

THE FOOD BLOCK

ALEXEI IVANOV



G L A G O S L A V P U B L I C A T I O N S



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by Alexei Ivanov

Translated from the Russian by Richard Coombes

First published in Russian as *Пищевлок* in 2019

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Agreement via Wiedling Literary Agency

Proofreading by Melanie Moore

Translation © Richard Coombes, 2024

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www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-80484-128-0

ISBN: 978-1-80484-129-7

First published in English by Glagoslav Publications in September 2024

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY RICHARD COOMBES

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS



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A NOTE ON THE NAMES

Russian given names have both 'full' and 'short' (including 'diminutive') forms. Short forms tend to be used between relatives, classmates, friends, and colleagues.

A single name can have multiple short forms. Where an author uses several variants of a name, translators often choose one and stick with it, rather than replicate the original range. In *The Food Block*, however, the author consciously selects each variant with a particular purpose in mind, sometimes to convey affection and sometimes a hint of negativity, teasing, or outright insult. This translation reflects the author's intentions by retaining all the variant forms.

PROLOGUE

THE BUGLE'S SONG

*Sunrise starts with the bugle's song
Of pioneer times, vibrant and young.*
Mikhail Sadovsky, 'The Bugle's Song', 1972

'They were signallers. The boy beat his drum and the girl sounded her bugle. Together they welcomed every sunrise and escorted home every sunset. But people did not hear the song of the bugle or the thunder of the drum. They did not notice the wind setting the signallers' pioneer neckerchiefs aflutter, nor did they see the pioneers' eyes shining in the sun. Everyone believed that the girl with her bugle and the boy with his drum were made of plaster. But they were alive, and very much in love.'

The young group leader with the modish moustache looked around the boys in the dorm. The boys were not asleep; they were goggling, anticipating the very worst. Everyone knew who the leader meant. The plaster girl with the bugle stood on a low plinth at the gate of the pioneer camp. The plaster boy with the drum was missing altogether; a square of earth darkened on the spot once occupied by his vanished stone pedestal.

'One night,' the young leader continued in muted tones, 'a group of pioneers from our camp gave their young leaders the slip. They picked up stones and smashed the drummer to pieces. The morning sun lit up a pile of rubble. Workers came, gathered up the rubble, and took it to the dump. No one noticed the girl with the bugle crying. She was left alone, forever, without her beloved.'

The boys on their bunks stayed quiet, ashamed. The reason was no mystery: each of them had more than once tried to come up with a way of demolishing the bugler. Not from malice, of course; simply casual naughtiness.

‘The girl did not forgive the boy’s murder. She decided she would have her revenge. Each night she jumps down from her plinth and walks through the camp looking for whoever destroyed her drummer. And if she meets anyone in the camp after lights out, then without a hint of mercy she will strangle them with her stone hands.’

The lads lay there stupefied, pinned down by their own terror.

‘Well, that’s it. Good night,’ said the moustachioed young leader.

He closed the dorm door behind him and went to his room, where his colleague was waiting for him, a tubby chap with curly hair.

‘Scared them half to death,’ chuckled the young man with the moustache. ‘Made up a horror story for them, about the plaster bugler girl by the gate coming to life at night and prowling through the camp strangling everyone. Taking revenge for her poor shattered drummer.’

The curly-haired young leader did not approve of his moustachioed colleague’s conceit. ‘Nurturing them on fear is bad pedagogical practice,’ he said.

‘Effective, though. They won’t go slipping out of their dorms at night.’

‘Effective?’ said Curly doubtfully. ‘I rather think they’ll batter the bugler to bits in the daytime, to break her psychological hold over them.’

Moustachio was genuinely puzzled. ‘That’s a twist that hadn’t occurred to me,’ he admitted.

Curly heaved a sorrowful sigh.

Meanwhile, the boys in the dorm were already asleep, sheets hauled up over their heads. Only the boy in the bed tucked away in the corner was awake. He was staring silently out of the window, as if waiting for something. He wriggled his hand free and reached towards the bedside cabinet for his glasses. Sat for

a moment. Then he stood up and started dressing, trying not to make any noise. He made his way to the window, worked the catch loose, cautiously pushed the casement wide open, climbed up on to the window sill, and jumped out.

The boy walked through the night-time camp, finding cover behind thick acacia bushes. Street lamps brightly lit the long, deserted avenue. The leaves set up a faint whisper. A dog howled somewhere far off. It was warm, but chills coursed through the boy's body. He was very afraid, but he straightened his glasses and firmly resolved to find out whether or not the plaster bugler stayed on her plinth at night.

Out on the avenue, an indistinct figure appeared briefly, and the boy froze. The light of the mercury street lamps was blinding him, burning out all the shadows, and he could not make out who it was coming along the avenue. Coming slowly. Uncertainly, as if unused to walking. The way bedridden patients hobble when they are finally allowed to get up and take a few steps. Except that very sick patients always had someone to support them. The person on the avenue was alone. If it was a person at all.

Coming down the avenue was a girl of about the same age as the boy taking refuge behind the acacia. With every movement, the girl's whole body trembled strangely, as if something were breaking inside her. White blouse. White skirt. White pioneer neckerchief. White arms and legs, white eyeless face, white stone plaits. It was the plaster bugler. She looked like a robot, except that robots are activated by electricity and the bugler was animated by darkness. The bugler was looking for the person who had killed her drummer. Looking for them, to kill them too.

The boy behind the bushes backed off, turned, and raced away.

If the darkness is stronger than you, do not leave your house until you hear the bugle's song.

PART ONE

THE VAMPIRE'S TRAIL

*Head all wrapped in bandages, sleeve with blood bright red,
Across the sodden grass the bloody trail will spread and spread.
Mikhail Golodny, 'Song about Shchors', 1935*

CHAPTER 1

PASTA AND DRUMS

The Olympic rings were ensconced in the elastic circularity of the letters:

Olympics 80!

White streamers had been strung along the railings of the upper deck of the river bus to both starboard and port. True, the little craft was not chugging along the Moscow River against the backdrop of the magnificently modernised Luzhniki Stadium. This was the Volga, and the backdrop was the Zhiguli mountains, ancient, sloping, and covered with tangled forest. And the river bus was bringing not broad-shouldered Olympic athletes, but burlap sacks of buckwheat and sugar, cardboard boxes of pasta and dried fruit, and aluminium canisters of milk – in short, provisions for the food block of the Storm Petrel Pioneer Camp. None of that prevented the pennant on the little ship's mast from flying with Olympic vehemence.

Ivan Palych Kapustin, the captain, was sitting at a helm that was rather more like a car steering wheel. Ivan Palych had pulled a black tunic with blue stripes over his soiled and tatty sailor's vest and hoisted a cap sporting a crab and a gold rim onto his head. Steering the river bus was no more complicated than driving a car, but captains are captains wherever they are: to a man a tad overbearing, and that was making Igor Korzukhin self-conscious, like a schoolboy on an excursion, although he had grown up knowing Ivan Palych. Ivan Palych was friends

with Igor's father, also a captain, except that Alexander Yegorych Korzukhin was not the commander of a 'galosh', that is, a Moskvich-type motorboat, but of a Volga-Don dry cargo ship, an enormous vessel, almost like an aircraft carrier. Igor was sitting in the wheelhouse in the engineer's seat, and Kapustin was throwing him sidelong glances, checking that he did not touch the lever that switched the engine from normal to reverse – that would properly foul up the works. Dials darkened on the panel in front of Igor: revs, oil pressure, cooling water temperature. Igor knew how to operate the ship and was certainly not about to yank the crank: was he a fool or what? But Ivan Palych did not trust the brat. There was too much of the peacock in the boy: those jeans, that badge he had knocked up himself with some guitarist on it; his lanky locks.

'Why didn't you get your hair cut before the shift?' grumbled Kapustin.

'I did,' said Igor.

Kapustin, naturally, did not understand that hair over the ears was the height of fashion. Igor had let his moustache grow as well. The result of that endeavour, it had to be said, was a young man's few sparse hairs. Well, so be it. The boy could be a hippy in summer while there was still time. Come autumn, the university military department would open its doors and a razor would be taken to every head, shaving them all to the universal boring butch.

Igor had finished his second year in the university's Philology Department the previous spring. Each year, after the end-of-year exams, the philology students would set off around the villages of the Volga region for a folklore practical. They questioned old women about forgotten rituals, and recorded folk songs, local tales, and dialect words. Most of the students in the faculty were girls, and these trips to the back of beyond were always filled with the yearnings of the lovelorn. The rickety fence of morality swayed under the pressure of susceptibility, and was held in place only by upbringing and natural timidity. Igor had no problem with timidity, and was hopeful of overcoming his upbringing, but in June, to his intense annoyance, he had caught a cold on the Volga and was not taken on the expedition. The Dean's

office swapped out folklore for pedagogy: he was to see out one shift as a young group leader in a pioneer camp. Well, that was not bad, either. Students of the Pedagogical Institute worked as group leaders. More precisely, female students, because in the Pedagogical Institute, just as in the University Philological Faculty, girls were in the majority. Igor took the view that the girls from Pedagogy would be no worse than the girls from Philology. They might even prove better, if he had no desire to maintain relations once his practical was over.

The wide stretch of water ahead of the bow of the river bus glistened in the bright sunshine, and, in the distance, the brittle brilliance merged into a solid blinding blaze. The bus's engine gave out a dull rattle from somewhere in its guts beneath the wheelhouse. The wheelhouse windows looked out to all four points of the compass. Over by the low left bank, Igor saw a dredger, splayed out like an iron spider. Its pipe, resting on a lattice boom, spewed liquid slurry in a solid stream into the gaping hold of a moored self-driven barge.

'You won't miss the Olympics in camp?' asked Kapustin.

The Olympic Games began in a week. Everyone was waiting for the opening with an inexplicable feeling of holiday, the way people waited for New Year, hoping that all bad things would beat a retreat of their own accord and remain in the past. But what could the closed city of Kuibyshev, into which foreigners were not admitted, gain from the Olympics? Fanta and sausages in the grocery shops? Natty trainers in the sports shops? Dream on. For everywhere in the USSR except Moscow, the benefits of the Olympics were limited to Olympic jackets for the women and decorative Olympic roubles. Igor felt no reverence towards the global tournament, nor any sense of nervous excitement at the thought of impending blessings. Blessings that no one, in fact, had promised anyone.

Igor chose not to share his scepticism with Ivan Palych.

'I don't suppose there's a telly in camp,' he replied diplomatically.

'There's a telly in the main building, where the radio room is,' countered Kapustin.

'How do you know?' asked Igor in surprise.

'I just do,' replied Ivan Palych evasively.

The penny dropped. Igor fell silent. Dimon Malosolov, a sailor on board the bus, had already broadcast the story that Palych had formed a liaison in the Storm Petrel Pioneer Camp with the lady in charge of the food block. The bus went to the camp almost every other day, and often tied up overnight at the jetty, whereupon Palych would relocate from the captain's cabin to his lover's bunk. Igor envied the captain: an old guy – he had already hit the big five-oh – and still a player with the ladies. Meanwhile here he was, Igor, young and frisky and at the end of his second year and still without a girlfriend.

Dimon Malosolov had also managed to find himself a girl in camp, one of the young leaders. While Palych was bagging forty winks in the food supremo's bunk, Malosolov had been strolling out romantically along the bank of the Volga with his group leader. Not that he had managed anything beyond a quick grope. Dimon had wearied of her, and his mind was set on changing his girlfriend for one more accommodating. He was not the least embarrassed that the woman scorned would see and understand and be hurt. Igor envied Dimon's unwavering selfishness. With selfishness like that, life was a breeze.

There were three girls on the river bus, students on their way to the camp. They were sitting on the foredeck among the sacks, boxes, and canisters, their construction brigade¹ jackets slung over their shoulders. Igor was observing the deck through the large windows of the wheelhouse. The wily Dimon waited for one of the students to make her way to the rail, then steered his way over towards her as if he were planning a quick smoke. She was the plainest of the three young leaders – plump, with glasses and a light brown ponytail. A typical girl from philology. She was

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¹ In the USSR in the 1970s, a number of major construction projects were undertaken for which young people were encouraged to volunteer. Such 'construction brigades' worked, for instance, on the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway ('BAM'), the 'Atomnash' nuclear engineering plant in Volgodonsk, the Kama Automobile Plant ('KamAZ'), and the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric plant.

exactly what Dimon needed: with a girl like her he would find it easier to reach his goal.

From inside the cabin, Igor could not hear what Dimon was saying out on deck, but he had all Dimon's wiles by heart. Dimon would ask, as if offering his help: 'Young lady, does your mother need a son-in-law?' At which the girl would melt away. It always happened that way with girls, and Igor's ears would burn red at the banality of Dimon's chat-up lines. This was not something Igor could do. He needed a girl to show an interest in him first. Which was precisely why he had wormed his way into Ivan Palych's wheelhouse. The young leaders at the pioneer camp would be sure to wonder who was this guy who had come sailing down to meet them. Why, he had not left the captain's side the whole way.

Igor was fully aware of all the goings-on in Dimon's life. They had been friends at school since first year. At the end of year eight, Igor had stayed on into year nine, while Dimon had gone to technical college to train as a helmsman. Their friendship had been rekindled over the summer: both were mooching unenthusiastically around Kuibyshev. Igor, refused a place on the folklore expedition, hung around the apartment block, smoking in the yard to avoid the sharp edges of his mother's tongue, while Dimon passed his evenings drinking beer on the bench by the front door. Navigation bored Dimon: the river bus, unlike bigger craft, did not make long voyages to Moscow, Leningrad, or Astrakhan. Dimon complained to Igor about how he slaved for Kapustin: he lubricated the engine and scrubbed the decks, and when they berthed he wound the mooring ropes around the bollards and stood watch at the gangway. Kapustin kept Dimon away from the helm. And rightly so.

Ivan Pavlovich steered the little boat towards the left shore past the white buoy marking shallow water, and the river bus left the channel. Meanwhile a snow-white 'Meteor' was powering slowly along the fairway. The whole craft was pointing upwards, as if frozen in an unfinished leap: unearthly, fantastic, lifted above the waves by the might of antigravity. Even in the wheelhouse, Igor could hear the aeroplane roar of its turbines. That was the sound of real life, in which existed skyscrapers, transatlantic

liners, powerful computers all but capable of intelligent thought, shuttles in orbit, and the search for extraterrestrial civilisations. Not the Storm Petrel Pioneer Camp with its pasta and drums.

A small village of a dozen or so houses roofed with iron or slate came into view. Thin-slatted painted fences, vegetable gardens, telegraph poles with crossbars. A light breeze from the Volga stirred the crowns of lindens and apple trees. The village was apparently considered so insignificant that no guard ship had been stationed there. There was not even a pontoon.

‘Pervomaiskaya,’ explained Igor Kapustin. ‘Only oldies here. Those who are up to it work in the camp. Security guards, carpenters, scullery maids.’

‘What about in winter?’ asked Igor.

Pioneers did not go to camp in winter.

‘In winter there’s a clinic and a DOSAAF² ski camp.’

Beyond the village, a stream tumbled into the Volga, festooned with willows along its banks.

‘The Bishop, they call it,’ said Kapustin.

‘Odd name.’ Igor was surprised.

‘Used to be the Archbishop. The camp’s a lot of old Samaran dachas. All sorts of merchants and nobility had places here. Archbishop had a dacha there, too.’

At length, Igor made out the former dachas, now the pioneer camp. Under the tall carvel pines lining the Volga stood fairy-tale gingerbread houses, outlandish, like Christmas tree decorations, whimsically jolly, with convoluted carvings, ornamented stoops, attics and balconies, glass verandas, multicoloured facades, turrets, and roofs of various kinds: hipped, boat, tent. Not so much a dacha village as a brood of frisky wooden roosters with combs and colourful plumage. Here and there, though, among the throng of elegant houses, others not quite so elegant had squeezed in: panel barracks and white-brick boxes. A chain link fence separated the village from the Volga, clearly to stop the pioneers from scampering down for a dip.

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² DOSAAF (the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy) was a Soviet Union sports organisation centred on weapons, vehicles, and flying.

'Isn't there an ordinary road that comes here?' asked Igor.

'There's a dirt track, but the backwater keeps flooding it.'

Ivan Palych was referring to the backwater of the Saratov Reservoir. In spring, and when the Balakovo hydroelectric station reduced its discharge, the water level in the reservoir rose, and the old lake bowls below Kuibyshev flooded, swamping the country roads on the low-lying left bank. In terms of reaching the camp, it was more reliable to bring in supplies by river transport.

'Already waiting for us up there,' said Kapustin, and the bus's klaxon let out a hoarse quack.

A pier had been built for the pioneer camp, a wooden jetty reaching a long way out into the water. It rested on iron pipes, driven into the river bed like piles. The sides of the jetty were hung with car tyres. An asphalt path led to the gates, near which stood a plaster pioneer girl on a pedestal, sounding a bugle. On the pier were a few men and a cart whose wheels had been taken from a car. They were ready, it seemed, to unload the supplies brought in on the river bus.

Igor squinted, checking over the people come to meet them. He could not see a single girl group leader on the bank. Bollocks. A crying shame. No one would know he had been in the wheelhouse with the captain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexei Ivanov has written fifteen novels, published between 1992 (*Dormitory on the Blood*) and 2023 (*The Armoured Steamships*, a novel that reflects Ivanov's long-time interest in the Russian Civil War). Ivanov's novels have been nominated three times for the National Bestseller prize, and for several other awards within Russia, including the Big Book Award. His works have been adapted for the big and small screen, most notably his 2003 novel *The Geographer Drank Away his Globe*, which was made into a multi-award-winning film starring Konstantin Khabensky. *The Food Block* ('Pishcheblok') has been made into a television serial which first aired on Russian television in 2021 and has since been followed up by a 2023 sequel, *The Food Block 2*.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Richard Coombes has been a classicist, a musician, an international tax specialist, and now translates Russian-language literature (verse, prose, and song lyrics) into English. Richard's recently published translations include Elena Dolgopyat's short story collection *Someone Else's Life* ('Chuzhaya zhizn'), published in 2023 by Glagoslav; other short stories by Elena Dolgopyat and poetry by Lyudmila Knyazeva, Dmitry Vodennikov and Tatyana Voltskaya in a variety of literary journals; poetry in the bilingual World War II poetry collection *Poems from the Front* ('Frontovaya lira'), published in Russia in 2021; and poetry in the bilingual anti-war anthology *Disbelief*, published in January 2023. A follow-up anthology by the 'Disbelief' team, called *Dislocation*, will be published in 2024. Richard's translation of *Liza's Waterfall* (Pavel Basinsky's documentary-thriller 'Posmotrite na menya') is complete and awaiting publication.

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The summer of 1980. The Moscow Olympics. A small pioneer camp on the banks of the Volga. The pioneers fall out, make up, play tricks. Romances start up among the young leaders. The river bus brings in drums of milk and boxes of pasta. Life in the quirky gingerbread cake buildings of the camp establishes its rhythms against the backdrop of the Volga's ceaseless flow and the sunset's daily blush over the Zhiguli mountains. But something is wrong. Something that no one except twelve-year-old Valerka can see. Disbelieved by the young leader Igor, in whom he confides, Valerka is left carrying the burden of what he knows completely alone.

Some of the children and young leaders are becoming vampires. Valerka resists the vampires on principle, while Igor finally joins forces with him only when what is happening touches him personally. Together, they brace themselves to do battle with a power they have no reason to believe they can withstand.

The Food Block speaks of how state ideology, even where its design is oriented towards the ideal, is nevertheless something dead, while love and friendship are forever living. Ivanov brings us a gallery of colourful characters: idealistic, dogged Valerka; seventeen-year-old Igor, groping to find himself and on the way finding his first love; the spiky and beautiful Veronika; the blithely self-absorbed Anastasiika; the drunken doctor who knows too much; the partly paralysed scullery maid Nyura; the old Civil War veteran Serp Ivanych; the steadily-growing cast of bloodsuckers and their 'carcasses'. Through them, Ivanov gives us both a thriller and a book of humour, insight, subtlety, and depth.

Translated by Richard Coombes

