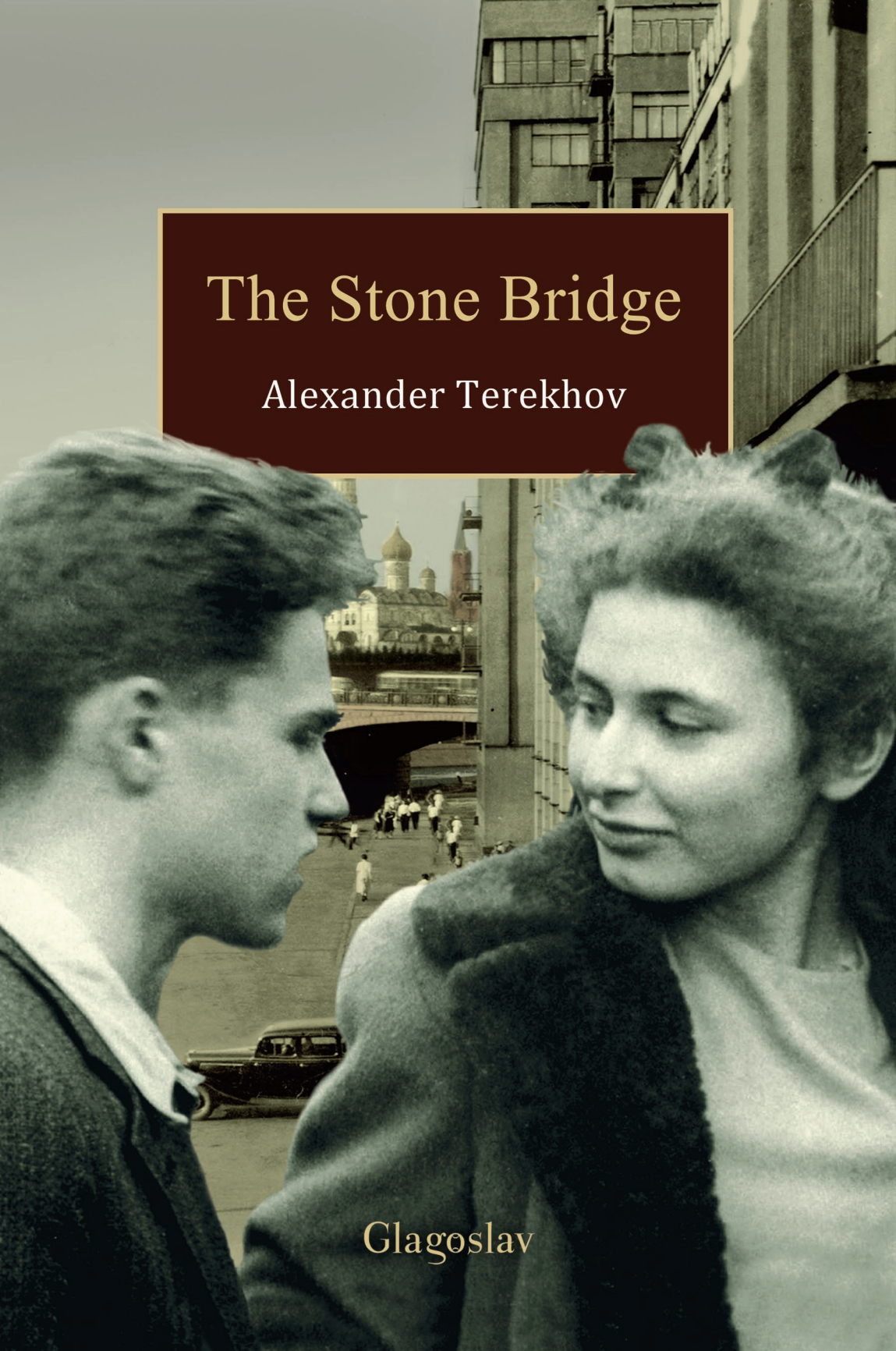
The Stone Bridge

Alexander Terekhov



Glagoslav

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by Alexander Terekhov

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THE FINNISH SKIER

I'VE NEVER WON ANYTHING IN MY LIFE.

On Sundays, there weren't many French, German or English tourists. The tour buses brought Poles, and uniformly faceless Chinese in baggy trenches came prowling. And what did they want? Gzhel ceramics, headscarves, matryoshka dolls… Serious customers came to Izmailovo market on Saturdays. One didn't expect much on a Sunday.

I nodded to my neighbor Rakhmatullin — he dealt in iron goods: samovars from the Batashov Company, old weights, padlocks, irons, bells and Melchior cup-holders from the old Kolchugino factory with the Kremlin depicted on them. Watch my things, the nod said, and I plodded to the steps leading down to the flea market.

There, on wind-blown, unlit wooden balconies, tramps, orphans rejected by school and proud old ladies laid out on blankets and wax cloths the refuse of humanity scavenged and stolen from abandoned and blighted buildings: bald dolls with rolled-up eyes, kerosene lamps, tin boxes that had contained sweets and tea from "Vysotsky and Co" with the famous tall ship on the logo, Christmas decorations made of colored cardboard, and scraps of wigs that looked like scalps. You could also find tin soldiers, but they were a rarity, there were mainly just plastic soldiers and toy monsters from Kinder Surprise eggs, but last June I had bought the vintage toy set "Soldiers of the Revolution" in excellent condition for a mere 300 rubles here, and sold them online on Molotok for 200 dollars. Locals repeated a story about an old lady who was once seen here taking "whatever I can get for them"

for Red Cossacks from the 1940s, which sell for 1,500 dollars each on the Internet. Not many people have seen the Cossacks even in photographs, and no one knows for certain how many and which ones there are in a set, and she didn't even have 400 rubles to pay for a place. Why couldn't I ever run into an old lady like that?

Around Sunday lunchtime, the hot-shot souvenir sellers, connoisseurs of icons and porcelain, would shut up their goods under iron shutters and come down to the flea market with a lazy, lordly gait to look for an easy catch, to pick over the washed-up rubbish while the locals kept a nervous, hostile silence. There would never be anything left, almost never.

"Coffee, please!" I called out to the Vietnamese woman in a white apron who was pushing a cart loaded with thermoses, shrink-wrapped sandwiches and a crockpot of sausages. For 10 rubles I got a steaming plastic cup, and took two more steps, before I heard Rakhmatullin call out:

"The owner's coming… Vasilich, you've got a customer! Come back here!"

Just as there are borrowed days in spring that smell of autumn, this September Sunday was paying back its debts with sun and blue sky, as if the summer were taking a backward look.

A guy with a foreign-looking face enhanced by just the right amount of tan was looking at my soldiers. He grabbed one and held it up right in front of his nose, turning it to examine it closely. Which one did he grab there, this sunburnt guy with a black coat over a white shirt, his striped scarf tied in a gay-looking knot under his throat? I looked closer.

"*Hyello! Eett ees skyer solzher of Feenneesh vor. Eexcluzeev. Vahn hahndreed dollars,"* I said, in my best English.

The guy shook his head in amazement, making his black curls bounce around his face.

"Would you just look at this!" He called out, in Russian, to a friend who had the burly appearance of the guy's driver-cum-bodyguard. "A hundred!" and he placed the soldier on the shabby counter to have a better look.

The faceless tin skier in his camouflage coat, covered with flecks of green paint, had his right foot forward in an unhurried movement. He had gloves, ski poles, boots that had long lost their black color, and a machine gun slung over his stomach with the muzzle pointing upward… The helmet, buffed by a thousand touches, gave off a dull-lead gleam. One of my favorite soldiers. I don't like them all equally. I don't like the Bryansk Sailors on Parade for example, or the Battle of Kulikovo set, the Astretsovo Cavalry, or cavalry figures in general. But I collect all the soldiers of the Soviet Army, in 1:35 and 1:48 scales — that's the name of my enterprise, Soldiers of the USSR.

The driver tore himself away from Rakhmatullin's samovars, and looked from a respectful distance at his boss's whimsical behavior.

"A skier from the Finnish war. That soldier, as it happens, was manufactured in *nineteen thirty-nine,*" I said, switching back to Russian, and sipping my coffee. The guy studied the bait with a beatific smile on his face. He would be reminiscing now: as a child he probably pushed a tiny skier just like this across deserts of summer dust, amid grass forests, avoiding the dried shoelace forms of desiccated earthworms. "One of these comes along every year or so. I wouldn't sell my own, my friend asked me to — he needs money to buy medicine. A Canadian bought one like this on E-bay last year for two hundred. It's one hundred euros for foreigners, but I'll do a hundred bucks for you. Take it or leave it."

The guy put the soldier in his palm again and brought it up to his face — the way people stare at a medallion with a miniature portrait on it in good-hearted black-and-white films — then he tossed it up in the air and caught it, clenching it firmly with his fingers.

"Careful. You break it, you pay for it."

"And what about you?" the jerk smiled thoughtfully. He was a young man of around twenty-five, with a large-lipped mouth and dark empty eyes. Scum like that look older than their age when they're young, and then younger when they get old. "You dress like that… Like a soldier. Are you a soldier? Will you fight?"

There was something forced about his speech, as if he had to remember how to say things in Russian. I wondered if he was drunk.

Abruptly, he leaned across the counter and took the collar of my dirty coat in his free hand. He chuckled — he was very much amused by the stars on the coat's gold buttons.

"You have the stars," he muttered. "You're the Red Army! Then you must fight."

I looked sideways at the driver — get your moron away from me! — and chuckled along:

"You can buy everything. A coat. A cap with a badge. A holster with a pistol. And a document holder with a photo. As long as you've got dollars. Have you got dollars?"

He let go and immediately scooped up a bunch of yellowed books from the stall. One by one, they slipped out of his grip, fell back onto the counter: Stalin *On the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, Stalin On the foundations of Leninism, Collective Farmer's Calendar for 1943*… He held on to one, opened at random and started reading: "There is no more so-called freedom of the individual — individual rights are now only recognized for those who have capital, and all other citizens are considered to be raw human material, suitable only for exploitation," — and then broke off. It was as if he suddenly remembered something. He stared at the text; his lips moved, opening and closing, making shapes around the sounds, and I could see the muscles of his neck twitch around his throat, articulating — he understood what was on the page, but he somehow couldn't speak it. He would've remained stuck in this loop if the driver hadn't touched him on the elbow. Then he came to life — he slammed the book shut and soberly pronounced the title on the cover:

"Stalin. *Speech at the Nineteenth Party Congress.*"

"Four hundred rubles."

"No doubt. Between the pages, you'll see, there's a tram ticket. From 1952. For one trip. Thirty kopecks. As a bonus," he said dryly. "The ticket is unused, you should hang on to it — one never knows. These books are in good condition," the guy eyed me unpleasantly. "Do you collect them on your trips *back there*?"

Enough smiling. I felt a stab of fear. I focused on sipping my coffee. Drunken smart-ass.

He broke off, having made a decision:

"Well, that's enough. Where's the Finnish skier?"

Five five-hundred ruble notes, and the man let the soldier slide from his palm into the pocket of his black coat. The pair walked off, swift and preoccupied, through the rows, toward the main stairs where sellers hawked ragged bear pelts, yellow-fanged boar heads and small armies of stuffed snarling stoats and sables. I pulled on my torn knitted gloves and started putting my soldiers away in biscuit and tea tins. I packed the containers into my newspaper-lined suitcase, tossed the books on top and clicked the locks shut.

"You sure conned them. Like a couple of kids," Rakhmatullin praised me. He was setting out backgammon pieces on a board. "You leaving already? Why so early? Stay a little longer — there's still money to be made!"

SHASHLYK

By the back way, through the painters' row, where there weren't so many customers, I carried the banging suitcase to the log cabin near the central stairs. Inside, in the dark, people sold mass-manufactured Dagestan daggers and stored suitcases for five dollars a week. I walked past the self-appointed veterans of the Chechen war (who had replaced the veterans of the Afghan war about five years ago) wailing their songs to keyboard accompaniment, and wound my way along the smoky chain of charcoal grills to the southern fence of the market.

"Shashlyk? Lamb! Pork!"

"No. Thank you."

"What do you mean, no? You've never had such shashlyk!" a red-cheeked guy with a shaved head, in a suit and tie, grabbed me by the shoulder and blocked the way. With a cop's pushy dexterity, he shoved me to the open door of the café Gorodets. It hurt, this shoving, the guy was good at it, I could feel myself getting bruised, and he wasn't going to let me get away. He almost knocked the breath out of me, and, scared and sweating, I looked hopelessly at the swarthy cooks manning the grills, who had stopped waving pieces of cardboard above their skewered meat, and at the familiar waitresses wearing white aprons over their knitted cardigans. What could I do? Scream? I stumbled into the café and checked my pockets. I knew it: the bastard had pulled out my passport and the rent receipts.

My sunburnt jerk with the scarf around his throat was sitting in the corner with a plate of food, dipping bits of meat in ketchup,

picking up onion rings with his fork. The waitress poured him tea, and he motioned for her to bring another cup. With his mouth full, he blinked in welcome and pointed to the chair opposite.

The cop who had dragged me in sat down on a bench at the neighboring table with the jerk's driver and turned his attention to tea.

I sank onto the chair with a sigh, placed my elbows on the table and folded my hands under my chin. Then I unfolded my hands and let them drop onto my knees. I reclined back on the chair. I stretched my legs under the table. Then pulled them back. Everything seemed awkward. I ate here twice a week, I knew everything by heart, and yet I couldn't sit still.

The man finished chewing his piece of meat, wiped his lips with a napkin and put the soldier of the Finnish war on the table.

"I envy you. You're a free man! You don't sit in an office. You've remained a child. You play for your own amusement, well into a mature age. And you get paid for it! To control your own time — that's the right goal for a man's life." He raised his index finger. "And not to have a boss. What wouldn't I give for that. To collect old toys and sell them — how wonderful! Do you think that collecting pieces of the past can change anything? By the way, I have my own theory about grown men who play with toy soldiers."

The waitress, Auntie Masha, brought another cup of tea with lemon and took away the plate with the remains of onion and the shallow puddle of ketchup.

"Would that be all?" she asked.

"Drink your tea," the man nodded at me, while giving the waitress the money. He took something out from under the table — I didn't see if he had a bag there — and placed a printed-out photograph on my half of the tabletop, then looked around and whispered, bringing the cup of tea to his lips: "Look at her. She's dazzling. So many years have gone by, but still, she drives me wild."

The girl did not look remarkably beautiful. Thick, luxuriant hair framed a wide, adolescently puffy face. She had a dimple on her chin. Her nose, with a barely noticeable bump and a gentle downward tuck

in the nostrils, was not Russian. Her upper lip was thrust forward, revealing a defect in the jaw structure, or perhaps indicating a moment of inner movement caught by the photographer — a smile forming, a word dying away.

If you covered the bottom half of the face with your hand and took in the wide, clear forehead, the distinctly traced eyebrows and most importantly the eyes, the girl looked uncommonly charming indeed. Her eyes looked with calm clarity over the right shoulder of the observer — there was living water splashing in them. But then when you took your hand away, all you saw was a healthy young girl, nothing more.

Her hair was of an awkward length — just reaching her shoulders— and curled at the ends. Her hairstyle was organized by a dark ribbon that revealed itself in a bow above her forehead; the bow's butterfly style dated the photo to at least half a century ago, and put the girl behind the desk of a high-school class. She was dressed in a sober jacket done up to the chin; you could see two large metal buttons with a simple design — grooves in a circle.

"She's dead," the man clarified dryly, as if this were of any importance. "She was killed by a bullet to the back of the head on the 3rd of June 1943. This fifteen-year-old *femme fatale* became an urn at the Novodevichy Cemetery. Nina Umanskaya, have you ever heard of her?"

For a time we kept silent, or rather he kept silent, and I looked out at the gates of the market — the stalls styled to look like fairytale huts and covered with fake tiling made of rubber — and at the newly built pavilion of Nizhny Novgorod folk crafts.

"Here's the summary of the case," the man said clearly, irritation creeping into his voice. "It's 1943, early summer. The Battle of Stalingrad is over, but Kursk is yet to come. The diplomat Konstantin Umansky has an incredibly beautiful daughter, Nina. The girl goes to an elite school along with the children of Kremlin bosses. Incidentally, Stalin's daughter goes to the same school. Lots of boys fall in love with Nina. One of these is Volodya Shakhurin. The boy is also from an important family — he is the son of the People's Commissar for

Aviation Industries. The children are finishing the seventh grade, and sitting for exams. Konstantin Umansky is appointed Ambassador to Mexico. On the 5th of June he is supposed to fly out with his family to the new post. On the 3rd, Volodya Shakhurin walks his sweetheart home. We can assume he's asking her, begging — he is 13 or 14 at the time! — don't go away, I love you very much. The girl probably tells him there isn't much she can do. Volodya takes a pistol out of his pocket and shoots Nina Umanskaya in the back of the head. Point-blank. And then he points the gun to his temple and fires again. For a while he keeps breathing. For about a day. And then he dies. The incident is reported to Stalin, and he exclaims, *These kids are real wolf cubs!* The case goes down in Russian history as The Case of the Wolf Cubs."

He pulled the photograph back, felt it carefully to make sure the sticky table hadn't smeared or soaked it, and put it away.

"Dull, isn't it? Schizophrenia, a teenage psychosis of unrequited feelings. It's all so plain and clear: our homegrown Romeo and Juliet!— that's all that's left. But no one," the man leaned over the table toward me, and everything that he said now seemed extremely important to him, his cheeks burned and his voice softened to a barely audible whisper, "no one, before me, thought of a very simple thing: why is everybody so certain that it was love? Why do we all think it was love that he wanted? The girl was killed. The boy is dead. And no one heard their conversation. So what or *who* is trying to make this seem so clear to us?" He suddenly smiled drunkenly. "I sense a professional touch. Someone worked very hard to make sure this one version survived for the future. And whoever it was had a reason. And someone is now sure that *it all worked out*. That everyone has been deceived, and no one will go back to dig around. They're wrong," and he finished with a playful, faggoty intonation, like something lifted from a British movie, "My dear chap, I want you to go back there. Everything must be changed."

He was giving me the chance to nod or at least move, but I concentrated on sitting more comfortably while I pictured myself getting up and leaving.

"I want to know who killed them."

Satisfied with my silence, the man (didn't his bodyguard realize that his boss had a screw loose?) started talking more freely, not expecting me to respond with anything that could blow up the rails he was laying down.

"Who killed them. And why. This is a job for a person who likes photography. The gaze of a photographer changes the object of the photo, if the photographer has, so to say, a special relationship with the object," he paused and gave me a suggestive wink.

"I've had a beast of a time trying to decide who to turn to," he went on. "The problem in Russia is that journeymen never grow up to be masters: everyone wants fast money. No one cares about the work." He broke off and changed the subject: "Do you visit the website 'The Last Frontier'? I do — it's totally wacky… All that New Age stuff, the fifth race… New cults. And there're so many young people there… They're into Kali, the Goddess of Death, I suppose."

He smiled at me in a friendly and sad way, like a hunter smiling at the carcass of an elk that has led him on a chase. Like a hunter with his muddy boot planted on the throat of his dead prey:

"On this website, I saw a transcript of a certain trial posted in considerable detail. But I won't bore you with the particulars. Basically, there was a young person, practically a child, who joined a cult — a real tragedy. Family abandoned, all possessions given to 'the teacher'. The young man's mind completely…" he pinched the fingers of his right hand together and rubbed them together, making a hole in an invisible fabric. "You know the story. Excessive fasting. Meditation. Drugs. There aren't any legal grounds on which this young person could be forced to return to the family. He — or she — is a free adult, they can choose what to believe in. The parents are in agony: all these years they spent nurturing their child, the apple of their eye, so to speak, and now this child serves some alcoholic with a bunch of criminal convictions like a loyal lap-dog and doesn't want to come back. Doesn't even recognize his Mom and Dad. You see what faith can do, eh?

"And what can the parents do, Alexander Vasiliyevich?" *My name, how did he know my name?!* "They can suffer. And wait. The used-up human material will be returned to them eventually. The problem is no psychiatrists could ever bring such an invalid back into a world where people fry shashlyk, fly to Egypt for seaside holidays, have children, or sell toy soldiers, for example. Instead: dark little rooms, the smell of medicine, mumbled mantras, uncontrollable drooling — forever.

"But the cults mainly target wealthy families. And the wealthy are not prepared to give up their children to the new Branch Davidians of the world. And thus, my dear Alexander Vasiliyevich, a paid service comes into being: forced deprogramming. Kidnapping, or recovery, if you prefer. Treatment. Return to the family. Haven't you heard about it? No? I believe you; the actions of these de-programmers are not, shall we say, particularly public. The cults certainly keep quiet about losing their cash cows. They wouldn't want their own corpses to come to light — every business has its waste. They'd keep quiet and have their own security services search for the missing people, the security and the guys who, let's put it delicately, provide protection for their business. So there you have it: a silent, shadow war with apartment raids, kidnappings, infiltrations, exchange of hostages, even shoot-outs, they say… No? With fatalities.

"Some of this came to light quite by accident. One of the young people who had been rescued threw himself out the window of a safe house apartment in Belyaevo during a therapeutic procedure. And broke his back, as it happened. Sychuzhnikov. Remember him? No? He happened to mention you personally… He was very much afraid that he would be finished off in the hospital. He's a nice enough guy, appears to be fairly sane. As long as you don't talk to him too long. But one doesn't need to talk to him too long to broadcast his story on television: a moving sound bite or two, and that's enough, next up are elections, corruption among officials, etc. But after Sychuzhnikov's story made the news, all these groups must have done the same math — and they all brought statements to the police: the Gaudiya Vaishnava, Money Tree, Blessed Virgin, Unification Church, the

Mormons, the Scientologists, Children of God and even a handful of the White Brotherhood followers. To this day, it is unclear what kind of psychological techniques the de-programmers relied on. In addition to kidnapping, the statements submitted to the police allege torture, beatings, food and sleep deprivation. Use of psychotropic substances. Forced manual labor. Is some of this lies? Yes, probably. It's politics, after all. But you and I, my dear, judging it all without sentimentality, may assume that the de-programmers, fighting fire with fire, probably used the same methods that the new cults did on the way *there*, in an attempt to bring their subjects *back here*.

"Incidentally, some of the young people who were returned to the world of police forces and market economies testified in court — I know, where's their gratitude, right? The exact number of kidnappings has not been established. Over sixty? The parents were charged one hundred thousand dollars and more in difficult cases. The children of poor citizens were of no interest to the de-programmers. Although poor people did also come to them — and begged to have their breadwinners returned to the family, fathers or mothers restored to their babies… I read into it — the stories are horrifying. Would move a stone to tears. But not you.

"Based on that testimony, some people got arrested — you must have heard this part, it was such a scandal! — among them retired and active-duty personnel of various security agencies. This triggered internal investigations in the Interior Ministry and the Federal Security, the FSB. Forty-two, in total, were arrested, sixteen were sentenced. The investigation is still going on. Not everyone has been found yet."

The man looked me in the eye and didn't blink. And I realized hopelessly that I would have to do it in front of him — to wipe the sweat from my forehead, my eyebrows and upper lip, to wipe my hand after that, and then undo, tear open the buttons of my coat, from the top to the bottom. And lick my burning lips.

"There's a person wanted by the FSB. The so-called information service of the Church of the End and the Beginning is also looking for him, with the help of the Izmailovo mafia. He didn't kidnap anyone.

He didn't take part in torture. He only worked on developing the clients. The circle, the connections of the victim… or the rescued person? And so, I thought, this is someone who can help me. This person. And his people."

He was handsome and well-groomed. One of those people who gets himself rubbed over with cream and has manicures. It was possible that his wet, tar-black curls were the results of someone's paid efforts. His youth was the one thing he did not buy. It was given to him. A triumphant, strong youth, which was now tossing someone else's life up and down in his hand, like a sea shell full of holes, collected on the Crimean shore.

"I'll tell you my train of thought. What does a sect do with a new member first of all?" He immediately answered: "A sect destroys the personal past. The past is not needed, it does not lead to salvation. To control a person, you must erase everything that has been experienced and fill the emptiness with the commands of the teacher. The man I'm talking about, on the contrary, returned the past to the victim, helped him to remember… But if you take into account that people came into his hands with a completely changed consciousness, empty, white paper boxes… They couldn't remember anything, and the past," the profiteer smiled with his eyes only, "this man, this agent wrote it over anew. At his discretion. You understand? And one important thing is that he did this for free. The investigation established that he was the only one who did not receive money — I found this particularly simpatico. What is money compared with this occupation? And I said to myself: OK. This is the guy I need."

"He's around forty, just over six feet tall. He has dark hair. He's going grey. A former historian? Although someone testified at the investigation that he saw him at the KGB institute while he was studying there. He's unlikely to have fled, I thought… He's in hiding," he looked at me again. "He's cut his hair short, wearing an army uniform… The only detail, I don't even know if it's true — he collects toy soldiers. All rather childish. But symbolic, you must agree."

He got up and slapped me on the shoulder with an unpleasant, lordly gesture. As if I were a dog.

I waited, as though I was supposed to be taken away somewhere for further tests, but nothing else happened.

Walking past the army backpacks and camouflage jackets, they — three of them — went towards the gates. They were being waited for by a riot squad officer in a black beret and an automatic pistol over his shoulder. He waved his hand, and a black BMW with a flashing light on it drove up, and a police Landover as an escort. The doors opened. The profiteer was seated in the first car, and the security ran to hop in… That was it. They had moved into the audience and would now watch me running around on my chain.

I took the photograph of the girl Nina out of my pocket.

The girl looked directly into my eyes with sad and questioning calm. Like a living person, as if her lips would open and she would say something to me. I tore her face in half and threw it into the bin for cigarette butts.

THE BRIDGE

In August the ruble collapsed, and life shattered. I didn't believe in the end of Sberbank and a people's uprising, but everyone rushed to withdraw their money, and every morning at half-past nine I called the Sberbank office at Novopetrovskaya: are you allowing withdrawals? They gave out currency in portions.

The manager laid out the last three thousand, told me to sign in triplicate — and closed the account.

"Thank you."

At the next teller's window a gray-haired man refused to budge: "Give me my money!"

"Oleg Semyonovich, your pension isn't here yet!"

"I don't need the pension — give me my money!"

"Oleg Semyonovich, the money hasn't arrived yet!"

"Hasn't arrived? Everyone's getting money, but not me, where's my money?"

"At the Finance Ministry, with Yeltsin."

"So I'll go to Yeltsin then. I'm not just anyone, I'm," he goes on stabbing his red identity card with a crooked finger, "a war veteran. Are you saying there's no money for me?"

"There'd be money if you didn't drink it up. I don't know, ask your kids, ask your son, he'll give you some."

"I don't have a son!"

I stopped listening, and my thoughts turned to the women in my life, familiar and unfamiliar. Whom to go to in times like these?

The new or the tried and true? I had realized a long time ago that I ought to quit turning up in strange beds, but I seemed to need this truth brought home to me endlessly. Indeed, I seemed always to need undiscovered secrets, the heart-stopping instant of first nakedness, the thud, like a bell, in my chest; I needed new telephone numbers, whose seven digits promised the thrill of new parents, unmet neighbors, grandmas with phenomenal hearing, mischievous younger brothers, dogs that bit through telephone cords, and fathers who noiselessly picked up the receivers on parallel lines.

I thought of a few names, then called the one who lived closest:

"Yes," I said, "today, now, yes, I was just out of town, I called and you weren't there, I'll just come to your office, where are you now?"

"On Krzhizhanovsky, the oil and gas company, Sibur."

I met her there. She walked up to me, smiling, in red pointy-toed shoes, a black and white skirt on her wide hips. We crossed the street to an establishment that seemed halfway between bar and cafe; the waiter and the barman, dressed in white shirts, sat with their heads tossed back, faces up to the sun, on white plastic chairs they'd pulled out onto the porch.

She was seated across from me at a table in a small dining room, a large, vintage photo of Moscow on the wall, the yellow dome of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior still intact, and the waiter nodded confidently as she leafed through her menu, indicating that of course the restaurant would have each item on hand.

We ordered. I looked at her brown shoulders and asked, attempting to recall the details of her life: does your daughter still dance with that theater group? Did that friend of yours ever marry her Frenchman? Did your father find a job?

She asked about me. I answered: Me? I'm in retail now. No, nothing happened, why do you ask? She didn't know why. Perhaps she hadn't gotten enough sleep, she said.

At that point, absently and for no reason, we each turned to the window just in time to see the waiter making a furtive beeline for a store on the corner to buy everything we had just ordered.

We chatted further and she laughed, but I felt my throat catch, a flash of nausea at the hint of something alien in her manner, as if on the first visit to my dacha after winter I had found the place defiled by squatters, clothes scattered, drawers yanked out of dressers.

"The company's cutting staff," she went on. "No one knows anything for certain. Some say that everyone will be fired and Gazprom will bring its own team. Others say it's only the management that'll have to go, and everyone else will actually get a raise. Also I decided to go back to my husband."

In the empty room, under the air-conditioners, I understood immediately: there we were, still sitting opposite each other, still waiting for the waiter to come back from the shop, to put the pieces of bread with cheese and ham under the grill, to dice the strawberries and bananas for the fruit salad, to scoop out chocolate ice cream, so that we could eat and speak at leisure — but I wouldn't touch her. There was only an emptiness waiting for me there, a gaping maw, and snow was blowing in through it.

"I'm sick of going to bed by myself. And of waking up by myself. And my daughter really needs her father. He's changed a lot, you know. He says he understood everything while I was gone."

She wouldn't go anywhere with me. Though in six months I'd likely get a call. Still, maybe she'd give it to me right then and there, in parting? The waiter would still be away awhile, I could hike up her skirt and put her on my lap, this lover of stockings and crotchless panties.

"You'll move out of the city, of course?"

Her main message out, she then replied hesitantly and with effort:

"Yes, there's a place we can have in Lozhki village. Solnechnogorsk district."

"With a woman to help around the house. And a driver to deliver groceries. And three dogs, bull terriers."

"Two. A bull terrier and a Leonberger."

"The house must have three floors, though."

"Four. A sauna and a billiard room in the basement. But what about you? What do you sell?"

"Antiques."

"Antiques? Any other plans?"

I studied the picture behind her back, squinted and read the title. Apparently, it was the bridge that was the painter's main subject, not the cathedral that was blown up under Stalin, and later recreated to replace the swimming pool that had replaced the original.

"Me? Well, I'm thinking I'll work on — the Great Stone Bridge."

"Where is this bridge? What's so special about it?"

We talked like this for another hour. Then she left, and I crumpled up the piece of paper on which she'd written her new cell number and left it on the plate. I finished the last of my water. A blue-and-white label on the empty bottle said "Shishkin Forest. Pure drinking water. Still water from artesian well #1-99. Made in Russia. Moscow Oblast, Solnechnogorsk district, Lozhki village."

THE GREAT STONE BRIDGE. THE HISTORY OF THE CASE.

The great stone bridge is recognized as the best location from which to view the Kremlin and study Russian life. The bridge has had the best view since the time of Cornelis de Bruijn, a Dutchman and painter, three hundred years ago; in more recent days, images of and from the bridge figured in the title sequences of the Vremya TV news broadcasts which replaced, for the Soviet people, the evening church service.

The view of the opposite side was sold as a secondary attraction: the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (absent for a time to accommodate the swimming pool) and the Second Building of the Council of People's Commissars (made famous by Yuri Trifonov as the House on the Embankment in the novella of the same name) — the dormitory of the builders of the Communist tower, a structure of politically-correct, unobjectionable luxury. A comfortable hive. The residents of five hundred apartments were later, to avoid a bloodthirsty expression, *changed* — as Emperor Stalin said to President de Gaulle, "In the end death is always the victor." The President, in his stupid cap that resembled an open tin can, of the kind that was ridiculed once and for all by comedies about idiotic French policemen, nodded, "Yes, yes…," he didn't understand what the emperor meant.

Of the Kremlin's towers, the closest to the bridge is the Water Pumping Tower (also called Sviblov Tower, after the prominent family

who lived in a house next to it), and it is tall and gloomy. It used to pump water to the Tsar's chambers and gardens. Napoleon had it blown up as he left the city, and the hands of restorers made it less morose, but in my opinion the tower still has a cheerless look to it. In 1937 it was crowned with a ruby star, the crowners having noted the tower's prominence in the eyes of those viewers who went down onto the bridge to examine the goings-on of our land.

Moscow herself grew on hills, and between the hills flowed rivers, creeks and streams. Myriad *ad hoc* wooden bridges, sometimes just a few boards thrown over the mud— *mostoks* they were called — held Moscow life together. Some have even argued that the very name *Mos*cow contains an echo of the city's humble beginnings. The Great Stone Bridge was the first stone bridge in the city — and happened to be the last. When it was built, it was considered to be the fourth wonder of Russia after the Tsar's Bell, the Tsar's Cannon and Ivan the Great's Bell Tower.

Ivan the Third cleared Borovitsky Square, moving wooden houses away from the Kremlin thereby nullifying the fires that tended to burn them, and making Tatar sieges difficult. Moscow life, forced thusly outward from the verboten square, crossed the river and moved south, into the Strelets villages, along the road from Veliky Novgorod to Ryazan. Since these new arrangements required that supplies be transported across the river, Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich summoned the craftsman Jagan Christler from Strasbourg, along with his uncle and his tools, which had names like magic spells: mattocks, bills, cant-dogs, parbuckles, trowels, salters. But just as the enormous cubes of white stone for the would-be bridge began to arrive in Moscow from Nastasin, everyone involved in the project unceremoniously died — both Germans and the Tsar.

The seventeenth century bore a striking resemblance to the twentieth. It began with troubles, and ended with troubles: civil war, an uprising of peasants and Cossacks, campaigns to the Crimea, Boyars "chopped to bits" by rebels, doctors who confessed under torture to poisoning Tsars, and Old Believers burnt at the stake during the

month known to us now as Bloody April. It was a time when Russians suddenly and obsessively turned to their past, considered their own present, and then decided rather frantically to begin rewriting the books on every historical sore spot: the schism in the Church, the streltsy rebellions, the place of our land on the globe which had just been imported to Russia. Children and women argued about politics in the streets! Suddenly the common people realized: we also exist, we take part, we are witnesses. And how sweet it was to say *I*.

In the year when Boris Sheremetiev went to the Hapsburg court of Emperor Leopold and Prince Golitsyn led the charge to Perekop, returning from the Konka River with nothing because the Tatars had set fire to the steppe, a monk who was able to read the drafts left by the late German bridge builder finally completed the new wonder of the world — the Great Stone Bridge.

If one is to believe certain records, the monk's name may have been Filaret. "One of the common monks, by the name of Filaret" — that's how another monk, Siliverst Medvedev, recorded it in his truthful but far from comprehensive *Short Contemplations*. The year the bridge was finished, the *Contemplations*' author lost his head — he was too educated and eventually had to pay for being Tsarina Sofia's favorite counselor, for arguing with the Patriarch, and for consorting with the rebellious streltsy. "Beheaded on the Red Square and buried at the poor house with the queer of mind in one hole..." reports read.

The bridge had eight spans, and was made of white stone. It was four hundred and sixty feet — seventy *sazhens* — long.

The engravings by Pieter Picart (you can see small huts on the river — mills or bathhouses), the lithographs by Daziaro (poles under the spans, a few people dawdling and a predictable dinghy, its passenger being ferried across with one oar by a warmly dressed gondolier) and the lithographs by Martynov (the latter-day ones, with the two-tower entry gates that were demolished long before the lithographs themselves were actually published) all depicted the Kremlin and captured the bridge in the first 150 years of its life: flour mills with dams and drains, drinking establishments, the town-house

of Prince Menshikov, crowds admiring the sight of river ice breaking up and beginning to flow in spring, the triumphal arch raised for Peter the Great's Azov victory, a pair of horses pulling a sled with two passengers — a priest and the quick-eyed Pugachev in shackles crying out right and left to the presumably silent crowd, "Forgive me, Christians!"

Sideshows brought wax figures, savages from Africa, and a siren fish recently caught by fishermen. Crowds at the shows gnawed on sunflower seeds and bought colorful balloons inflated with gas. Convicts knelt in the dust, with signs — *Arsonist, Robber* — around their necks. Constables with theatrical halberds, hirsute students smoking casually and short-haired girls in dark glasses, the Wolf Pack tavern in a dirty two-story building, the jetty of the Moscow Fishermen's Society (nothing more than a hut on a wooden raft with a bunch of boats tied to it) — and everyone seemingly with a sense that this life on and around the bridge couldn't last (especially when in the flood of 1783 three arches collapsed at once, crushing a fisherman and some washerwomen). Still, when Alexander the Second took the throne and had the great old bridge dismantled — the old masonry wouldn't yield to hammers and crowbars, it had to be blown up — people would not forgive him this deed and remembered it often and bitterly.

The new bridge was still called the Great *Stone* Bridge, despite the fact that when it was built again in 1859, cast-iron arches were anchored on the two stone abutments, laid with rails of the same material, and paved over half-timber boards — by engineer Nikolai Voskoboinikov. In photographs from the Gautier-Dufayer collection, you can see that the cast-iron bridge stood a little to the left of the old one, and now did not lead to Borovitsky Square, but ended at Lenivka, the shortest street in Moscow. Gradually deteriorating, the bridge nonetheless lasted the length of a human life — 75 years. There were plans to demolish it earlier, but wars and revolutions interfered, and then the bridge had a second life: a Soviet newspaper clipping informs that "the arches of the bridge were found to be in satisfactory condition and transported by barge to Zaozernaya village."

The best minds of Russian architecture (which had become Soviet architecture without evident effort) competed to build the Third Bridge: Peredery, Zholtosky, Shchuko, Shchusev. Vladimir Shchuko won with his powerful one-span steel arch. The losers had preferred the narrowness and multiple arches of Moscow's antiquity. Shchuko was the only one to experience a genuine epiphany, to look out his window in the pre-dawn mist and see there: MOSCOW SEA PORT. Canals! Moscow — Volga and the White Sea! Caravans of ships under the bridge! Swiftness, force and resilience, and all of it expressed in that single, surpassing insight, that one individual arch.

Vladimir Shchuko was the son of a military man, graduated from an academy in Tambov, tried his hand as an actor at the Moscow Art Theater, was noticed by Stanislavsky, and later took part in a polar expedition to Spitsbergen.

He started his architectural career working on the palace of a governor in the Far East, and was inspired by Rome, Istanbul, Athens, Florence, Milan, Art Nouveau and Russian Empire style, the traditions of Cameron and Voronikhin. He ended with countless plans for statues of Lenin (one was made — Lenin on the armored car, Finland Station), with the Lenin Library and with a fruitless seven-years of planning for that impossible colossus, the Palace of Soviets. And the Third Bridge, 478 meters long. He built it and died a year later.

On 5 March 1938, the bridge was tested: one hundred and forty ten-ton trucks and twenty fully-loaded trams rolled over it. Meanwhile, four Bolshevik polar explorers drifted over the North Pole on an ice floe, Japan was fighting in China, girls on advertising posters advised the public to drink coffee with liqueur manufactured by the vodka and liqueur department of the People's Committee for Food Manufacturing, and engineers were testing a new invention — a telephone answering machine. But these and many other first fruits of the general plan for the reconstruction of Moscow — metro stations, parks, streets, bridges — felt remote and overshadowed in the spring of 1938. Completion of construction projects coincided with the surfacing

of right-wing Trotskyist vipers from the swampy depths. Technological advances were lost amid news of the so-called Trial of the Twenty-One with Bukharin among the convicted. The trial was concluded with the customary Russian executions of "beasts in human guise," the customary Russian accusations against rivals and a completely non-Russian submissiveness on the part of the victims.

Were there cases when members of your organization who had access to butter manufacturing put ground glass into butter meant for public consumption?

Yes.

Were there cases when your allies, accomplices of criminal organizations, put nails in the butter?

Yes, I confess.

And did you intentionally spread epizootic disease, which caused the deaths of twenty-five thousand horses in Eastern Siberia.

Yes.

It has remained forever unclear why in these cases, when hundreds of thousands of people could've maintained a dignified and customarily Russian silence, instead chose the shame of false confession? What happened then? Who promised them resurrection?

A pedestrian on the Third Bridge would very soon have stopped admiring the eternal Kremlin: the foundation had already been laid for the Palace of Soviets, and the pace of construction was such that you'd think something in Russia was about to end forever. In just ten months the frame of the Palace was supposed to rise as high as the Second Building of the Council of People's Commissars, and grow higher, to 320 meters at which point it would be topped with a statue of Vladimir Lenin (the index finger of which was itself five meters long). The sum of these two figures (320+100) was supposed to give a clear indication to the Statue of Liberty (33 m), and also the Cheops Pyramid, the Cathedrals of Cologne and Amiens, the Eiffel Tower, and finally the Empire State Building in New York, of

exactly who was going to save world. Great ideas demanded stone edifices of a great size.

A shadow, though, a black shadow, was creeping, growing and thickening over Moscow, obscuring everything. It swallowed these weeks of executions (two thousand people were shot every day), and blotted out concerts, and the premieres of two films: *Volochaevsky Days* and *The Youth of the Marshall* (a biopic of young Semyon Budyonny, the cavalryman with the most famous whiskers in the Soviet Union). In its utter blackness, seething and shuddering, it conflated all events, as if saying: the only thing you'll ever see from the Great Stone Bridge is Russia, and nothing else; saying: now you may build only tanks and planes; saying: you can't kill that many of your own people anymore because there are already others coming to kill us. The steel of the Palace's frame had to be recast into anti-tank hedgehogs and railroad bridges when the Donbass was overrun by the German army and new rail construction was begun in the Russian North, where there was coal. In the end nothing could be annulled.

GOLTSMAN

Is a man always to remain alone?

Suddenly as hot as if I'd been wearing a tight-fitting suit, I staggered to a kiosk, bought an icy can of diet Coke, and listened to it hiss when I opened it. I crossed the boulevard, sipping from the can, climbed over a fence on the divider, went through some bushes, and sat down on a park bench. I drank, gasping for air, and listening to myself: still hot? Cooling down? My head burned, blood slammed into my left temple like it was a dam.

A man next to me on the bench looked at me, seeming aloof and free. He was old and exquisitely thin, with a disheveled and grey cloud of hair on his head. He had on soft casual pants and an ancient scholarly cardigan belted over his stomach, the kind you always see in pictures of dying Jewish physicists and immoral scoundrels who buy stolen violins and stamps. His cheeks, stubbly, looked like they was still getting used to the loss of their daily shave; he sat as easily as if he lived somewhere nearby and came here every evening to get some fresh air, on this bench, with the circus on Vernadsky Street behind him.

"Hello, Alexander Naumovich!" I cheerfully moved closer to him on the bench. "What are you reading these days?"

Goltsman smiled with pleasure, and we shook hands.

"Since Regina died, there's only one book I read. It's on my bedside table. It's the Bible. You know, it has *everything* in it."

"You know, I meant to tell you: the bed you and Regina Markovna gave me worked out great. I sleep in it all the time."

"And we had it for seventeen years before you. Until we needed a special one…" Goltsman paused in thought, smiling mournfully at something; his hand twitched at a memory and raised itself away from his lap, then swayed toward my shoulder, but collapsed instead onto the bench between us, exhausted. Everything was clear anyway. "You've got to go."

"There's nowhere for me to go," I looked up at the coldly trembling leaves, at the autumn, at my fleeting, meaningless life, and almost cried.

"But you know what's happening. Clearly someone has identified you. They've marked you as a target. We don't know who they are. I hope it's something commercial. If you don't agree to work for them, they will hand you over. You should leave. I don't see any other options." He spoke slowly, moving words like heavy furniture, making it clear that we were being followed even here, on this bench. We were guppies in a fishbowl. "You know our capabilities. They are quite limited. *If* we find enough money… *If* the right people at the prosecutor's office and court agree to help… You'll spend a year in prison just waiting for the trial. Or two. Why go through that? Look at all of this differently. Aren't you tired? You've lived some. You have experienced things that others often miss. Go somewhere warm, to the sea. You can have everything a man needs — a bit of a beach, honest work..." Goltsman wanted to add "a good woman", but blinked off the word with a tear in his eye. "Trust me, you don't need anything else. I need to know what you think."

I have so little life left, was all I could think. I've forgotten the meaning of childhood games, of moving toy soldiers in the grass, I've lost the joy of New Year's Eve, the sweet watermelons, enjoying the body of a beloved woman, the sweetness in the sound of my own name, the warm weight of a soaked shirt under a summer downpour— the world looks at me without interest. All I have left is to dream of a healthy old age, without soiling myself, and to hope to die in my sleep.

"I want to work on the Great Stone Bridge. You'll help me."

I had noticed Goltsman in reading room number six (scholarly research only) on the second floor of the historical library, I saw him

in the archives of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism (it's called something else now, something about the socio-political history of the Russian state), I ran into him in the former Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on Ilyinka. We would nod to each other. Exchange pleasantries. Then one day we started talking in the cafeteria, over apple tarts. He'd read me his works and ask why no one was interested in publishing them. With a slavish desperation, the old man carved out, as if with scissors through metal, sketches about heroes of the partisan movement in the winter of 1941. And then made the rounds of magazines and publishing houses, hopelessly, with his load of stories about these unwanted parachutists, lieutenants of state security, and sundry other incredible individuals who on a winter morning, with the hangman's noose around their neck, would say to the village residents gathered to watch the execution, "Our cause will triumph! I'm not afraid of death! I'll die as befits a patriot of the Motherland!" This while German motorcyclists were rolling from Khimki to Moscow, past the space where there now sits an IKEA.

Goltsman was only printed by Communist newspapers and the *Military-Historical Magazine*. I kept wondering: Why is he doing this? To keep himself busy? Does he need money? Does he pay rent on an apartment for his granddaughter? But Goltsman didn't have any grandchildren, and dragged his metaphorical pebbles to the graves of comrades with intentional stubbornness, as if he were taking part in some great construction project. His wife had cancer, and it took the disease three years to devour her; at some point it became awkward to call Goltsman at home and, if Regina Markovna answered, chat idly with a woman who was doomed to die slowly, consciously, while you stayed behind and watched it happen. Goltsman's son had given himself over to computers, and went to live in America.

No one still living had really known Goltsman in his earlier life, although there remained his pupils, and his beloved Motherland. In the prefaces to various KGB veterans' memoirs, Major General A. N. Goltsman was singled out for his achievement in collecting and recording

the history of counter-espionage. In the archives, whenever a form required the retired researcher's "last workplace", Goltsman always wrote in his tidy, narrow hand, "Assistant to the Chairman of the Information Committee"; as a result, everyone thought he was a journalist. It was little known that the obscurely named Information Committee, in 1947, briefly attempted to unite the military (GRU) and political (First Department of the MGB) intelligence services — the Chairman of the Committee was the number two man in the empire, Vyacheslav Molotov.

For what Goltsman ultimately came to do for us, we didn't pay him. He helped us on an ideological basis, and he and I were not friends — I can't be friends with someone and pity them. Compassion only ever leads to unintentional cruelty, and anyway he didn't know how to be friends with anyone either. We served the Truth, and the rest was nothing, at the end of earthly roads there is nothing, and no one to call to. We simply met and said the things to each other that our work required. Until his wife died. Then Goltsman was taken by an invisible hand, crushed with a quiet crack, and put back on this bench.

"The idea is simple. To unpack the bridge. And get things across to these freaks, to bring them to their senses. They think that all the questions will be closed. That everyone will be buried. I want to show them."

Goltsman nodded — yes, he had been expecting this:

"That, my dear man, is hopeless. That is useless, dangerous work. It's not our business. It comes after all of us. There is only one way out for us. It is also open for you. The way out is — here."

I didn't turn. Instead, I looked straight ahead at the bikers racing towards the Sparrow Hills, carrying their blond girls in black leather — so I never did see what gesture he made to refer to the book that now ruled him — a cross? Three fingers pinched together?

"And we'll return."

"I don't see a way out. I'll do what I can."

We were quiet for a while, companionably. I finished my Coke and tossed the can into the trash-bin.

"What about this... young man? The one who contacted you? Do you think you'll have what it takes to, let's say, solve this problem?"

I licked my lips and considered Goltsman's question.

"He did scare me, at first. It all looked very real, more real than life, in fact. But then I went over it in my head — I spent all night thinking about this guy, replaying our conversation. And here's the thing: he wasn't sure how to get into his car. I mean, he didn't know where he was supposed to sit. At all. He went to the wrong car first, the security people had to nudge him to the BMW, and there, again, he didn't go to the right seat, they had to prompt him. If I'm lucky, I bet he came to the market alone, without the escort, and the rest of the show was timed, staged for my benefit. What if he just hired the security detail for an hour? Then, it's just him, acting alone — and he's wide open. He's just a clown with ideas. I wrote down the license plate number."

Goltsman considered this, his face impassive, and finally nodded: yes, that's possible.

He stood up. It was time for him to go. Now, in his retirement, when he was his own man and didn't use an alarm clock, he lived according to his own, very strict order.

"The Great Stone Bridge is by the House of Government. I've heard a lot about it, but nothing useful. We need to find a way in." He considered something for a moment and added, indifferently: "The result may be instructive."

Night is an unreliable time. At night, I become a boy. Everyone who knows me as a different person, and for whom I must be working, is asleep. I sit on the bed alone, and can't bring myself to turn on the light. As if there were someone else with me whom I might disturb. I can't turn on the light to read, I can't listen to music in the darkness. I can only feel that I am a boy — I can touch my face in the dark and smooth it with my hands; I can ignore anything uninteresting, I don't have to take an interest in pedestrian things. I can hold a ball in my hands, or quietly roll it to the wall.

A PROBLEM

I AM THIRTY EIGHT YEARS OLD. I HAVE TWO CHILDREN. I HAVE many grey hairs. I regard them with resignation, like snow lying on a roof — this will melt! — or like a scrape that is healing.

Five years ago I was reading a newspaper in the metro, on my way to work: several thousand years from now (or several tens of thousands of years), the Milky Way galaxy, where we live, will collide with the Andromeda nebula. We are barrelling towards each other at the speed of five hundred kilometers an hour. Or five thousand kilometers an hour. But by the time we collide, the Earth will have been a dead body for a long time. The Sun will run out of heat, and the Earth will turn into an icy crag.

For some reason, this did something to me, induced the sort of terror I had only ever felt as a child, and only on the metro, and only when I thought about the death of my parents. When I read the article, I immediately thought of my daughter. I felt death so strongly that it seemed this feeling would never go away. But ten minutes went by, and by the time I walked into my office, I felt better. But then later that summer there was a day when my daughter and I turned off into a ravine to look for mushrooms.

"Dad, is it true what they say, that someday the Earth won't exist?"

I played for time, pointlessly — "Who told you that?" I asked — but there, on the slope of that ravine I realized it fully and irretrievably: yes. There will no longer be anything. Everything will rot away like the grass. Yet this seemed impossible to reconcile with the fact of my

Alexander Terekhov

A professional journalist, Alexander Terekhov has contributed to *Ogonek*, a top Russian magazine, and worked for the editorial teams of various publications. During his time at the newspaper *Top Secret*, Terekhov came across an item about two youngsters who perished in 1943 at the Stone Bridge in Moscow. He first featured the story in one of his short works, but later on embarked on a quest for the truth that lasted several years. The outcome of Terekhov's research provided the premise for his novel *The Stone Bridge*, eventually winning him the Big Book Award in 2009.

Alexander Terekhov is known outside Russia for his sharp, topical satire. He has published several novels and short stories, which have been translated into English, French, German and other languages.

On June 3, 1943, two bodies are discovered at the Great Stone Bridge, in the heart of Moscow. They are the teenage offspring of two of Stalin's favourites: Volodya Shakhurin, the son of the People's Commissar for the Aviation Industry, and the stunningly beautiful Nina Umanskaya, 15 years of age, the daughter of the former Soviet ambassador to the USA. By all accounts, the former shot the latter before turning the gun on himself. A complex matrix of three periods – the Stalinist era, the Soviet '70s and Russia in the 2000s – the novel revolves around an ex-FSB officer, now an outcast. Taken aback by the deliberate obscurity surrounding the story – to the extent that he launches his own investigation into this alleged murder-suicide – he unearths some startling facts, shattering the original theory about the crime.

The Stone Bridge is a detailed historical reconstruction of the Stalinist era as seen through one man's seven-year investigation into the case of the 'young wolves' – a Nazi-inspired secret society inside an elite Kremlin school. Based on a true story, *The Stone Bridge* resurrects actual historical figures and brings to light official documents from NKVD case files. The book shines the spotlight on a past with which the country has never properly come to terms, and which therefore – tragically – has a poisonous effect on present-day Russia.

Instead of the standard Russian problems, What is to be done? Who is to blame?, Terekhov's novel raises postmodern (or post-Soviet) questions: Who am I? What is history?
–Times Literary Supplement

Stone Bridge, the bitter fruit of the Putin era, is postmodern and anti-nostalgic; for Terekhov, Russian history is destitute of glamour, heroism or plot.
–London Evening Standard

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