blood stem cells.'

Dinussya suggested I should carry a Geiger counter in my pocket and use it in restaurants and hotels.

*Will tomorrow fit in here? I don't know –
 Let's measure it. Readings in Tokyo soared
 More than 20-fold and reached
 0,809 microsieverts per hour, March 15, compared
 With 0,0338 microsieverts before
 The catastrophe. What should I read
 Into these figures? My death, as usual;
 Two deaths, three deaths. Tomorrow I'll spend
 A few hours in Tokyo. I'll sleep
 At the Ana Hotel. The highest level is below
 A hundredth of the radiation dose
 From a single chest X-ray.
 Am I doomed to live? Seafood can require
 Up to two years of monitoring
 Because radioactive materials can take longer
 To reach larger fish such as sea bass.
 I won't eat sea bass in two years.
 What shall I eat? Porridge, fruit, tea leaves?
 I'll drink my own blood, the Milky Way*

And Romanée Conti 1929.

‘Before taking measurements, users should shield the instrument in plastic to prevent contamination and determine background radiation levels. Poor ventilation, concrete walls in underground locations and proximity to granite and mobile phones can distort readings. Measurements are best taken at a distance of 1 cm, moving the device about 2 to 3 cm per second’ (*The Japan Times*, Saturday, April 16, 2011).

Shall I have an X-ray of my chest instead of going to Tokyo? I’ll wait until it’s over. ‘Can you see anything?’ I’ll ask.

‘Not yet,’ my doctor will answer.

‘I hate waiting for public transport, but I’ll wait for your diagnosis.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Are there any tumours on the X-ray?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Can’t you see a slight irregularity in one lung?’

‘Not yet.’

My dear Marussya. You’ve forgotten your life, your chest, your tumours and your lungs. How do you manage to breathe? You inhale the wholesome air of your garden and think about the flat you bought in Saint Petersburg. Do I need Cinderella to talk you into forgetting the world?

‘You lost a flat but you’ve got a house,’ says Cinderella.

‘I don’t want to lose anything,’ says Marussya.

‘You’re not homeless and you don’t have to put your child up for adoption – you’ve got no children. Why aren’t you happy?’

‘Because I’ve got no children.’

‘Have you already forgotten your flat?’

‘It’s the other way round – the flat has forgotten me.’

‘Do you think your flat learnt you by heart when you bought it?’

‘Everyone and everything has forgotten me. Only one document bears my signature. My name isn’t in the register of owners.’

‘Don’t you own anything?’

‘I own a piano.’

‘You can play some Mozart, can’t you?’

‘I can.’

‘So you own Mozart. Isn’t that enough? Is a flat in Saint Petersburg bigger than Mozart?’

‘I could have both.’

‘You can’t have everything. Nobody can.’

‘Don’t you have your pumpkin and one shoe?’

‘I also have a castle,’ says Cinderella. ‘And I have a pair of shoes – several pairs of shoes, as a matter of fact.’

‘And every pair of shoes turns into a prince, I suppose,’ says Marussya. ‘How many princes do you have?’

‘I’m faithful to my husband.’

Vast tracts of the Tohoku region are demolition sites: The stuff of entire cities is sorted into piles taller than three-story buildings around which dump trucks and earthmovers crawl. Ankle-deep water stagnates in streets, and massive fishing boats lie perched atop pancaked houses and cars. The occasional telephone pole or bulldozer is sometimes the only skyline.

The Japan Times, Saturday, April 16, 2011

Can you forget this image, Marussya?

There are people who never forget anything; what’s more, they immortalise the images they come across. The Japanese are fond of immortal images, otherwise they wouldn’t photograph cathedrals and ordinary pedestrians. ‘Capturing the eerie beauty of Chernobyl. Photographer Jun Nakasuji has now twice braved the danger zone.’ The photographer went to the Ukraine, looking for life in the area which has been a ghost area for 25 years. The Red Forest is located 2 km west of the power plant. Exposed to radiation, the green pines of the forest turned red. After the accident, workers constructed a road through the forest by piling up mounds of earth. The road is much higher than the actual ground of the forest so that whoever drives through it avoids radiation exposure.

A lot of poplars grow wild around the empty houses located 3 km from the nuclear power plant. A ghost town, a lot of ghost houses. A lot of radiation has accumulated in the trees and flowers and could even be present in the area’s wildlife. A lot of sunbeams. Their work involves restoring and recreating wildlife habitats all across the area. Yet the photographer is somewhat sceptical about the area’s natural rebirth. A lot of dead trees stand in the forest, but other areas of Chernobyl are teeming with flowers that talk to leafy green trees. A family of wild boar walks around, looking at the flowers, trees and bushes.

This weeping cherry tree has stood here for a thousand years, local farmers say, blossoming every spring despite blizzards, earthquakes and, now, a nuclear disaster.

The town, however, may not be as resilient. The hundreds of thousands of people who come here each cherry blossom season to view the prized tree, one of the three oldest in the country and a designated national monument, are largely staying away this year, scared off by the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, only about 50 kilometers, or 30 miles, away.

International Herald Tribune, Wednesday, April 27, 2011

Dear Dinussya. Shall we talk about Vassya again? You said he didn't look like a criminal. You said he might be my friend even after stealing a lot of my pictures and all my furniture. I don't think he has ever stolen anything either from me or anybody else. There is no proof and no proof is needed to regard him as an honest man, a good friend, a nice fellow. ('You're really going out on a limb in praising his generosity, wit and learning,' said Marussya.) I called the woman to whom he had talked about my novels and she assured me she was willing to become my agent. 'I like your style,' she said. Is that enough? She sent one of my books to an important French publisher. But I haven't heard from her for more than three months. Does that mean she is not a literary agent? Another lie, another puppet in Vassya's theatre? Another Disneyland? Am I living in Cinderella's castle? I'd rather live in Versailles or in a Petersburg hotel with Dinussya. 'What do you think of Vassya? His theatre company must have several new productions in the pipeline for next season.'

'It's just another fairy tale,' said Dinussya. 'A beast turned prince. I don't mind being his puppet.'

'Neither do I. After all, puppets have more fun.'

'I wouldn't like being a puppeteer,' said Dinussya. 'Too much work, too many thoughts, too many intrigues. In our harbour, a few boats are bobbing gently up and down on the water. Don't you want to sit in one of them, in all of them? One of them is swept out to sea by the tide. Are you in this boat? What does it matter? You're in the sea and in the harbour. There are ups and downs in your life, in the music you play, in your poems. Why should I take turns to row the boat up the river? God or Vassya will create my itinerary, my way of life. Vassya might be God's messenger, for all I know.'

'I agree with you,' I said. 'No one knows who God may send to us. A dog may turn out to be God's messenger. A cat, a tree, a glass of water. They're all God's messengers. The Suizenji Jojuen Garden in Kumamoto is the ruins of a beautiful city. And the ruins are a new garden.'

'Vassya can't live otherwise,' said Dinussya. 'His watch was wound once and for all. What can he do with the watch? He can put it on a chest of drawers, in a pocket, in a bathroom. The watch movement regulates the speed at which the hands guide our Vassya through the network of life, through the maze of amazement.'

'Vassya is both our garden and ruin,' I said. 'He refuses to say anything on the grounds he may incriminate himself. Everybody suspects him of robberies and murders. So he doesn't say to me, "I must have sold your picture by mistake. I've got so many pictures in my collection I can't tell them apart. I thought the oysters were mine, but I confused them with the apples. The apples and pears are mine, but the oysters are yours. The waiter's yours too. I forgot about the waiter, to tell the truth. Aristocrats look neither at servants nor at waiters, so I forgot him. I thought the oysters were suspended in mid-air. That's what I feel when a waiter brings me a dish in a restaurant, in a hotel. The dishes I eat come on their own, flying from the kitchen to my table. I'll give you my pears or apples or

lobsters. Which still life do you prefer? Or I'll give you money." Actually Vassya said at some point he would give me a painting.'

'He has as much as admitted it was his fault,' said Dinussya.

'He's got a guilty conscience – that's why he can't sleep. Did you hear him walking around his castle at three in the morning?'

'I thought it was a ghost. He spoke about his ghosts, didn't he?'

'He might have spoken about himself, for all I know,' I answered.

'You should tell him, "I'd like to get this matter settled once and for all, wouldn't you?" Don't accuse him of anything.'

'Why should I accuse him? Vassya's innocent. Everyone may confuse contemporary pictures or fruit. Oysters look like apples or waiters in a Cubist still life. Doesn't Vechevova adore Picasso?'

'Just say, "Don't worry, I'm not accusing you" and he'll give you three pictures instead of one. He's a really sweet person and he's generous to a fault.'

Is it a never-ending story?

15

I'm in Tokyo. Waiting for an earthquake. There was an earthquake yesterday, not far from Tokyo. I might have felt it, had I come to Tokyo yesterday and not today. I would have been scared stiff. And yet nothing really happened: the city is still on the map and beyond my window. I'm staying on the 30th floor and this floor isn't lying on the ground with all its furniture and bathrooms. From where I'm sitting I can see a sort of panorama and not a mass of rubble or a collection of ruins. One may say to a guest staying in my room, 'From here you can enjoy a panorama of the whole city.' I'm not enjoying it and I'm wrong. I'm often wrong but being wrong today makes me feel my weakness, not my stupidity. And I'd rather being stupid than weak.

My recital is over. I received a letter and a book in Japanese. Later on I realised there were some English poems in it. My translator sent me both the letter and the book. He has translated many poems of mine from English into Japanese.

Thank you so much for coming to Japan in these hard situations. I've been deeply moved by your decision. I'm sure your concert will encourage us profoundly. And your new poem! It is, I think, one of your best poems because it reminds us of our living with the dead and the dead and the dead being with us. The poem is not only for us survivors but also for the dead. Music and poetry maybe have the most fundamental power to communicate and the communications which work on our bodies are the most necessary for us now.

I'll give you my first poetry book titled The Sleep of the Ears in return. It includes 19 English poems inspired by your poems and haiku. I hope you enjoy it on your flight to Paris.

Three weeks ago I sent the following poem to my translator:

*A hillock about half a kilometre
From the Pacific Ocean. The survivors
Come and go, searching for the dead.
The dead are Japanese history,
Mount Fuji and Hokusai.*

*An old man said, 'I'd been looking
Everywhere, but I couldn't find them.'*

*They're everywhere, everyone:
Prince Genji, Bach, Shakespeare.*

I already quoted the first version of this poem in my book; it is somewhat longer. I excluded myself from the definitive version, putting an old man instead. He was looking for his relatives; I was looking for myself. I didn't deserve to be in the poem.

Here is a poem I found in my translator's book:

LOST DEATH

*I've lost my cards
That identify myself,
Open the door,
Bring me to a psychiatrist,
And give me chances to dream.*

Cards are life.

*I've lost my cards
In the moonless night.*

I've lost even my death.

I've lost many pictures; I haven't lost my death yet. What should I lose to lose my death?

They're coming: death, an earthquake. I hear a noise. Such a noise isn't made by ghosts. The noise reminds me of a train I saw or rather heard this morning. The train sped through the station I went to with a whoosh. I both saw and heard the whoosh. I see the noise I hear in my hotel room.

What I see reminds me of the sentence I read in *Newsweek*: ‘Japanese soldiers carry a body out of the debris in Onagawa, where half of the 10,000 residents remained missing a week after the catastrophe.’

After the noise comes a movement. The hotel is quaking with fear. Babies like toys that make a noise when they’re shaken. If the hotel I’m staying in were a toy, many babies would like it. The movement stops. The hotel is no longer quaking with fear, but that doesn’t mean anything. If you fight fearlessly against an invading army, a bullet will find you despite your bravery. And no one will say, ‘How come? He was a fearless fighter. Why did he die?’ There are *your* bullets in the world.

Waiting for another shock. No point in putting my clothes on. No point in jumping out of bed and running downstairs. I’m staying on the 30th floor. Let the floor come down. Why should I waste my energy on what will be done by the hotel itself?

Shall I turn the TV off? I’m watching an adult movie. ‘Selected Beauties will bring you a captivating dream.’ I’m living the life of the hotel. Whatever happens to it is my destiny.

Welcome to Club InterContinental!

As a valued Club InterContinental guest, we are pleased to extend you the following benefits:

Complimentary use of the exclusive Club InterContinental Lounge located on Level 35 throughout your stay. The Lounge is open from 7.00 a.m. until 10.30 a.m. on weekdays and until 11.00 a.m. on weekends and holidays.

Usually I stay awake until 7.30 a.m. At 6.30 a.m. I have breakfast which lasts for an hour or so. Then I go back to my room and fall asleep. Should I have breakfast or is it better to sleep before the flight? At 9 a.m. my manager will be waiting for me in the lobby. My flight is at 11.55 a.m. Should I have breakfast at 7 a.m. or wait for a gorgeous first-class lunch? Should I watch my weight? Should I take advantage of the complimentary buffet? An earthquake would settle this matter once and for all.

An extensive selection of teas, coffee and juices, served throughout the day in the Club InterContinental Lounge until 10.00 p.m.

My blood pressure forbids me to drink either tea or coffee. I might have a glass of tomato juice.

Complimentary evening canapés and cocktails, served daily in the Club InterContinental Lounge from 5.30 p.m. until 7.30 p.m.

After the rehearsal I went to the Lounge and was disappointed by the choice and quality of the canapés. What was more, they didn’t have champagne in the Lounge. ‘To die with music,’ say the Russians. If you drink champagne during an earthquake, you’re sure to die with music. In this Lounge I would die without music. So I’d rather stay in my room.

My manager spent the evening cracking jokes and telling funny stories. The Japanese are used to joking about earthquakes. Now they joke about radioactivity. 'I won't live long enough to find out if I've been contaminated,' said an old woman after the concert.

Called the 'Fukushima 50,' they are standing fast and directing seawater onto the fuel in the process of meltdown, risking death. The New York Times reported, 'That kind of response is not out of the normal for some workers in the nuclear energy sector.' Perhaps. But it is also a classic stance in Japanese iconography. The Lost Stand of the Kusunoki Clan, a battle fought at Shijo Nawate in 1348, is one of the enduring images in Japanese iconography, occurring in many woodblock prints (by, among others, Utagawa Kuniyoshi in the 19th century and Ogata Gekko in the early 20th), the doomed warriors defying an immense shower of arrows.

These samurai who were defeated – their wounded leader committed suicide rather than be captured – are inspirational to the Japanese, representing courage and defiance, and the samurai spirit. So the Fukushima 50 are braving 250 millisieverts of radioactivity, five times the permissible dose, in the way the Kusunoki defied enemy arrows.

Paul Theroux, *Newsweek*, March 28 & April 4, 2011

We are all defeated. What does it matter? Napoleon was defeated by the Duke of Wellington at the battle of Waterloo. The Duke of Wellington was defeated by time and a tree standing in Versailles. Much of our region's verdant countryside was destroyed 10 years ago in the hurricane predicted by a famous astrologist. And the astrologist is dying of lung cancer. Death is defeated by samurai.

I gave an interview after the concert. 'What are your plans for the years to come?' asked the journalist.

'I have no plans,' I said. 'I just do what I have to do. I hadn't planned to go to Japan – it was one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions. I stood in for one of my colleagues. Usually I let every moment guide me through the network of the future and the past. What will I remember tomorrow? Where will my house be located? I can finish my job on time if I do my bit.'

The pictures are a random, soiled sampling of years and decades past: a young girl laughing at a festival; a somber couple in black and white; an awkward group posing at Universal Studios. Former residents of the tsunami-ravaged area walk slowly along as they scan the columns of images, which are clipped or taped to long pieces of string on the walls of this muddy gymnasium, a motley testament to a town that no longer exists.

More than a month after the powerful tsunami blasted ashore March 11, boxloads of muddy, torn photo albums arrive throughout the day. They are carried in by soldiers working nearby or locals who roam the streets of their flattened neighborhoods, looking for links to their old lives.

'It's just a way for people to keep their memories,' said Ami Kisara, 24, who found her elementary school yearbook.

The Japan Times, April 17, 2011

There were few people in the restaurant to which my manager invited me after the concert. There was nobody, to be exact. On our way to the restaurant we walked by a hotel which was as dark as the houses near Chernobyl. 'Are you saving electricity?' I asked.

'They want to sell this part of the hotel,' my manager answered. 'Nobody lives there.'

'Where *do* they live? On Jupiter?' I asked.

There was a boy in Russia. He was very ill. He wished to fly from the Earth to Mars. He said he was a creature from outer space. But he was ill and so he couldn't fly from Petersburg to Tokyo or from Moscow to Paris. He was born in Russia. He was doomed to die in Russia.

He thought about a Russian cosmonaut who flew over the Earth, over his hospital. He would say to his mother, 'I wish I could speak to this man.' The doctors said he would die very soon because his fever showed no sign of abating.

The cosmonaut was calling the Earth. He said to his friend, 'Could you drive from Moscow to our star city? I need these images, some photographs. Could you send them to me?'

'Are you sure you want them? Our narrow and bumpy roads. I always say to my wife, "You're treading muck into the carpet with your dirty shoes!" There's nothing but muck, mud and sludge on our roads. Do you want me to tread the dirt into my carpets?'

'I'd like to see the road,' the cosmonaut said.

A doctor called the cosmonaut to say an earthling was dying. 'Could you call him from space?' he asked.

Instead of sludge and muck, the cosmonaut got the photograph of a boy who was dreaming about the stars. 'Why does he think about the stars?' the cosmonaut said to himself. 'Only the Earth is our shrine, our garden.'

He called the boy and the doctor answered the phone. 'I'd like to speak to Oleg,' said the cosmonaut.

'I can't hear what you're saying – there's too much background noise,' said the doctor.

'I'm talking from Venus,' said the cosmonaut.

The boy took the receiver and spoke to the cosmonaut. 'How is Venus?' he asked.

'A beautiful planet,' said the cosmonaut. 'But I prefer the Earth. Don't you?'

'I prefer Venus,' said the boy. 'I prefer Mars and Saturn.'

'The Earth is more beautiful,' said the cosmonaut. 'I envy you. You live in Petersburg. I live on Venus, on Mars, on the Milky Way.'

'Can't I join you?' asked the boy.

‘Why should you live with the Ancient Cosmonaut? I’ll come to your hospital soon. Good luck!’

‘If the growth gets any bigger I’ll have to operate,’ said the doctor.

‘Are they going to operate on him?’ asked the cosmonaut.

The hospital had a two-year waiting list for minor operations. But the boy’s tumour was operated on at once. And the boy spoke to the cosmonaut once more.

‘How are you?’ asked the cosmonaut.

‘I’m fine. How are *you*?’

‘I’m fed up with Venus, Saturn, Mercury and Andromeda. Do you know anything about Andromeda?’

‘No. Is it as beautiful as Venus?’

‘Andromeda is a constellation of the northern sky at about one hour right ascension (the coordinate on the celestial sphere analogous to longitude on the Earth) and 40° north declination (angular distance north of the celestial equator), named after Andromeda of Greek legend.’

‘I see,’ said the boy.

‘I wish I could join you in the hospital,’ said the cosmonaut.

‘Are you ill?’ asked the boy.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Do you have a tumour?’

‘Andromeda’s my tumour.’

‘Is it a benign tumour?’

‘No.’

‘Is it a brain tumour?’

‘Yes.’

The boy and the cosmonaut met on the Earth.

I sent an email to my Japanese translator:

Dear Friend,

Thank you very much for the book you sent me, for your poems. Here are three poems inspired by your poems:

*There are lights I don't see. I don't seek them,
Their darkness and wisdom. There's a pool of wisdom.
I'll bathe in this pool and in the loss I'll find on trees,
In a glass of wine, beneath the debris in Ishinmaki.*

I don't know what to lose. Life

*Tells me, 'I'm a trifle confused about
The arrangements for tonight.'
I've lost the arrangements, today,
Tomorrow and the star I see
From my window. I'll stay on our Earth,
Whatever happens. I'll stay in a marvellous
Cliff-top hotel. I'll stay on one
Of the lesser-known Greek islands.
I'll lie in my bed.*

*I'll lose a half of what I haven't got.
What's one third – the world I don't see
From my window? Whatever
I do see is nothing; or just a shoot,
A fruit I won't eat. I'll see tomorrow
And the eyes of the blind.*

In response to this latest development, the U.S. embassy recommended that Americans in the vicinity observe a 50-mile (80 km) evacuation zone. Alvarez would go further. 'I'd get my butt on an airplane and get out of Japan,' he says.

Time, March 28, 2011

The Americans, who are always far ahead of other nations and countries, don't allow their journalists to risk their lives for the sake of a worthless piece of information: any information, however important, is worthless in comparison with human life. So they watch epoch-making events from balconies situated in the area where bullets neither fly nor even crawl. (One of them used a pile of books as a rest for his telescope.) And these prudent journalists are certainly right because human life is more important than a bullet shot by a rebel or simply by a criminal. But the question on everyone's lips is: 'Why have they become journalists?' It's much better to become a multimillionaire and sit in your office or play a few rounds of golf at the weekend. Or you go on safari and open fire on wild animals. Wild animals are far less dangerous than rebels and criminals, even if they do misbehave occasionally, being scared by your bullets or dogs.

On a windy, chilly day near the top of a volcano known as 'little Mount Fuji', the Ryan family of Florida described the fuss at home before they left.

'People thought we were crazy,' said Kerry Ryan, 52, of Cape Coral, Flo.

'They said we'd come back glowing,' 10-year-old granddaughter Isabelle Ryan added.

But the Ryans, who had never before traveled overseas, decided to stick to their destination: Fukushima.

International Herald Tribune, May 2, 2011

*We went from hospital to hospital and from one contaminated village to another. **We found deformed and genetically mutated babies** in the wards; pitifully sick children in the homes; adolescents with stunted growth and **dwarf torsos**; **foetuses without thighs** or fingers and **villagers who told us every member of their family was sick.***

*This was 20 years after the accident but we heard of many unusual clusters of people with rare bone cancers. One doctor, in tears, told us that **one in three pregnancies in some places was malformed** and that she was overwhelmed by people with immune and endocrine system disorders.*

The Guardian

I have no children. My name will be lost amidst the stars or the debris. A nondescript handlebar is not my name, and yet you really can't tell the difference. You can't tell them apart. What *can* you tell? You can tell it's autumn because the leaves have started to fall. Is it autumn? A lot of leaves are falling from the sky. Are they leaves or unknown names, extraterrestrial visitors? Are they the souls of the dead? 'When we say we will never forget, we mean what we say,' they say.

*One of the 'liquidators' who had helped clean up the plant, told us that **nearly all his colleagues had died or had cancers** of one sort or another, but that **no one had ever asked him for evidence.** There was burning resentment at the way the UN, the industry and ill-informed pundits had played down the catastrophe.*

The Guardian

Even if the radiation is quickly contained, there's already been too much for most people's comfort. Radiation levels are measured in rems – for 'roentgen equivalent man'. The average background exposure that most people absorb simply by living on earth is 2,4 millisieverts (mSv; or one-thousandth of a rem) per year. 'It could account for some of the cases of cancer that appear in the general population that have no other evident causes, like smoking,' says Dr Ira Helfand, a board member at Physicians for Social Responsibility. Medical procedures carry their own radiation load. A CT scan, for example, can expose you to about 10 mSv. In most cases, though, the benefits exceed the dangers.

Time, March 28, 2011

Dinussy lost two kilos: she was worried about the situation.

My manager drove me to the airport. He didn't feel the earthquake I heard and saw at 2.25 a.m. in Tokyo. He was fast asleep. The Japanese are often asleep when earthquakes visit their land. They're right. They're always right.

The Japanese electricians who bravely strung wires this week to all six reactor buildings at a stricken nuclear power plant succeeded despite waves of heat and blasts of radioactive steam. The restoration of electricity at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station stirred hopes that the crisis was ebbing. But nuclear engineers said some of the most difficult and dangerous tasks were still ahead, and time was not necessarily on the side of the repair teams.

International Herald Tribune, March 25, 2011

Ultimately, the fuel could simply burn through the floor and contaminate the ground and water table below. Rising heat and pressure could also cause the containment vessel to rupture. All that is still a possibility, but Bergeron sees some small cause for optimism. 'They've had several days, and that's certainly an advantage,' he says. 'Every day is one more day in the decay curve of the heat. They start to need less and less water to do the cooling.'

Time, March 28, 2011

A young woman guided me to the First Class Lounge. Narita Airport. I know it by heart. But I forget the airports and cars where I spend a lot of time – my youth, my mature years. I can forget whatever doesn't fall in love with my life. I don't forget anything.

'The helicopter pilots who dumped sand on the burning core at Chernobyl knew they were going to die, and they did die,' says Shan Nair, a British nuclear-safety expert who was part of a panel that advised the European Commission on its response to that disaster. 'We don't know what the radiation levels are inside the plant. Reports of a 400-mSv figure suggest that it's not a suicide mission, but it is still a risky operation.' Bergeron disagrees. 'I think some of them will be sacrificed,' he says. 'These are heroic actions, but it's going to be a real challenge to keep some of these people alive.'

Time, March 28, 2011

Still, the elderly who survived the March 11 catastrophe know better than any other Japanese how quickly their homeland can revive itself. My grandmother used to recall the U.S. firebombing of Tokyo during World War II, which reduced half the capital to rubble. The pictures of that era bear a haunting resemblance to the images coming out of northeastern Japan today. Yet within two generations, Japan had transformed itself from a defeated land into

the world's second largest economy. Incomes were spread relatively equally, with little poverty to speak of. Japan took on a contented, comfortable air.

Time, March 28, 2011

There was some good news. Levels of the radioactive isotope found in Tokyo's water supply fell Friday for a second day, officials said, dropping to 51 becquerels per liter, well below the country's stringent maximum for infants.

International Herald Tribune, March 26-27, 2011

Dinussya had a dream. As she walked along the seashore she saw several sorts of seaweed and lots of tiny crabs. All of them were poisoned. She prayed. 'I've been praying to God that the seaweed and fish will make a complete recovery,' she said.

Sirens wailed and people bowed their heads and wept along the devastated Tohoku coast Monday as they marked a month since the historic temblor and tsunami killed up to 25,000 people and triggered a nuclear disaster.

The Japan Times, Tuesday, April 12, 2011

Michiaki Furukawa, a nuclear chemist and board member of the Citizens' Nuclear Information Centre, a watchdog group in Tokyo, said exposure to 1,000 millisieverts an hour of radiation would induce nausea and vomiting, while levels between 3,000 to 5,000 millisieverts an hour could be lethal.

Such high amounts of radiation would clearly make continued recovery work near the reactor very difficult and could hobble attempts to bring the nuclear crisis under control.

International Herald Tribune, March 28, 2011

Several hours after releasing the initial results, the nuclear company said that those readings had been in error, and that retesting had shown negligible amounts of the isotope.

International Herald Tribune, March 28, 2011

I drank a lot of champagne in the Lounge and on the plane. I'll drink a lot of champagne tomorrow. I don't remember what I ate on the plane. I ate something: I'm not dying of starvation.

The company has not yet been able to determine the source of those leaks, and confirming the isotopes' exact levels could take much longer.

International Herald Tribune, March 28, 2011

Asked Sunday about the company's projected timeline for emerging from the crisis, Sakae Muto, a vice president for Tokyo Electric Power, said, 'We don't have a concrete schedule.'

International Herald Tribune, March 28, 2011

About the only thing that was clear was that Japan would be dealing with traumas from the disaster for many years to come.

International Herald Tribune, March 19-20, 2011

In Osaka, a 70-year-old woman survived for four days inside her home, which had been swept off its foundation, until search teams arrived. And an elderly man spent two harrowing days at sea floating on his roof until he was discovered and saved.

Newsweek, March 28 & April 4, 2011

One of the first phrases foreigners pick up when they live in Japan is ganbatte kudasai, because it is so commonly used. Japanese say it in parting, at moments when Americans or Brits might say 'take care' or 'have a good one', but the meaning is different. Translated fairly literally, it means 'please endure it'.

Newsweek, March 28 & April 4, 2011

A lot of people have dedicated their lives to hunting down Hitler's stooges, but 'hundreds, if not thousands' of criminals are still at large, Israeli Nazi-hunter Efraim Zuroff said. Perpetrators and witnesses die off or become unfit to testify. 'A current round of trials may be the last, bringing to an end the bid to seek retribution for the millions of victims' (*The Japan Times*, April 11, 2011). The end of the era.

My theory offers an answer to the question: Why does the Maya calendar end on December 21, 2012? Since it falls on an accurate solstice date, we should suspect that its location is not a random occurrence but was intentional. With this as a working hypothesis, we observe that the date is the end of a 13-Baktun cycle, a calendrical concept that appears occasionally in the inscriptions and dated carving of the Classic Period, always in the context of cosmological Creation Mythology. The end of a 13-Baktun cycle, as recorded at Quirigua and elsewhere, is the end of an Era, otherwise known as a Sun or Age. These Ages, or World Ages, belonged to a World Age doctrine that, as a mythological construct, is described in the Maya Creation Myth (The Popol Vuh). In this way we can see that the Long Count's 13-Baktun cycle and the Maya Creation Myth are both expressions of an underlying World Age paradigm. One is calendrical and the other is mythological, and as we will see they both encode astronomy.

2012 Story, John Major Jenkins

I'm in Versailles. In my letterbox I found a few newspaper clippings; a friend of mine had sent them to put me in the picture about what I had gone through. I know my story better than any friend, any newspaper, any television. All right, I'll watch television once more, tomorrow, next week. They talk about Chernobyl, about the 25th anniversary of the catastrophe. What can they say? They say no one will live on that spot for several millennia. They can't wash the spot as if it were Lady Macbeth's hands. But Lady Macbeth died and thus washed her hands, not her crimes. Chernobyl isn't dying, for all its Shakespearian tragedies. They try to cover the reactor, to bury it under a lid. The lid is too expensive and only a few countries are prepared to pay for it. So there's only a small lid in Chernobyl and the reactor stands in the middle of the universe, half-naked. Some people say, 'The reactor is naked,' but they're wrong. Other people visit the spot but they don't say, 'This looks like a nice spot for a picnic.' Nor do they ring their friends up to say, 'We found a nice spot for a bit of sunbathing.' What *do* they say? I'm not sure they talk about Lady Macbeth after visiting the Chernobyl Castle.

'We have moved on from a situation where we were forced to take emergency measures, to one where we can take measures that were thought out – a more stable stage.'

The Wall Street Journal, Monday, April 18, 2011

'The information we are getting is far from pointing out a picture which we would need to make an immediate assessment. We don't always have the information we would like to have. Measurements are patchy and unclear.'

The Japan Times, Friday, April 8, 2011

The Japanese Health Ministry said Saturday that it had detected elevated levels of radiation in spinach and milk at farms as far as 150 kilometers, or 93 miles, from crippled nuclear reactors.

International Herald Tribune, Monday, March 21, 2011

Whatever you eat, you remain yourself. But what is your self? My right hand was holding some chopsticks throughout my stay in Japan. Those chopsticks would pick up a morsel of fish, a morsel of beef, a morsel of radiation. My right hand is half dead, I suppose. My statement is therefore based on pure supposition. The food is impure, the supposition pure. Why didn't I eat my supposition instead of poisonous fish and meat? Well, I can live without my right hand. Where did I put all these morsels? In my mouth. Is it half dead as well? I can still open my mouth. Why should I open it? To eat another morsel of poisonous food. To utter a few nonsensical words. I can write them down. I shouldn't eat poisonous food. So I don't need my mouth, my teeth and my tongue. There's a hole in my face, in my head. Does my head belong to my self? Is it my self? No. What about my intestines and my bowels? I have trouble with my bowels. So what? They're not my self. They're just my bowels. The long tube

that carries solid waste from my stomach out of my body. The same tube must carry radioactive waste from nuclear plants into the Pacific, the Atlantic and the Black Sea.

The ministry did not make reference to any contaminated farm animals, seafood or fishing grounds. And no food experts from Japan have failed quality tests being done by other countries.

But the perception of contamination, one Japanese agriculture expert said, could cause long-lasting 'brand damage', especially if there were evidence of radiation spreading across Japan.

'If the accident becomes bigger, like Chernobyl, it will damage all the brands and people won't buy any of it, even if it's safe,' said Hiroshi Uchida, a former professor of agricultural science, speaking of Kobe, Sendai and other brands of high-priced, top-quality Japanese beef.

International Herald Tribune, Monday, March 21, 2011

They come and go. Who are they? Everything comes and goes, so do I. I come home after playing some concerts in Japan. And then I go to Japan and eat some fish, some morsels of high-priced, top-quality beef. I was born so I must go away. Hasn't my bullet train come in yet? Where's my bullet? Am I heading away from northern Japan? Where's northern Japan? Everywhere. I was heading out of the room when someone called me back. So I went back to the room.

No one can doubt that the Japanese capacity for endurance, the country's almost spiritual sense of stoicism, has just had its greatest test since wartime defeat and destruction in 1945.

When I look at my actions, I see myself. My actions also look at me and they recognise my face, my hands and intestines. No longer can I become someone else. Then I do become someone else. I start all over again despite causality, determinism and idleness. I say about my life, 'It was just a casual comment, I didn't mean it to be taken so seriously.'

Sudden death on the scale seen in March 11's huge earthquake and tsunami is not something that modern, industrialized, mature societies are used to.

Coming and going. I'm looking for a permanent place to stay. But places, spots and hotels aren't rooted to the spot. To what spot? The journey left me with permanent brain damage. Another brain will appear in the not too distant future. Another turning point will come and go away. On its way, the turning point will meet another turning point. I greet each turning point with a friendly 'Hello!' I greet each end with a smile: the East End, the West End, dead ends, live ends. There was a tank of live lobsters in the restaurant I went to last night.

It's really quite simple. The ballcourt symbolizes the Milky Way, the goal ring is the dark rift, and the game is about the rebirth of the sun. The ball represents the sun, and some ballcourts are aligned with the solstice, proving that, at least for those ballcourts, the solar rebirth occurred on the solstice. That's it. This symbolism was integrated with the Creation Myth, in which One Hunahpu's head represents the gameball. Generally speaking, the ball represents the sun and the game is about the rebirth of the sun. The game was not so much about athletic prowess; it was performed as part of the Creation Myth. It was an eschatological mystery play depicting the transformation and renewal that happens at cycle endings. In this play the goal ring was the place of victory and rebirth. Thus, the ball's passage through the goal ring symbolized the sun's rebirth, its emergence from the underworld and the victory of light over darkness.

2012 Story, John Major Jenkins

Angela Merkel, German Chancellor, has blamed Japan's nuclear crisis, triggered by this month's earthquake, for the 'very painful defeat' suffered by her ruling party in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

Financial Times, Tuesday, March 29, 2011

We don't know what will happen in the next few days or in the next 12 years. What we do know is that it wouldn't hurt to listen to the words of Don Alejandro who said that on Dec. 20, 2012 Mother earth will pass inside the center of a magnetic axis and that it may be darkened with a great cold for 60 or 70 hours and that because of environmental degradation, she may not be strong enough to survive the effects. It will enter another age, but when it does, there will be great and serious events. Earthquakes, marimotos (tsunamis), floods, volcanic eruptions, and great illness on the planet Earth. Few survivors will be left.

2012 Story, John Major Jenkins

Urayasu, a 20-minute train ride away from Tokyo Station, is akin to Westchester County in New York: close enough to the city to commute daily, but far enough away so people can afford to buy more spacious homes.

But when the earthquake struck on March 11, the city, which is also home to Tokyo Disneyland, quickly sank into the ground and became submerged in mud, partly because 75% of it sits on reclaimed land. Tens of thousands of residents in this city with a population of 165,000 were deprived of water and natural gas for weeks following the quake. Tilted houses, warped roads and popped-up manholes are now strewn across the dust-covered city.

The Wall Street Journal, Thursday, April 14, 2011

The Suizenji Jojuen Garden represents the Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido Road.

The fresh springs in the garden release clean, cold water, which flows there from Mt. Aso via underground currents.

In 1636 Tadatoshi, the third Lord of Hosokawa, began its construction as a tea retreat, and he also built a temple here for Priest Gentaku (a former Priest of Rakanji). This temple was called Suizenji.

This beautiful Momoyama-style garden evolved during the reigns of the fourth and the fifth Lords. In all it took about 80 years to complete.

The alignment of the solstice sun and the dark rift had a profound meaning for the ancient Maya calendar makers. A veritable symphony of similar astronomical alignments with the dark rift, involving Jupiter, eclipses, the Moon, Mars and probably Uranus, were tracked through the Classic Period. Their meanings are abundantly clear, supported by specific Long Count date references, and contribute to our own understanding of how the ancient Maya thought about the cycle ending in 2012. King-making rites, the sacred ballgame, time cycles, and a Creation Mythos form different facets of a lost cosmology, ancient beliefs that center around one idea: transformation.

2012 Story, John Major Jenkins

It is a brave person who will die for their beliefs. I'm not a brave person. I won't die for my beliefs or anything else. I'll die and the Earth will carry me somewhere.

But even as a country waited anxiously to see what would happen at the crippled reactor site, ordinary Japanese quietly came to one another's rescue. Just hours after a fire at the Daiichi complex, Kichi Ishikawa drove deserted roads not far from the plant to deliver noodles to the needy. 'I'm just doing what needs to be done,' he said. 'It's nothing special;' for Kenichi Numata, there was little time to even explain his actions, much less process his own sorrow. After the earthquake, he and 1,600 others dashed to the airport in Sendai, the region's largest city, and watched as dozens perished in the surrounding tide of mud and debris. Numata knew that his house had been swept away by the tidal wave. But he had a self-imposed task: organizing dazed locals trying to figure out whether their missing family members might be alive. Just in the past few hours, he had told several people their kin had died. It was not an easy job. 'I'm sorry,' he said, bowing deeply in apology. 'But I had better go back to work.'

Time, March 28, 2011

EPILOGUE

‘Hello, Vassya. Are you sure my picture isn’t in your attic or in your wine cellar?’

‘Look, I’m fed up with these talks. Can’t you talk about something else? About a piece of sculpture, for instance?’

‘I’ve never bought a piece of sculpture.’

‘Do you talk only about what you buy and sell?’

‘Of course not. But the picture must be found. I’m the laughing stock of Moscow and Petersburg.’

‘Because you talk too much.’

‘Why don’t you call the auctioneer?’

‘Why do you call him “auctioneer”? He’s got a first name and a surname.’

‘What’s his first name?’

‘It’s rude to call someone by their first name if they are much older and more important than you.’

‘Okay. What’s his surname?’

‘Gordon.’

‘Could you call him please?’

‘What for?’

‘He might have put the picture in storage.’

‘Hello, Vassya. Did you call Mr Gordon?’

‘I did. He promised to look for your picture. But he’s got so many pictures, you know. How to find yours?’

‘He should look for a plate of oysters.’

‘I’m not sure he likes oysters. Anyway, he can find them in any *brasserie*. Why look for them in a depository?’

‘It’s more serious than you think, so please don’t joke about it.’

‘Okey-dokey. He’ll look for your picture, but I’m not sure he’ll find it. No harm in trying, though. Let’s give him two months.’

‘Why not one week?’

‘Because he’s got too many pictures. And there are probably a lot of oysters among them.’

‘Hello, Vassya. Did you call Gordon?’

‘No. He said he would call me or you.’

‘Can’t you call *him*? No harm in trying.’

‘It’s impolite to call your friends when they don’t expect your call.’

‘He’s dragging his feet, my dear Vassya. We should do *something* about it.’

‘What?’

‘Can’t you call him?’

‘It’s better to talk to him in Brussels. He doesn’t like phone calls. We’ll have to butter him up a bit before he’ll agree to look for your picture.’

‘When are you going to Brussels? I’ll join you.’

‘I don’t know. All I know is I have to go to Brussels and Antwerp. My mother’s dying.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘I hope she won’t die before I come.’

‘I hope so too.’

‘Hello, Vassya. What’s the news?’

‘My mother hasn’t died yet.’

‘And what about my picture?’

‘Your picture’s your picture. I wonder where it is now.’

‘What about Gordon?’

‘I’ll go to Belgium in the near future.’

‘How near is this future?’

‘I should pay my taxes first. We don’t live in a tax haven, you know. In two months’ time perhaps.’

‘I can’t wait so long.’

‘You’ve waited for six years already. Why not wait for another two months?’

‘I can’t wait.’

‘Okay. Let’s call Gordon. I’ll speak to him and you’ll listen to my voice. Don’t hang up. What’s his phone number, by the way?’

‘Isn’t it too late?’

‘Of course not. I can call him till eleven. And it’s half-past nine. What’s his phone number?’

‘Just a second. 322-4067083.’

‘Just a second. Hello, my dear. How are you today? Wonderful. And your husband? In the attic? Wonderful. I’m waiting. Hello, my prince. Are you all right? What about the picture? You know what picture I’m talking about. No. *Let’s Have a Game of Cards* is my picture. You should look for oysters. And what should I say to the owner? I’m afraid he won’t go to hell. Actually I’m not sure about oysters. But there are no cards, not a single pack of cards. So don’t look for cards. No, he’s not in the frozen food business. I know your firm does a lot of business with overseas customers. Wait a minute – someone’s knocking on the door. I’ll call you tomorrow. Bye-bye. Did you hear my voice?

‘I did.’

‘So now you know I don’t have your picture.’

'Hello, Marussia. How are you?'

'You know how I am.'

'All right. Could you please call Gordon?'

'Who is Gordon?'

'The auctioneer.'

'Your lost picture again?'

'I haven't found it yet.'

'All right. What's his phone number?'

'Don't you have it?'

'I'm not in the habit of rubbing shoulders with such people.'

'02-4067083. Please try to find out if he talked to Vassya yesterday. And talk to him about the receipt. He should have given a receipt to whoever took the picture.'

'Hello, Marussia. Did you call Gordon?'

'I did, several times. First I called him around 11 a.m. He was in a meeting. He said I could call him around 1 p.m. He sounded angry and rude. I didn't want to call him again, but I did. Why should I let you down? He said his charwoman had given the picture to a man or a woman. "To Jeremiah de Durdum," he said. "Or to his secretary," he added. "Jeremiah has nothing to do with it," I said. He said, "What a pity – the picture was *so* beautiful." Then he talked to me about his furniture. Apparently they are moving out of Brussels because it's too expensive. I asked him why he talked about his furniture. He said some pieces had got lost. "You know, furniture and pictures get lost sometimes. Very often in fact." He talked nonsense of course. What else could he do? By the way, he said he hadn't talked to Vassya for several months.'

'Did you ask him about the receipt?'

'He said he'd never given any receipt to anybody.'

'I know a Russian oligarch who goes to Petersburg whenever I play there. I told him the story of the picture. He said he had a lot of assistants everywhere.'

'Assassins?'

'They wouldn't *kill* Gordon and Vassya.'

'They shouldn't beat them up either. All this is beneath your dignity.'

'Mr Gordon?'

'Yes.'

'Good afternoon. I called you a few months ago about my lost picture.'

'I remember you.'

'You haven't found it yet, have you?'

‘I haven’t.’

‘Has Vassya called you?’

‘He hasn’t.’

‘Hello, Vassya. Gordon said you hadn’t called him.’

‘Now you know he’s always lied to you.’

‘I don’t. Why should he lie about your phone call? He has every right to speak to you on the phone and even in his office, on a beach, in a disco. It’s not forbidden to speak to you, is it?’

‘He’s always telling lies. That man can’t be trusted.’

‘Professional liars never lie gratuitously.’

‘How much did you pay? Never mind. You’re not starving to death, are you? Do you really need the amount of money you paid for the picture? If you’re hungry, come to my castle – I’ll give you a sandwich. You can even stay here, if you wish. But why do you hold me responsible for the picture stolen by someone else? Incidentally, it might have disappeared on its own. When I left Antwerp, I put three pictures of mine in a gallery. And the gallery was wiped off the face of the Earth, along with my pictures. Did I complain? I didn’t. I forgot about the pictures, the gallery and the boys who worked there. I never speak of them. Why should I? Don’t ever talk to me about your picture again. Do you know the word “chemotherapy”?’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’ve got something I shouldn’t keep inside my body. A stress-related illness. People under a lot of stress may die of cancer. Your picture, your picture. All this stress is dragging you down. You may die of cancer too. There’s still no cure for cancer, you know.’

‘I’m sure Gordon has nothing to do with the disappearance of my picture.’

‘Are you accusing me of theft? It’s beneath your dignity.’