Elena Chizhova

Little ZINNOBERS

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

London

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TRANSLATED BY CAROL ERMAKOVA

AD VERBUM

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LITTLE ZINNOBERS

by Elena Chizhova

Translated from the Russian by Carol Ermakova

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Introduction © 2018, Rosalind Marsh

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Translator's Note

Elena Chizhova's *Little Zinnobers* is not an easy read, and translating it has been no easy task either. Chizhova's style and content are both kaleidoscopic. She delves deep, exploring themes such as ageing and loss of innocence, the individual versus society, and, of course, how learning another language alters our perception of the world, providing us with another filter, another formula we can apply as we evaluate the events of our seemingly ordinary everyday lives.

Yet Chizhova never labours her point; her message is conveyed subtly, almost by-the-by, in throwaway remarks and sidelong glances, veiled references and allusions. As translator, it has been my task to pick up on these hints and gently weave the thematic threads into the narrative's tapestry as it unfolds. Some allusions to political events or literary figures would, I felt, be lost on an English-speaking reader, so I have added footnotes here and there to clarify some points while honouring the understated nature of Chizhova's prose.

One stylistic device Chizhova is particularly fond of is the extended metaphor. Perhaps the clearest example of this surfaces in the chapter entitled 'Incomplete Circle Dance. The image of the incomplete circle recurs throughout this chapter – where it takes on a very graphic form as the children literally circle through the hall – but the image echoes throughout the story as a whole, too, reflecting the cyclical nature of life. As a teacher, F. is well aware of this; she sees an unending stream of pupils waltzing through her classroom doors, then out into the big wide world where they 'age,' completing the incomplete circle. For a translator,

extended metaphors pose a challenge as the image must light up in the reader's consciousness creating a pattern of connections without dazzling or becoming ponderous.

Sometimes Chizhova turns to more simple repetition as a stylistic device to reinforce her motifs and metaphors, encouraging the reader to recognise the image and what it stands for each time it crops up. Take the colour red, for instance, so readily associated with Communism. It is present in the school, in the flag, in Maman's dress, in Marina's lipstick, and – perhaps – even in the title, since Hoffman's hero is called Zinnober, which literally means 'cinnabar,' a red pigment. In translating, I felt it important to keep this repetition of exact words or phrases – which sometimes occur close together, or sometimes resurface after several chapters – so they run through the novel as a recognisable beat alerting the reader to the motif they represent.

Surprisingly, one of the trickiest translation challenges was rendering the title into English, especially bearing in mind that, as one of the Glagoslav team put it: "It's pretty straightforward in Russian." Chizhova's original title is *Kroshki Zaches*, which literally means 'Tiny Zacheses' and is itself an allusion to ETA Hoffman's nineteenth century tale *Klein Zaches genannt Zinnober,* translated into Russian as *Kroshka Zaches, po prozvaniyu Zinnober* and into English (by Michael Haldane) as *Little Zaches, Great Zinnober*. Russian readers are far more familiar with Hoffman's tale than their English-speaking counterparts; indeed, one TV programme specialising in political satire even based a 10-minute sketch on the tale, poking fun at Vladimir Putin and the other politicians. As Rosalind Marsh has since picked up on this in her paper, I shall not develop the point here.

Chizhova sees both the Soviet Union and F.'s pupils as 'Zacheses' in that they are lauded as something they are not. The name Zaches jars on the English ear so it was decided to use Zinnober instead, which left the problem of 'tiny ones.' By extension, 'kroshki' can also refer to small children, so 'poppets' seemed the obvious choice, especially bearing in mind the historical usage of this word: 'a small figure of a human-being

used in sorcery and witchcraft,' a nuance that sits well with the rather dark undertones of Hoffman's tale. But Nicholas Kotar, the American editor who worked on this translation, pointed out that even educated American readers would assume 'poppet' was a misspelling of 'puppet' and so this idea was dropped, to be replaced by the more neutral 'little.' And this nicely brings us back to Haldane's title. Many references will be lost to those unfamiliar with *Little Zaches, Great Zinnober*, and it is beyond the scope of this brief note to elucidate them here. Suffice to say, parallels can be drawn between F. with her golden locks and the Fairy Rosabelverde with her golden comb, and perhaps also between B.G. and Hoffman's wandering magician Prosper Alpanus. Interestingly, there is a clear link to Shakespeare in Hoffman's tale, too; Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* resonate with Rosabelverde and Prosper Alpanus, who in turn suggests Prospero in *The Tempest*.

In Chizhova's *Little Zinnobers*, F. uses Shakespeare to create an inner world of truth where there is no place for falsehood or the banal, a world underpinned by honesty, loyalty and inner freedom for both the teacher and her pupils, where the children, if not innocent, are at least protected from 'ageing.' The language of this unfettered microcosm is English, and for the first time in their lives the children are free to speak openly of honour, history, the eternal, and love. And indeed, love is another topic Chizhova explores, mainly through the rather unconventional relationship that develops between F. and her pupil, our narrator.

Chizhova's clipped style proved to be an ongoing challenge. Russian grammar allows for the omission of pronouns. Questions and verb tenses are formed without auxiliary verbs, while definite and indefinite articles are not present. This means that Russian is naturally less wordy than English, neater, shorter, and – in Chizhova's case – elliptic. I have sought to mirror this as much as possible, with short sentences and the omission of personal pronouns wherever admissible, and I hope this rather staccato effect serves to keep a racy pace without sacrificing meaning.

In other sections, however, Chizhova changes tack, alternating these clipped passages with protracted, potentially cumbersome sentences (take, for instance, the novel's opening paragraph). Sometimes, these simply had to be split in English.

Another slight modification I introduced was speech marks. In the original, the combination of curt phrases and lack of punctuation made verbal exchanges hard to follow. By adding "-" I hope the reader will keep abreast of these quick exchanges.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my husband Dmitry Ermakov for his invaluable contribution to this translation, and of course to Elena herself for her many helpful suggestions.

Carol Ermakova
North Pennines, Spring 2017

Little
ZINNOBERS

THE WITNESS

Now at forty with – if we are to take the sages at their word – the productive part of my life coming to an end and giving way to the contemplative stage, I am of sound mind and memory, qualities which she admired in herself, so I shall meekly set about writing her story, the story of her life, a small part of which was lived before my eyes, the larger part of which is known to me through her tales, which *in this case*, are a reliable source. However, having hardly begun, in other words having resolutely said what I was saying, I feel the need to give further explanations, since almost every word of my first long but relatively laconic sentence is already germinating deep within. Sprouting little roots. Perhaps my character is at fault here, or maybe it is the contemplation that comes with my age. Contemplation, it seems, is no stranger to imagination and is capable of transforming my first and overly long sentence into a pot of peat, into which, shortly before Easter, having scratched out little hollows with my fingers, I drop some wheat grains, so that they will sprout and take root in time for the Feast. A word is a little grain, with a little shoot and a little root.

Or maybe I am betrayed by my habit of comparing myself to her, a habit quite illicit, yet of which I am fully aware. This habit has taken root so strongly that I myself (and no other phrases or words have any bearing here) stand like a sprouting grain, her fingerprints on its burst husk. Sprouted, but ears never formed. Well, who expects an Easter grain to bear fruit?! To form an ear, you must be tossed into the soil of a real field, a field riddled with voracious weeds, so that you wrestle with them under the real, cruel, life-giving sun so that, victorious, you shoot up triumphant

ears. Or you lose. In other words, that busy life on which people squander their most glorious years engulfs you, so that, having crossed my current threshold, they look back on the years they have lived with either bitterness or pride, wallowing in well-earned contemplation, regretting what never was, or savouring their accomplishments. Both are beyond my reach.

But don't be misled by my confession that I was not graced by the sun. I was graced by a different sun; other, harsh rays caressed my wheat ears. My life could not be called idyllic—the epithet 'idyllic' does not/ cannot be applied to my life—at any rate, not without a strong dose of bitter humour. And even if an idyll could be hinted at, then only to the exact extent to which she herself permitted idylls. She did not permit them at all, generally, with a harshness not easily married with her tact. On paper. But in life, these two – harshness and tact – were firmly fused: the unshakeable cornerstone. I will not excavate the reasons why my roots did not get their fair share of fertile soil; suffice it to say that, as I prepare to devote myself to the contemplation that my present age permits, I understand and accept it is unearned. Instead, let me continue my comparison with the Easter shoot: twin grains sometimes find their way into pots of peat, and they sprout with the double shoots of pride and bitterness.

She never taught me meekness. That was probably the one thing she would never have attempted to teach me. She was not meek herself, not in the slightest. Had she known what would become of me, she would have nipped both shoots in the bud without more ado. Then they would not have united, twining into a single shoot: meekness. She simply ran out of time. So, ironically, it was she who taught me meekness, thanks to the slowness of her fingers, a mission which had defeated all others, try as they might to instil this quality in me with heavy-handed methods.

Here I must mention one peculiarity: I can no longer speak her name. I blame this entirely on myself. Her name would trip with casual ease from a hundred lips, lips which have not yet lost that ability. But mine… For many years, they were no exception, but now my lips are locked tight, retaining

only the pronoun, and having transmitted only one letter to my hand: F. My eyes, though, which read her postcards, were more familiar with the letter Ф,[1] for that is how she signed them, until that last day when, taking her own photograph instead of a postcard, she changed her signature.

A froth of pink lilac, the colour of the dawn. Every year the bush under her little balcony increases its breadth. The balcony is small, like everything else about her flat. The empty balcony, painted white, where she would stand and wave goodbye to me. She looked so small, dressed in her large pink cardigan. We had been talking about something, and, as I walked away and glanced back, she continued the conversation, leaning over the rails slightly, calling out: I am a witness. And quickly pounded her chest.

I can recall that whole conversation if need be, though I only *remember* one phrase. Just before I left we had been talking about most mundane matters (I'm already beginning to recall), which means we were speaking Russian. But the high words, the balcony words, were uttered in English. Language is the simplest way of explaining. I always memorized whatever she said in English. She was equally fluent in both languages, but her Russian was slightly washed out at the edges, like a watercolour. Her English, however, was like a fine, delicate pen and ink drawing. Apart from a few school years, I never replied to her in English – maybe out of fear of damaging those fine pen lines – so our dialogues were usually Anglo-Russian: my Russian oil painting and her English like a fine drawing etched on top.

So be it. Let this duality of language be the reason I remember that balcony again and again, and then after it, those places where she – I want to say – 'lingered.' No, she never decorated them; her walls were always bare, but now, years later, I remember the bareness of those walls like the emptiness of a white screen. The whitish smoothness of a canvas brought to life by her presence; now that the film is over, the screen is blank.

[1] Ф – Cyrillic form of 'F'.

That's why I see, and will always see, the white balcony: the crooked door and the little wonky cupboard that she laughed about, tapping her head with her finger in an English gesture: 'crazy.' My eyes, my weak eyes, won't be covered. Even if they grow dry, or red, even if little black dots fly or white poplar fluff and yellow snowflakes float above the city scrub. I am a witness. Witnesses don't cry. They stand on white balconies on the very top floor.

NEW WORLD

Her mother was a *dvornik*, a road-sweeper-cum-caretaker, and never learnt to speak Russian properly. Both in good old St. Petersburg tradition, considering her nationality. Hence the Russian language spoken by all those around the daughter, both inside the communal flat and outside, was not so much a mother tongue, as an 'other tongue.' It was her mother's mother tongue which resounded above her cradle. Russian, not native *from birth*, became so later. The mother spoke to the daughter in her own mother tongue but the daughter, having reached the age of self-consciousness – i.e. about six – responded to her solely in Russian. The mother took this for stubbornness, mulishness, and maybe she was right. But, even so, it was a particular stubbornness which had nothing in common with the ordinary stubbornness of daughters. Language was dictated by environment. A phenomenon known to emigrants and their children, who are familiar with this stubbornness.

Her mother was born in a distant, non-Russian village and dodged the label 'immigrant' only because St. Petersburg and her native land were part of the same empire then, and when her mother entered this world, no-one alive was responsible for this. Be that as it may, to *some extent* her mother was still an immigrant since she never mastered the imperial tongue well enough, and so stood little chance of ever getting an easier or cleaner job. The daughter was not an immigrant, neither historically nor in fact, but the mother's life, so like an immigrant's, inevitably left its mark on her own. They lived – and here it is not a St. Petersburg tradition but a Leningrad one which comes into play – in a small room in a large, semi-basement

communal flat. The mother's life, so like an immigrant's, kept the daughter forever on her toes. She was the mother's ears in the world around her. The mother could not pick up the whispers, rapid mutterings or words spoken 'into thin air' in the communal kitchen. The mother did not ask, of course, and the daughter did not pass the conversations of others on to her, but whereas in normal – i.e. monolingual – families a child does not listen in on the conversations of adults, silently relying on its parents for that, here, the daughter could not rely on her mother, linguistically. In a world which spoke a language not quite accessible to her, the mother could not fulfil the role of mediator between daughter and world. The daughter met the world head on. Being the younger of the two parties, she was obliged to converse with the world in its own language.

At the same time, the world was unfolding through the vastness of the Russian language, which she met head on, without maternal mediation, and the Russian language itself became the world. Actually, it was merely a fragment of a much larger world, but she had no inkling of that back then. Like Columbus. Due to the limited knowledge of the Europeans, who had not yet reached the necessary historical age, Columbus's world did not include either of the Americas. Columbus set sail for known shores but discovered unknown ones. Be that as it may, the cry: "Land!" held a sharp joy, independent of the land to which it referred. It was joy at land itself, *in a pure sense*. And, growing up in *such* a family, it was *this* kind of joy she knew. At the age of six, she came across *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer in a Russian translation. It was 1940, the pre-war winter. Reading it induced this joy, and she understood: everyone should know Chaucer. Small in terms of age as well as constitution, she had to climb onto a kitchen stool – where else but the kitchen could she read this aloud to *everyone*, so they could listen and laugh? She read it to them just as Columbus had told his compatriots of mysterious lands he had seen, of the New World he had discovered. I imagine they listened half-heartedly, not slackening their kitchen bustle for even a second: lighting the wood stove, splitting wooden tapers, boiling the

washing in cauldrons and rubbing it in basins, shuffling potatoes in frying pans and clattering as they washed up in the sink. None of them, I suspect, turned from their bucket or basin to look at her, to sit and listen. Yet she took no offence; yes, she was opening a new world for them, but they, with their basins, jars, and frying pans, were her world, too, a world once large but from which she would sail away aboard the St. Mary, then sail back. Had she not sailed away and then returned, she would never have suspected that, before becoming Mary, one must long and patiently bear being Martha. That is how she began: under the rumble of basins, the crackle of frying potatoes and the roar of logs burning in the stove. The winter of 1940 was rowdy.

It was the next year that a silence worthy of Chaucer fell. The voices and basins quietened as the months passed, the roar of the stove faded into hungry memory, and the thrumming of drops in the metal sink changed to the measured drip of a metronome. That winter, she read Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter*. To herself. Shining eyes met her there, eyes that bewitched her. She could not read about these eyes aloud to them: the *blokadniki*[2] had their own idea about shining eyes. Just as Columbus's compatriots had had their own ideas about 'shining,' too: the glitter of gold. She went hungry, drank hot water and became deceptively plump. This deception tricked a terrifying man with shining eyes; she ran from him through the city's wasteland. The *blokadniki's* idea of shining was correct.

Having finished school – I know next to nothing about her school years – and having learnt that others' concepts, however correct, remain alien nevertheless, she decided go to university. This decision was a gargantuan leap out of the mother's past. Had her past listeners, barely able to read, heard about this earlier, they would have considered her either crazy or a heroine. It was not the kind of act which provokes jealousy; you can only

[2] A reference to the Siege of Leningrad which lasted 872 days from September 1941 to January 1944. Known in Russian as the 'Leningrad Blockade,' a *blokadnik* is someone who lived in the city at that time. The siege caused devastating famine, with over 600,000 residents starving to death. Cannibalism ensued, and children were particularly at risk, although only 44 cases were officially registered.

be envious of something within the realm of possibility, and for them, in their semi-basement flat, this was well beyond that realm. Her deed – for the decision was followed by the act – inspired impartial amazement, brief gossip, and alienation: she was becoming 'an apple from a different orchard.' She succeeded first time, and this successful attempt, while not exactly reconciling certain aspects of life around her, became something akin to an antidote, as if, once and for all, it gave her certainty: that which is important is possible. Ever after, though never tolerant of vileness, when faced with it, she would, as it were, swallow a secret potion known only to herself: "Even so…"

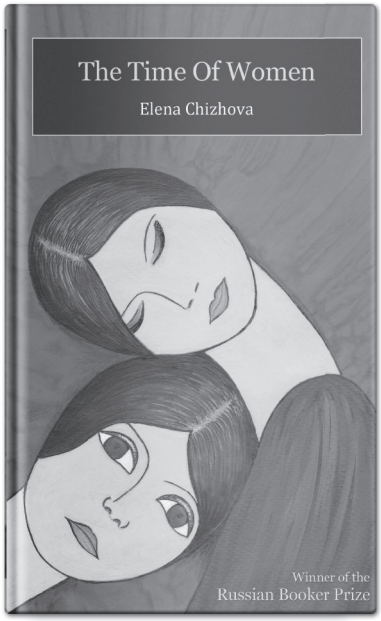
There were no longer any St. Petersburg lecturers left in Leningrad University in the days when she matriculated, for a variety of reasons. Still, among the random people who had replaced pre-revolutionary professors on the principle of natural selection in a proletarian state, from time to time, one did come across their students, who had managed to receive knowledge first hand. Besides these, there were also lecturers who succeeded in siphoning and furthering knowledge by themselves, thanks to their own efforts, intelligence and talent. Unlike students for whom the university bench was a forgone conclusion, or whose parents had booked a place for them mentally, so to speak, as sons of the landed gentry were once registered in the regiment, she never could *get used to it*. The propensity which affects all students to a greater or lesser degree – namely, that one cannot permanently rejoice in what comes to pass partly thanks to your own efforts, yes, but nevertheless 'according to plan'– had no hold over her whatsoever since the trajectory of that astonishing gargantuan leap from the mother's past continued far beyond the university gates. The run-up required had been herculean, congenial, so where other students were *already* walking, she was *still* flying, unable to touch down.

In the eyes of the above-mentioned rare lecturers, this flight was a quite natural state; they were themselves flying, flitting in the scholarly empyreans, and what shone in her eyes did not need to be put to the test. She studied

as though she were still running through the city's wasteland, fleeing from the blockade cannibal, the only difference being that in her childhood she had been running away, whereas now she was running towards what she saw beyond the wasteland, and it was coming more sharply into focus with each university year. They were teaching her as though they were standing under the saving shadow of the building she was headed for and could see that man behind her. This trajectory was more than enough to burst open the doors of the First English School, flying in from the street straight after graduation, which, again, was unheard of: prospective teachers for this school were selected from higher echelons, almost at the level of the *raikom* party committee.

The Time Of Women

by Elena Chizhova



Life is not easy in the Soviet Union at mid-20th century, especially for a factory worker who becomes an unwed mother. But Antonina is lucky to get a room in a communal apartment that she and her little girl share with three old women. Glikeria is the daughter of former serfs. Ariadna comes from a wealthy family and speaks French. Yevdokia is illiterate and bitter. All have lost their families, all are deeply traditional, and all become "grannies" to little Suzanna. Only they secretly name her Sofia. And just as secretly they impart to her the history of her country as they experienced it: the Revolution, the early days of the Soviet Union, the blockade and starvation of World War II.

The little girl responds by drawing beautiful pictures, but she is mute. If the authorities find out she will be taken from her home and sent to an institution. When Antonina falls desperately ill, the grannies are faced with the reality of losing the little girl they love – unless a stepfather can be found before it is too late. And for that, they need a miracle.

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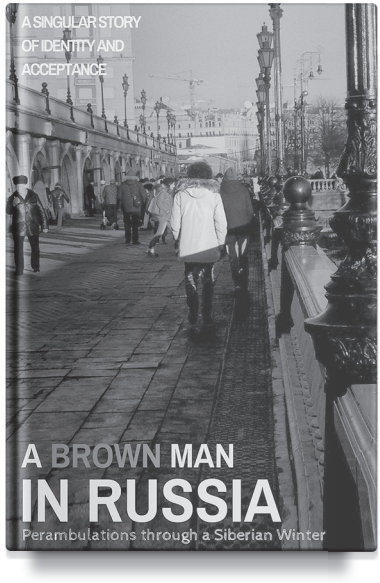
A Brown Man in Russia - Perambulations Through A Siberian Winter

by Vijay Menon



A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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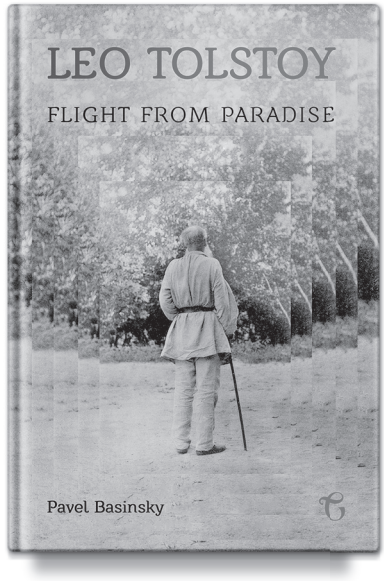
Leo Tolstoy – Flight from Paradise

by Pavel Basinsky



Over a hundred years ago, something truly outrageous occurred at Yasnaya Polyana. Count Leo Tolstoy, a famous author aged eighty-two at the time, took off, destination unknown. Since then, the circumstances surrounding the writer's whereabouts during his final days and his eventual death have given rise to many myths and legends. In this book, popular Russian writer and reporter Pavel Basinsky delves into the archives and presents his interpretation of the situation prior to Leo Tolstoy's mysterious disappearance. Basinsky follows Leo Tolstoy throughout his life, right up to his final moments. Reconstructing the story from historical documents, he creates a visionary account of the events that led to the Tolstoys' family drama.

Flight from Paradise will be of particular interest to international researchers studying Leo Tolstoy's life and works, and is highly recommended to a broader audience worldwide.

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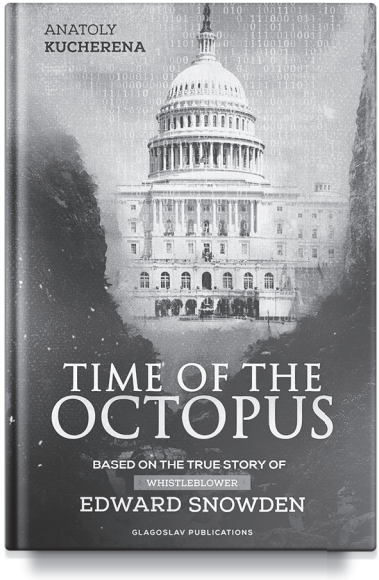
TIME OF THE OCTOPUS

by Anatoly Kucherena



A frightening, prophetic vision of our world...
In Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport, fugitive US intelligence officer Joshua Kold is held in limbo, unable to leave the airport's transit area. He is on the run, after blowing the lid off the terrifying reach of covert American global surveillance operations. Will the Russian authorities grant him asylum, or will they hand him over the clutches of the global octopus eager for revenge for his betrayal?
As this gripping psychological and political thriller unfolds, a Moscow lawyer takes Kold to a secret bunker and grills him intently on just why he did it. Upon Kold's answers hang not only his own fate, but much, much more as the true extent of this chilling 1984 world unfolds.
Anatoly Kucherena is the famous Russian lawyer who took on the case of the American whistleblower Edward Snowden whose revelations about US intelligence operations sent shockwaves around the world in 2013. Time of the Octopus is a fiction, but it is based on Kucherena's own interviews with Snowden at Sheremetyevo, and provides the basis for Oliver Stone's major Hollywood movie 'Snowden' starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, one of the movie events of 2016...

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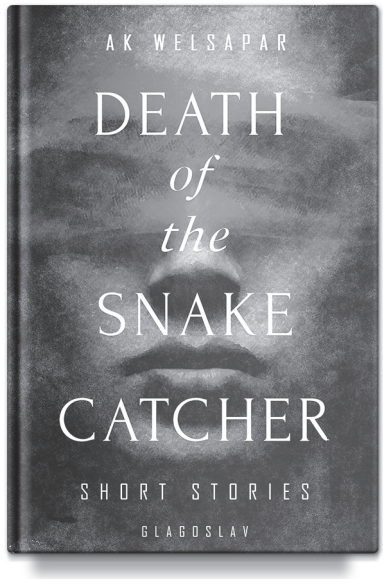
Death of the Snake Catcher

by Ak Welsapar



This book features people from one of the most closed countries of today's world, where the passage of time resembles the passage of a caravan through the waterless desert. This world has been recreated by a true-born son of that mysterious country, a Turkmen who, at the will of fate, has now been living for a quarter of a century in snowy Scandinavia. Is that not why two different worlds come together in *Ryazan horseradish and Tula gingerbread*, to come apart in *Love in Lilac*, in which a student from the non-free world falls in love with a girl from the West?

In the story *Death of the Snake Catcher*, an old snake catcher meets one on one with a giant cobra in the heart of the desert. In the dialogue between them the author unveils the age-old interdependence of Man and untamed nature, where the fear and mistrust of the strong and the hopes and apprehensions of the weak change places but co-exist as ever. *Egyptian night of fear*, in which a boy goes to an Eastern bazaar and falls into the clutches of depraved forces, is created in the writer's characteristic style of magical realism, while the novella Altynai celebrates first love, radiant and sad, pure as virgin snow.

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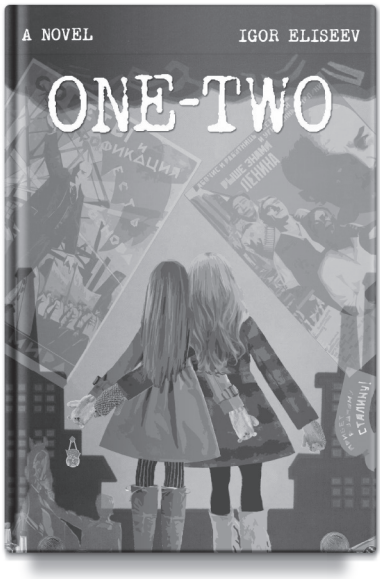
One-Two

by Igor Eliseev



Two conjoined babies are born at the crossroads of two social worldviews. Girls are named Faith and Hope. After spending their childhood in a foster home and obtaining primary education, they understand that they are different from other people in many respects. The problems of their growing up are exacerbated with permanent humiliations from society.

Finally, fortune favors them, slightly opening a door to happiness – separation surgery that theoretically can be performed in the capital. And sisters start their way, full of difficulties and obstacles. Will they be able to overcome a wall of public cynicism together with internal conflicts among themselves? Will they find a justification for their existence and accept it? Searching for the answers to these and many other questions constitutes the essence of this novel...

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