The TESTAMENT

DAVID GUY

IM PRESS

David Guy

The Testament

Edited by John Varoli

Boston • 2024 • Chicago

David Guy The Testament. *A Novel*
Edited by John Varoli

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ISBN 978-1-960533272 (paperback)

Book Design and Layout by Yulia Tymoshenko
Cover Design by Larisa Studinskaya

Published by M•Graphics | Boston, MA
www.mgraphics-books.com
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Printed in the U.S.A.

An old immigrant writer dies in New York. Three suitcases of his archive are left behind. By the will of circumstances, the archive falls into the hands of his grandson, a Harvard graduate who speaks and reads fluent Russian. Sorting through the papers and photographs, the grandson tries to make out a portrait of his grandfather's life. A vivid human destiny appears before him—with quirks, discoveries, losses, sufferings, love, betrayals, sorrows, losses, and gains. His goal is to unravel secrets, mysteries, look into the innermost corners of the soul, and to answer the question to which the grandfather will not answer: is what he aspired to higher than what he fought against?

The war in Ukraine fits organically into the narrative, which is told by the grandson: he is involved in the events caused by Russian aggression, participates in the rescue of a young woman from Kiev—the granddaughter of a mistress of his grandfather. And then the unexpected announcement…

All of this gives the novel an acute sense of urgency.

What is compressed expands.
What is weakened is strengthened.
What is destroyed flourishes.
Who wants to take something from someone else,
is bound to lose his.

Lao Tzu

The greatest fault of the Russian people is that they are always guiltless in their own eyes. We repent of nothing. Maybe it is time to stop acting foolishly, pretending that the Russian people was and remains a plaything of forces outside of its own control...? These are convenient, cunning, and sneaky lies. Everything in Russia was done by Russian hands, with Russian consent, and we our selvessowed our bread, and lathered our ropes. Neither Lenin nor Stalin would have been our destiny if we had not wanted it.

Yuri Nagibin, 1994

Not Putin.

David Guy, 2022

Man is an animal that has gone mad. There are two ways out of this madness: he needs to become an animal again, or he needs to become more than human...

Carl Jung

1

The house was staring at me with a squint, from under its brow—*what kind of bird had flown in and from where*. The log-cabin frame of the two-story building, watered by rains for many years, caressed by snows, and blown by winds, reminded me of an abandoned, miserable, untidy, lonely man with bad front teeth and with deep furrows on his face, as if unevenly plowed. The house was graying, gnarled, its log sides blackened, with tow sticking out of the cracks; it had not been repaired or painted for a long time. *Caulking* was called *konopatka* in Russian—I learned the word with the help of the Internet, searched for the equivalent in English and found it—*caulking*.

The caulking brought to the surface a silly poem I had heard from my grandfather, who remembered his childhood: *"Red, red, rumpy, killed grandpa with a shovel, but I didn't beat grandpa, and I loved grandpa..."* As I found out, "red-haired" means "freckled, freckled", it has nothing to do with caulking—just a consonance and nothing more.

My grandfather was born in this house, once the only two-story house in the entire street of a Moscow suburb, and this immutable fact of his intricate biography brought me, a New Yorker, here.

My grandfather's old Moscow friend accompanied me on the trip. I addressed him as "Uncle Heinrich", and he addressed me as Kirill, sometimes Kiryusha. He reacted to the house, it seemed, broken and disappointed—that's what kind of shanty town his friend lived in... And I perceived what I saw as a dead shell, the chiton of a fly from which the spider of time sucked out the contents. People lived here, I must think, of modest means, otherwise they would have moved to a more acceptable dwelling. In the neighborhood they built brick mansions, covered with a metal roof and bright tiles...

In the early hour of the weekend, the inhabitants of the house were asleep, and the courtyard was empty. Grandfather recalled: the first floor was shared by his family and his father's sisters: doctor Roza and her husband, teacher Manya and her daughter, and an old woman and her niece who came from the town of Kasimov on the Oka River. The windows of grandfather's apartment with a glazed veranda looked out onto vegetable gardens, flowerbeds, and a wooden toilet, where all the residents relieved themselves of small and large needs. Inside the cold latrine in winter, with ice crusts around the hole called the "point", neatly cut and dried strips of the newspaper *Pravda* hung on a clove—they had no idea about toilet paper back then. I perceived this story as something phantasmagorical, otherworldly, from some other century, but not the 20th.

The house was a local landmark of sorts: as the tallest and most conspicuous structure, it hung a flag on May 1 and November 7. The flag was flown by Ilgin, who lived on the second floor and whose windows looked out onto the street. My grandfather recalled that in the process of hoisting the flag on the facade, right under Ilgin's windows, all the residents joined in, as if bystanders in a ritual. Ilgin set up a step ladder, climbed up and nailed the flagpole with the scarlet cloth to the logs of the cabin's frame.

Ilgin was disliked by his neighbors, who called him a *strickulist* behind his back (another strange word that I was unfamiliar with, but which means "trickster," "weasel," "swindler." Having taken a course in Russian at Harvard, I already had an idea of the unprecedented richness of the language's vocabulary). I was accepted into the prestigious university thanks to my excellent grades and success in sports. I studied saber fencing, and my coach was my father Semyon, a former USSR champion. Fencing in America was developed in large part by coaches from the Soviet Union, and Russian dirty words and phrases often rolled off their tongues: American students still didn't understand... I mastered the obscene vocabulary early enough, however, even suffering from excessive knowledge. During one of my saber matches at an international tournament, I expressed my dissatisfaction with the decision of the referee, involuntarily bursting out: "Блядь!" ("Fuck" in English). The referee immediately

showed a yellow card, and could even have given me a red one. The referee was a Canadian with ancestors from Ukraine, and it turned out he also knew foul Russian words and phrases.

However, "*strickulist*" did not belong to local slang, and was frequently used.

My grandfather also remembered his own father's unkind gaze, looking down at Ilgin's efforts to strengthen the flagpole. He couldn't tolerate the red cloths under which crowds of people marched on the occasion of holiday demonstrations and which adorned the facades of Soviet offices. Of course, he did not talk widely about his sentiments, but after the death of Stalin he no longer hid his dislike from his 12-year-old son.

At that time, Danya, my future grandfather, learned that his father had been jailed on political charges but miraculously was released from prison. However, the husband of his sister Mania was shot in 1938. Danya's father said that according to reliable information, Ilgin was denouncing people. At a party meeting, a colleague-neighbor whispered, pointing to the cover of the brochure of the leaders of the revolution: "Look—what Lenin has on the front, Stalin has on the back". He in fact meant the initials V.I. and I. V. After the denunciation, he was given "ten" and learned from the investigator who had snitched on him. He survived in the camp, and eventually got out during the amnesty after the death of Stalin, and he severely beat the informer.

After March 5, 1953, my grandfather began to understand what was going on in the country where it was his fate to be born, and which he described in detail in a multi-page saga. I repeatedly reread the part in which he described the crazy drunken confession of his father, who celebrated the death of the tyrant and was not afraid to reveal the truth to the boy. My grandfather repeatedly recalled that night of his epiphany, opening for me the new glasses of an intricate kaleidoscope…

Fate dealt Ilgin a cruel fate—in the early 50's his only son died, punished for blasphemy. This imprinted in my memory another memory of my grandfather. Vitaly Ilgin studied at a military academy that trained political commissars. With two friends he came home to celebrate his birthday. They drank a lot, and tough luck took them to the cemetery where the guys began to

compete, jumping over graves—who can jump over the highest fence on a dare. Vitaly unsuccessfully jumped and hung on the sharp peaks of the fence, piercing his stomach. They weren't able to call an ambulance in time, and he bled to death—*okachurilsa*. (I memorized this word for a long time, but I never learned how to pronounce it correctly).

The street had never seen such a funeral before. His entire class came, the military band played mourning music, and the coffin with Vitaly's body was carried in their arms to the bus going to the cemetery. Neighbors silently saw him off on his last journey. Grandfather clearly heard one of them mutter: "*Koshchunnik*" ("Blasphemer") and added: "God, he sees everything..."

"*Koshchunnik*" joined my list of ingratiating, belligerent, nagging, instructive, and other words that passed me by while studying Russian at Harvard.

It was unknown who lived in my grandfather's apartment now. I didn't want to go there—after so many years, his spirit had completely evaporated.

I was looking at the house and saw a curly-haired boy in pants with suspenders ("child's suspenders"—the Internet deciphered another unfamiliar word). Judging by the photos, the boy was thin, narrow-shouldered, whirling around the yard and the street, naive, wary, a little cowardly, avoiding fights, because nature had not given him muscles. Even though now he is older, in satin pants, a zippered tennis shirt and Chinese sneakers, Danya didn't yet know what was in store for him, but as he grew up, he thought more and more about the future, which seemed uncertain and therefore frightening. Then, in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, he had unsolicited thoughts: If this sun, and this water, and these trees will one day disappear, that is, if he himself will disappear, then it's not worth living at all, it's not worth striving for something, it's all the same when his existence will come to an end, since it will undoubtedly come to an end? Everything around him seems dull, defective, useless, meaningless, and the unspeakable begins to come into his head. This was not called fear of death, but *fear of life*.

This is roughly how my grandfather described his condition at the time, which fortunately quickly disappeared like a pill dissolved in water…

I prepared thoroughly for my trip to Moscow. I read through the episodes of my grandfather's miraculous childhood described in the story and made notes. He often recalled the crazy years, I listened and was not lazy to write some things down in a special notebook. "Scattered Thoughts"—grandfather's diary, found in archival papers, also helped. He kept a diary from occasion to occasion. But the things contained in it encouraged some kind of comprehension of grandfather's angular path in life and literature.

I had only been to Russia once before—to compete in the Moscow Sabre tournament. Even before I entered university. I stayed with my coach-father in a posh hotel on Tverskaya Street. Semyon showed me the house at Pokrovsky Gate, where he lived in his early childhood, and his last apartment on Tukhachevsky Street, from where he left for emigration in 1991. However, we did not manage to visit grandfather's hometown in Ramenskoye near Moscow due to a severe lack of free time, and we did not visit the graves of our relatives—to the extreme disappointment of grandfather, who had entrusted us with this mission. We were only able to visit a close friend of my grandfather for a couple of hours. Uncle Heinrich was so moved that he shed a tear.

I had planned my visit for three days. I was familiar with Russian customs: I did not want to have to deal with the humiliating and regrettably stupid procedure of registering with the police. If you are in the country for no more than three days, registration is not required. I decided to stick to that deadline.

I stayed with Uncle Heinrich on Vrubel Street. My grandfather told me about the wonderful days his friends spent in the artists' village not far from Sokol, among the gardens, coniferous and deciduous trees, and emerald grass—nature had generously invaded the urban landscape. On New Year's Eve, guests once went sledding on fresh powder, calling out obscene ditties across the village… Alas, the island of sanctuary did not have long to live—in the 1990s, the New Russians occupied the village, demolished some of the old buildings and erected mini-palaces with taste-

less architecture, with a claim to a classical style—with stupid columns, inappropriate porticoes, bay windows, and other decorative tinsel.

At the same time, a 30-story building with underground garages appeared on Vrubel Street. The street became noisy, and there was always traffic... But back then, in the days of my grandfather's youth, it was, as he admitted, a paradise.

I'm no longer in paradise. But I felt the host's friendliness to the fullest extent. He surrounded me with care and attention, sometimes excessive, as if he were paying me back with the warmth that had been left to my grandfather because of his separation from him (my grandfather left Russia in 1993). However, they saw each other twice: my grandfather invited his friend to New York and California, and as a result, a movie shot and edited by Uncle Heinrich was born; I watched it with pleasure—at the time I was walking under the table, and occasionally got into the frame...

"No man is rich enough to buy his past," said Uncle Heinrich melancholically. It must be a quote from some unknown source, at least to me. He had been in the printing business for many years, was a bibliophile, and had amassed an excellent library. Grandfather was jealous of his knowledge. Now he said it very appropriately, and his characteristic hand in the direction of the house said that he was immersing himself in the edifying mirages of the past, trying to connect them with the shameless reality of today.

"Tell me, Kiryusha, do you feel excitement at the sight of your grandfather Daniel Dikov's more than modest abode?" he said, sounding a little high-minded. "The task you set for yourself—to write a book about him—its fulfillment largely depends on your experiences, doesn't it?"

"You're right, Uncle Heinrich. By the way, he almost died on this street almost 80 years ago. He chronicled the incident in some of his books. Do you remember?"

Uncle Heinrich had a peculiarity not to answer instantly, but to wait a second or two while a thought matured. And now he was a little slower:

"What do you mean?"

“The war with the Germans had just begun, when my great-grandfather volunteered to go to the front, he was already forty-five, and great-grandmother had given birth to Danya and with... how is it in Russian?.. with a baby in her arms, she went for a walk. And that’s when the German plane, known colloquially by Russians as a ‘frame’, had spotted her.

“I recall...,” he sounded after a pause.

In our conversations with my grandfather, the episode with the German Focke-Wulf 189, which in the Soviet army was called a “frame”, occupied a special place. And every time previously omitted details resurfaced. Didn’t my grandfather invent this story, was his writer’s imagination at work?—sometimes the doubt crept in and was immediately discarded—*such things are* not invented.

“To this day I cannot convince myself that my child memory was not my own, unearned memory, arising from my vision and feeling, but was intricately woven from someone else’s stories, familiar from childhood and settled in the cells of my brain. Elementary common sense pointed to the futility of my hopes concerning such an early developed reflex consciousness, but with naive stubbornness I could not accept the sensations taken, it turns out, on loan, on rent, and gambled, to tears, in every possible way to prove that I remember a meter-deep trench for sheltering the inhabitants of our house in case of bombing, dug behind the barns by my father, who was leaving to join the army; I remember the dry crackle of machine gun fire when my mother, caught unawares in the street, clutching a live swaddled lump, that is, me, was suddenly chased by a German aerial scout flying a double-fuselage ‘frame’ that somehow flew into our town 45 kilometers southeast of Moscow where there was no fighting; I remember the sudden arrival from the front on that October day of madness and panic of Uncle Shura, a major in counter-intelligence, who forbade my mother to leave with the refugees, for the chances of survival with an infant in her arms were negligible; I remember my wounded father with a beard, who saw me for the first time in the Lefortovo hospital four months after my birth. I remembered many other things, though I could not remember this.”

"As long as the city was not bombed, my mother walked with me in her arms without fear—there was no stroller. The street, which was not yet fully paved, was not very wide and stretched on one end from the farmer's market to the other end in an empty lot covered with tall grass where cows and goats grazed. No more than three hundred steps separated the street from the railroad and the station, and the residents of wooden houses fell asleep to the silent clatter of train wheels. Echelons seldom came by day, but at night the ground was humming.

Whether it was the proximity of the station or our two-story house, one day a German reconnaissance plane, a 'frame', rumbled over the street, almost touching the stove pipes. Caught unawares at the high fence, my mother instinctively clutched me to her chest, pulled my head into her shoulders and froze like a dumbfounded woman at the sight of the two-fuselage monster that resembled a frame. The German made a U-turn and flew over the street again, so low that my mother (she swore later that it could not be imagined) saw the pilot's huge frozen merciless eyes under his helmet goggles. Had it not been for those terrible eyes, she would have remained standing at the fence, but here, feeling completely defenseless, she ran in the opposite direction to the house, like a bird leading a predator away from its nest.

The airplane allowed itself to descend low, sure of its own invulnerability. And so it was: there were no troops in the city, and even less anti-aircraft guns; the city was far from the area of military operations. The scout who flew here could easily observe, take photographs, and then he could have left without taking note of a lone woman darting along the road with a bundle in her hands. The German, however, had the instinct of a watchdog, especially fierce in biting those who run away.

My mother did not hear the machine gun crackle, she only saw the bores digging into the ground in front of her and fell down, skinning her elbow to protect me from being hit. The scout made a new semicircle and came in from the other side. Mother managed to crawl back to the fence and cover me with her body. The round pierced the grass and cut through the fence post, bypassing the live crouched target. "The frame" wriggled its sides angrily and flew away, ending the hunt.

"Not yet believing that she was alive, my mother lay still for a few minutes, then got up, waddled to our gate, entered the veranda, and she began to have chills. She put on a shawl, a drape coat on thick padding, but the nervous trembling did not go away. The most surprising thing was that, in spite of my mother's fall and the obvious discomfort of lying on the grass, I did not utter a sound, and continued to sleep."

The pictures scanned in my brain and scrolled through the newsreels. I briefly recounted the texts to Uncle Heinrich, and he confirmed what he remembered and summarized it in a profoundly thoughtful way:

"Life and death are sometimes a blink of an eye. It could have happened that you wouldn't have grandfather Daniel, but fortunately that was not the case…"

We stood at the gate of the house, looking at the street: asphalted, with long-exterminated plantains, burdocks and yellow-sunny dandelions that looked like tiny chickens in the grass, with delicate fluff—that if you blew it would fly away. The street did not resemble the old one from my grandfather's childhood.

"Uncle Heinrich, do you remember any games from the post-war era?"

"Games?" he asked again, seemingly surprised by the question. "We came back from the evacuation in '44. There were no special games. Well, rag balls, hide-and-seek, Cossack, and Bandits, whatever else there was… Don't equate Moscow yards with the local streets—dumbfounded a lot of things happened differently in Danya's neighborhood.

"He listed *shtandr*, *'knives', stilts*, catching May bugs, …And at school, it was *zhostka, pedilka, pristenka*."

"The names are familiar, but we didn't play that on Vrubel Street. I guess we only used to play *zhostka*."

"Did the boys toss sand rags with their foot, tightly tied with threads at the neck?"

"That's right. The main thing is to keep it in the air as long as possible, and not to let it fall to the ground. Some virtuosos could score 200 points at a time."

"'Knives' was an echo of the war with the Germans," my grandfather believed. "A large circle was drawn, divided equally

into two, three, or four parts, depending on the number of people playing, and everyone occupied his own territory. The one who started the game stuck a penknife with an open blade into the 'foreign' land and cut off a piece, joining it to his 'own' land. And the firm condition was to cut off as far as he could reach from his "own" territory, without leaning on 'foreign' territory with any part of his body. When someone seized a large part of the circle he would hear: 'Ooh, you damned fascist!'"

"Nice game. Danya is right—the echo of war. Don't you think, dear Kiryusha, that…" he hesitated "that the current times have revived the simple 'knives': first—Abkhazia and South Ossetia were cut off; two—Crimea; three—Donetsk and Lugansk? Only instead of blades—mines and shells."

"That's an interesting thought. I hadn't thought of that."

"Think about it…"

We took a few pictures of the house on our smartphones. Uncle Heinrich took a picture of me in front of the building, and I took his. We also took selfies, but the house's outline was blurred against our faces.

We headed to the station, and from there to the cemetery. I was leaving the house with an inescapable sadness of forever saying goodbye to something I had never known before and that had suddenly become dear. At the turn I looked back, saw a part of the second-story windows behind the trees and buildings. I imagined that the house was waving at me and saying something, but I couldn't make out what.

My uncle roughly knew the way—he had once made such a trip with Danya and had written down the route just in case. The piece of paper had survived, clear and meticulous as he never threw anything away. Now that paper was in front of his eyes.

We climbed the bridge and crossed to the other side of town. We walked along the drying lake where were the adjoining buildings of the weaving factory. On the right-hand was a line of residential brick high-rise buildings. Some forty minutes later the cemetery gates appeared in front of us. Next, the most difficult thing was waiting to find the graves of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother. The paper guidebook said there was a land-

mark—a monument to the factory director Mikhalevich. The factory was a military secret because it made gyroscopes, and was simply called "Panel". This sounded lewd in the mouths of women who worked there when they answered where they were employed: "At the Panel" in colloquial Russian implies that one provides sex services.

My grandfather worked at the factory for three years before enrolling in the university. He told me that he was taught by Frayonov, a genius of locksmithing—one of the first Heroes of Socialist Labor for space exploration. He wasn't able to teach my grandfather anything useful: he remained just as inept as before.

The granite monument to the director of "Panel" towered above the rest of the gravestones, as if to demonstrate the former power and glory of the owner of the most prestigious enterprise of the city. "From Mikhalevich" it was required to mentally draw a diagonal line, leading to what they were looking for. We did just that, but the graves of the grandfather's parents seemed to have disappeared. The lush vegetation of the semi-rural old part of the cemetery shaded the names on the monuments and slabs. Uncle Heinrich read in the note: "There is an ash tree in the fence at the headboard. Nearby is the grave of front-line soldier Burov, a photo with orders and medals is embedded in a small obelisk in the form of a stone pillar tapering to the top." We wandered near the graves, waded through fresh thickets, and almost nowhere saw flowers, neither fresh nor wilted—it seems that descendants did not visit their deceased relatives often.

This was the second time I had been to a cemetery in my early twenties. The first time was in San Diego, when my grandmother Vera was buried, but I was very young then, and I didn't remember much about it, except for my mother Nadya's sobs. I experienced the loss of my grandmother in my own way, I loved her, but the emotions of grief did not penetrate me, as if they ran into an invisible barrier, going, as if to say, tangentially. Maybe because of my youth I did not know how to grieve and mourn…

That cemetery was American-style cleaned and tidy, with impressive monuments and vaults of granite and marble. The cemetery here, on the other hand, was dreary. The unkept graves with rusted fences, the remains of decaying artificial flowers and tilted crosses were all depressing.

Finally, tired and dissatisfied with ourselves, we found what we were looking for. I was upset at the sight of the grave, and Uncle Heinrich was upset too, judging by his furrowed brow. There were leaves, dry branches, scraps of wrapping paper, and a holey plastic bag lying on the mound of earth. The fence was graying, the gray marble slab of gravestones was swaying.

Uncle Heinrich took rags out of his bag, moistened them with water from the one-liter bottle that I thoughtfully brought, and began to wipe the slab with the names of my relatives Joseph Davidovich and Dora Wolfovna. I took care of the mound—I raked leaves, branches, and garbage onto the newspaper. The cleaning took half an hour.

Uncle Heinrich reinforced the slab as best he could, shook his head—it wouldn't last long.

"I'll pick a day and come back with some paint to tidy up the fence," he promised. He scrutinized the rusty metal bars: "They are firm, which is surprising. You can remove the rust with sandpaper."

He was a handy man; he knew his stuff.

I looked at the plate with the names, surnames, and dates of life of my close relatives and tried to evoke certain feelings in myself. To grieve for people you have never seen, even if they are close relatives, is difficult, impossible, it seems to me. No matter how hard I tried, nothing worked—I didn't know them when they were alive. I was content with my grandfather's stories and descriptions, and that wasn't enough now. But one story came out by itself, like the sudden appearance of outlines hidden by fog. A very special story jumped out, as if from an ambush, and which was connected with my great-grandfather and referred to the specific date of March 6, 1953. Daniel described it as follows:

"My father showed up at just after eleven o'clock, happy, and drunk. I'd never seen him like that before. Mother was stunned, her palm pressed to her mouth. Aunt Manya sobbed. My father tsked and spoke in a pathetic voice, as if on a podium, which he had never noticed before:

"Don't you dare cry, Manyasha! Today is the happiest day! The tyrant is gone! Think of your husband, of our dear incomparable Sasha Vitashkin—who destroyed him? Remember who

ruined millions of people like him, who put me in prison... Didn't he know what was going on in the country?! He directed everything himself. And you're shedding tears... You're all fools, brainless chickens...

"'Yuzya, wake up, they can hear you,' mother wailed. 'There's a child here,' she decided to resort to the main argument, in her opinion."

I felt as if I had been hit on the head with a shoe. The words spoken by my father were incomprehensible, as if they didn't sound in Russian, and so I couldn't understand them. It was not the words. The other thing that was incomprehensible: the grief, even grief like today, was not universal or all-encompassing, since one of the two most dear people to me was cheerful and even drank to celebrate.

My father excitedly paced around the room, whistled, shouting and reciting: "Cut my body, drink my blood!", turned on the gramophone, put on a record, floating ruddy and festive: "The morning paints the walls of the ancient Kremlin with gentle light...

Uncle Moishe squeezed his head into his shoulders, arching his back as if expecting a blow, and scampered to his side. The aunts stood frozen like statues, watching in mute horror as my father jumped and grabbed me in his arms:

"Don't you dare cry! Today is a holiday, and we're... we're going to have fun!" he spun around with me, out of tune with the music.

It lasted about three minutes. In anger, my mother Dora jerked the gramophone membrane with a needle, and the record made a nasty cracking sound.

"That's enough! Genuk! (Yiddish). Think of us, if you don't spare yourself."

Father drunkenly burst into tenderness, speaking to all present, whom he loves very much, and almost in his own, former voice, a little stammering, told how at the Kazan railway station he learned of Stalin's death. How he came to work, locked himself in with Volodya Arist, and how they drank something hard, hugged, kissed, and thanked fate for having lived to see this historic moment.

He settled down by midnight and went to bed.

During the night, someone's hands carefully pulled me out of bed. I found myself in my father's bed by the window and woke up. My father usually took me to his bed when I was sick. Now leaning back against a large pillow, half-sitting, half-lying, in the dark, he uttered a fast-flying, nervous whisper, jumping from one thing to another, sobering up and becoming more serious and angry in his words with each passing minute, a story about what was happening in the country in which I was born, which I loved and about which I sang in an emotional voice at school matinees: "My native country is wide, there are many forests, fields and rivers in it..." I didn't understand much of his story, the names of Kirov and his murderer Nikolayev, Yakir, Tukhachevsky, Ordzhonikidze, Yezhov, and some other names unfamiliar to me. Father told me about Aunt Mania's husband, Sofochka's father, who, it turned out, was not killed at the front, as I had been told, but shot; I learned about my mother's brother, who had also been arrested, imprisoned in a camp in Kolyma, and who still lived in that region. And then he began to recall his arrest and his time in prison.

I didn't remember much in those crazy hours, as my mind was a total mess. I only grasped the most important things that completely broke my childhood ideas. There are two worlds—one, open before me, in which various actions and deeds are performed; and the other, the hidden world—it is not talked about or written about, it is hidden, but it is impossible to imagine life in its entirety without it; the people hidden in this secretive world are not guilty of anything, but they are called enemies of the people, counter-revolutionaries, spies, saboteurs. But in fact, this is all nonsense, and they are just like all of us. And the fact that some of my relatives belong to this secretive world did not alienate them from me. On the contrary, it brought me closer to them after what I had heard that night.

My father finished his story and fell asleep. He snored heavily, occasionally moaning and sobbing. With a sharp, drilling pain in my head, trying to accommodate my scattered thoughts, overwhelmed by the pile of unbelievable, unthinkable discoveries that fell upon me, I wandered to school. I didn't know Solzhenitsyn's words at the time, because "First Circle" had not yet been written, but when I read them later, they fit my sentiment at the

time: "I am a stalk growing in the crater where the bomb tore out the tree of faith".

Was my father right in the experiment, which he had done without any intention, but simply because he had been drinking, and was he right from the point of view of pedagogy: did he have the right to do it or not? Should he have thrown me immediately, without preparation, into a turbulent river, where even experienced swimmers choked and drowned, unable to cope with the current? After all, wasn't it dangerous—for him and for me? When I think about it, I always come to the conviction that it probably should have been. Although, if I were in my father's shoes, I'd hardly dare to tell my twelve-year-old son such a thing. I'd be afraid that he'd start talking and we'd all be arrested. Somehow Dad wasn't afraid. There was always something that distinguished him from the majority of people I knew then and afterwards, and I can't find a strict definition for it. He was trusting, inadmissibly open-minded, sometimes acting frivolously, not even in an adult way, but he saw and felt much more deeply than others; this very trustfulness and inadmissible openness did not seem to fit at all into the norms of the unrighteous, cruel time in which he existed. My father had to die more than once, and against all odds he survived. Was it God's will, or, as my father had said, a higher power commanding fate?

I, Kirill Dikov, saw this picture so clearly, as if my great-grandfather were holding me in his arms, making awkward jumps, we were spinning, twirling in a wild dance to a festive melody, not at all corresponding to the sorrowful moment that the country was experiencing. Then something inside suddenly struck, broke, collapsed, as if the barriers had broken under the furious pressure of a flood, and I felt a shudder like none I had ever felt before."

On the grave we placed a bouquet of wildflowers that we bought at the cemetery. We threw the rags and newspaper on the dump nearby. We washed our hands with water from out from a bottle and sat down to rest on a bench near the exit.

"Remember the way," Uncle Heinrich said sternly. "If anything happens to me, you'll be the one to watch the grave. Danya is gone. You're the youngest in the family."

I could not define my state of mind: I was agitated by a new, completely unconscious, chilly, anxious, attracting, and longing sensation; for the first time I felt an unnoticed connection with those who had lived before me and whom I had never seen before. The fates of people hitherto incomprehensible became as if mine, invading my shell naturally and powerfully, flying in like a ball into a hole, saying: “Now you know us firsthand, remember us and do not lose us in your soul. You would be very different if you didn’t have us.”

The clock read half past twelve. The heat and absence of wind were beginning to get to me. It was, however, much easier to breathe than the August weather in New York. According to the arrangement confirmed by yesterday’s phone call, my grandfather’s former classmate was waiting for us. She explained that it would take twenty minutes by car from the cemetery to reach her house in the village of Kholodovo.

We walked out of the cemetery gate and headed in the direction of the station. On the way we bought a magnificent bouquet of carnations with large scarlet buds. While paying, Uncle Heinrich said with a chuckle: “One of our wild-eyed national patriots once said: ‘What a country America is—children don’t cry, dogs don’t bark, flowers don’t smell, women don’t love’… Well, Kiryusha, check if these flowers smell?” I sniffed—the carnations exuded a pleasant smell of cinnamon.

We added to the bouquet a box of Belgian chocolates I had bought in New York.

Uncle Heinrich pressed the button on his smartphone and called a cab. The service was provided by Yandex. It was also possible to order an Uber. In this respect, the cities of the Moscow suburbs, as I already knew, did not differ from American cities. I typed in the address where to go, our coordinates were already marked, including on the map, and in seven or eight minutes a Skoda arrived. The driver was a black-haired guy who looked like he was from the Caucasus region.

There was no traffic on the highway stretching along the railroad, so we quickly drove to Bashmakova’s house. The entrance of the pre-fab concrete nine-story building was open; no code or intercom was necessary. The elevator took us to the 6th floor,

and on the wall was written in black felt-tip pen: “Fuck Tanya” I smiled-almost Bronx.

We were met by a short stout woman with puffy cheeks, (one more adorable addition to my Russian vocabulary—“like a bull-dog”—would sound extremely impolite and rude when applied to a lady). The dyed blonde looked young, hiding her age, but her teeth… her teeth gave her away; if she had flashed a Hollywood smile full of crowns with transparent enamel, the effect would have been unimportant due to the inconsistency of the rest of the grooming standards.

We made acquaintances. “Svetlana Vasilyevna, but you can call me Svetlana or just Sveta,” she said, removing the barrier that naturally arose when people see each other for the first time.

I handed her the carnations and candies, and she lit up: “My God, I haven’t been given flowers for ages! And thank you for the candy…”

She had prepared thoroughly for our arrival; the table under the beige tablecloth in the living room was laden with plates of Russian food: thinly sliced sausage with specks of fat, and jelly, pickled cabbage, pickled mushrooms, a bowl of fresh salad—to-matoes, cucumbers, radishes, green onions… We washed our hands once again and sat down. Svetlana Vasilyevna brought smoked potatoes and a sweaty bottle of Russian Standard vodka. I felt hungry.

“Let us, gentlemen, commemorate the servant of God, Daniel, who died not in his homeland but in a foreign land,” she began meaningfully, like a memorial prayer. I was miffed, Uncle Hein-rich frowned. “Kirill, in my school days I was friends with your grandfather. Then he moved to Moscow and disappeared from the horizon. I’m not even talking about his departure to Ameri-ca. Eternal memory to him. No cheers…”

…I had found Svetlana Vasilyevna by accident. While sort-ing through my grandfather’s archive, I came across an enve-lope with several photographs of a group of elderly people and a letter in Russian. A certain Bashmakova reported that she had found my grandfather’s address on the Internet through a liter-ary magazine that he edited. “I am the same Sveta with whom you kissed in the schoolyard. We, your former fellow students,

joined the social network *Odnoklassniki* a couple years ago and invite you to join our group. Tanya Shepel, Ella Kozlova, Vitya Andrianov, Kolya Skovpen, etc. are there. I hope you remember our girls and guys… Many, unfortunately, are no longer alive, but the rest are happy to be friends and communicate. Join us, we have a lot to remember…"

I started my search. It was easy to find Svetlana Bashmakova through Odnoklassniki. I wrote to her, gave her my contact details, and within a month she responded. When she learned that my grandfather had died, she sent me sympathetic words by e-mail, seemingly quite sincere. I called her in Ramenskoye, thanked her for her recollections and hinted that I was going to Russia to meet those who knew my grandfather. Svetlana said: "I would be happy to see you."

Now we are drinking vodka, snacking on jellied meat with a strong scent of garlic; in my pre-university life in California this Russian dish was always present at adult feasts; it was wonderfully prepared by my grandmother Vera. And we listened to the stories of our hostess, flushed from drinking.

"Danya—let me call him that in a friendly way," she said to me, "he didn't answer my letter or send me a picture, as I had asked. I don't know whether he was proud of himself, a great writer, or whether he was already ill at that time, but I didn't wait for an answer. By the way, Kirill, your grandfather and I sympathized with each other, maybe even loved each other; I remember, several times in the evenings, when there was no one at school, in the yard on the bench we kissed, he unbuttoned my marquisette blouse, but it didn't go any further. I'm sorry to give you such details, but you're an adult, I know it's important for you to know everything. Anyway, he could have been my first. We once traveled to Tarusa, a wonderful place on the Oka River: Danya, me, Nadka Sinitsina and Igor, Danya's friend, I don't remember his last name. We spent the night in a *stog*. Nadka just had an abortion so she wouldn't let Igor have sex. But I was ready—romance, mind-blowing tickling smells … Do you know what a *stog sena* is? How do you say it in English?"

"I know. Haystack."

"Wow… Where did you learn to speak Russian like that? Must have been Danya's influence. Well, anyway, I was ready to give

up my virginity, but your grandfather wasn't persistent. He's indecisive. I can imagine that later in his life he was not a leading man in relations with women, but rather a wingman. And how are you, Kirill, in this regard? Do you have a girlfriend?"

I dodged the question.

"Allow me, dear Svetlana Vasilyevna, to disagree," Uncle Heinrich spoke up. "Daniel was very determined. I can judge from personal observation. Women liked him, and he had no lack of them. He didn't hide or conceal his love affairs. Of course, this is not good, and this was quite unpleasant for his wife, and Tanya ended up with a lot of gray hairs; she loved him without holding a grudge and forgave him. Who among us is without sin..."

"I don't know... I think it was also reflected in his behavior and actions: Danya was ashamed of his Jewishness, and worried, hence his shyness. There were only two Jews in the class—him and Axelrod. We didn't talk about it, but I felt it."

There was a pause. I didn't want to touch on the Jewish subject. The hidden side of my grandfather's life was partly not clear to me, and it was not for me to discuss it with Bashmakova. Uncle Heinrich understood my state of mind and took the conversation aside and began to ask the landlady about her family and children.

"My husband died three years ago; cancer," Svetlana sighed deeply and finished the rest of her glass. "I have two children: a son and a daughter, and three grandchildren. Seryozha lives in Moscow, working in construction, and Masha is a civil servant, working in our city hall. Both of them are on their second marriages. They help me—it's hard to live on a pension. Are you married, Heinrich?" she asked in a sneaky way.

The conversation under the influence of vodka moved neither shakily nor slow, jumping from one thing to another. I realized that I would not learn anything new about my grandfather. Girls appeared in the 7th grade, and before that it was boys' education only. Svetlana knew nothing about grandfather's aged friends that he had once colorfully described because they had managed to be excluded from school by the time the girls were included.

And by the way, it's a pity that we can't find and question any of these 'bandits'—they're the ones who could tell a bunch of crazy stories... Alas, none of them are alive already a long time,

according to grandfather. Titus died in prison under mysterious circumstances; Tsymba was found on the tracks cut down by an electric train; while all traces of Bosun were lost. Grandpa shared with readers what this trio had been up to, and I bet most did not believe the author. Such outrages were possible in a Soviet school? However, everything is true—grandfather confirmed this in my conversation with him.

Take Titus. A reputable fifteen-year-old, not even a second-year student, but a *third-year student,* he was up to his neck in such antics. As a writer Grandpa 'painted', so to speak, from real life events. Titus liked the new English teacher Sophia Petrovna—Sophochka—a sweet, innocent graduate of the Pedagogical Institute, who blushed for no reason. Titus was burning with excess of feelings and came up with idea for some fun. As soon as Sofochka bent her blond doll's head over the teacher's logbook, pondering who would be called to the blackboard, Titus stood up by his desk and pulled down his pants, showing the twelve-year-old numbskulls squirting into their fists what a masculine object he had under his hair. The trick was to be able to pull up his pants before Sofochka finished looking at her journal and raised her head. Twice Titus missed, and Sofochka fainted…

And what was the hidden walk of the mentioned trinity led by Titus under the station platform… Once they seduced the naive Danya to go and watch *"television"*. Unsuspecting, he went with the trio and… found himself under the platform where was he disgusting smell of dog and human feces. He realized that he was now an accomplice to something bad, but it was too late to run away. He saw the trio peering through the gaps between the platform boards, peeking under the skirts of the women waiting for the train, and Tsymba thrust a sharpened reed into the gap and quickly thrusted it up. In response—there was a shriek and a man's angry voice: "Bastard, I'll tear your balls off!" The trio fled in a flash, leaving Danya, who ran off in the direction of the market in absolute terror.

…In a few seconds I had recalled my grandfather's way under the platform, running madly in fear of possible reprisal. Bashmakova's own revelations, warmed by drink, had already drifted away somewhere. Returning to the table, I suddenly wanted to see her as a young woman, kissing my grandfather on the bench,

but I could not. Unstructured, fluctuating like a curtain in the wind, this picture was overlapped by much more visible tricks with a boy's pants down in English class and the "TV set" under the platform.

…It was time to call it a day. And then the hostess burst into tears.

"Danya disliked Russia, and wrote vindictively about it. What bad things had his homeland done to him? Even though he was a Jew, worked for a big newspaper, published a lot, and traveled abroad, but still, he didn't love Russia!" This is my conclusion based on his books, some of them I could get and read. "He disliked Russia!" and tapped a glass of water as if to confirm it.

I didn't expect such a turn. It stung: *even though he was a Jew*… I had to answer something.

"I did not detect any malice or vindictiveness," Uncle Heinrich preempted. "Dikov left Russia because had a premonition of bad changes to come and did not want to be a part of them. I doubted very much that suddenly, as if by magic, everyone had become democrats and liberals. It was *profitable to* be considered as such, so people proclaimed themselves democrats. "There's no turning back!" were words repeated like a mantra at rallies on Manezhnaya Square. In reality, however, it turned out—you see for yourself. He expressed himself well on this subject in his novels."

"But you haven't left!" Svetlana pushed.

"I'm a different matter," he retorted.

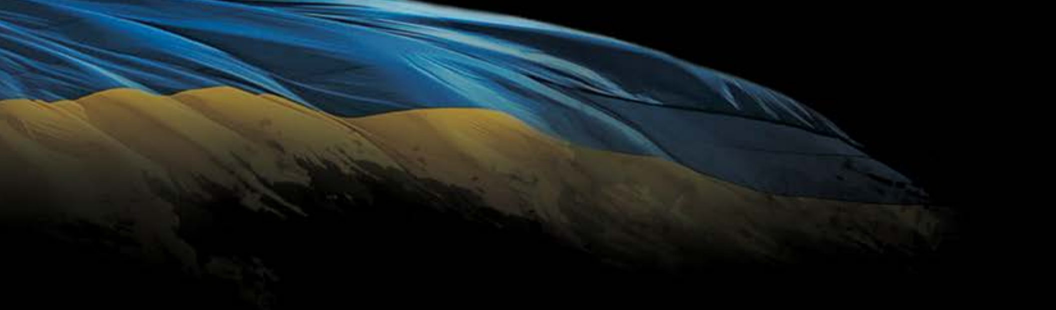
"You think I'm unfair? Well, what about the Putin novel? It's from 2012. No Crimea yet, no Lugandonia. Putin in the guise of a Dragon—remember the cover? Masha got it through her own channels, and gave it to me to read. It's a nightmare! The only one in the class who volunteered to execute a duck raised by the kids. Some sort of backstreet villain! And the testimony of the fucking German spy Lenchen, who gained Lyudmila's trust in Dresden: it turns out that Putin beat his wife, and cheated on her, and in general, he was a sadist. And the mocking story, completely made up, about Putin's illegitimate son, conceived in Gansonia—meaning in Germany—who is judging his father… Every page there is a slander: the Supreme Ruler adores snakes,

keeps a terrarium at his dacha, and at the same time an air defense unit in case of an attack from the air…"

"Svetlana Vasilyevna, it's a special genre: realities crossed with dystopia," I objected.

"I don't know what kind of utopia there is, but it's a slander!" Bashmakova didn't stop. "And what kind of clown is this that is supposed to replace the president? Danya sent Vladimir Vladimirovich to the other world in March 2017, killing him in a helicopter crash. It seems that he wanted to settle scores with the hated head of a great country, for whom all our people voted in the elections. Danya invented a scene with the Apostle Paul, who summoned Putin's soul to a private trial. The Apostle tortured and tormented him, asking him poisonous, insidious questions—the blown-up houses with their inhabitants, and Beslan, and so on, doubting his Christian faith…And you say: the author is not malicious…"

I remained silent. Uncle Heinrich smiled crookedly. There was no point in developing the discussion any further. Bashmakova also sensed it and quieted down. We said goodbye.



An old immigrant writer dies in New York. Three suitcases of his archive are left behind. By the will of circumstances, the archive falls into the hands of his grandson, a Harvard graduate who speaks and reads fluent Russian. Sorting through the papers and photographs, the grandson tries to make out a portrait of his grandfather's life. A vivid human destiny appears before him—with quirks, discoveries, losses, sufferings, love, betrayals, sorrows, losses, and gains.

His goal is to unravel secrets, mysteries, look into the innermost corners of the soul, and to answer the question to which the grandfather will not answer: is what he aspired to higher than what he fought against?

The war in Ukraine fits organically into the narrative, which is told by the grandson: he is involved in the events caused by Russian aggression, participates in the rescue of a young woman from Kiev—the granddaughter of a mistress of his grandfather. And then the unexpected announcement... All of this gives the novel an acute sense of urgency.

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