

VICTOR PELEVIN OMON RA



ТАΙΔΕ

Victor Pelevin

OMON RA

© 1991 Виктор Пелевин & «Text» Publishers, Moscow, Russia.

Translated from the Russian by Юрий М.

Typeset by Τάφος Δεμέστιχας (ΤΑΔΕ).

Dedicated to the heroes of the Soviet Space.

1

Omon¹ is not a particularly common name, and maybe not the best there is. My father gave it to me. He worked in the police all of his life, and wanted me to become a policeman too.

“You see, Ommie,” he would tell me often after having a couple of drinks, “with this name, if you decide on police. . . And especially if you join the Party². . .”

Even though father's job included shooting people from time to time, he had a kind heart, and he was cheerful and agreeable by nature. He loved me very much, and he hoped I would achieve that which he wasn't able to achieve himself. And what he wished for was a plot of land in the suburbs so that he could grow cucumbers and beets on it—not for eating, or selling at the farmer's market. That too, of course, but mainly for just being able to hack at the earth with a spade after stripping naked from the waist up, to see the purplish earthworms writhe and all the assorted underground life go about its business, to haul the wheelbarrow full of manure across the entire subdivision, stopping at strangers' fences to have a couple of jokes. When he realized he was not going to get any of that, he began to hope that at least one of the Krivomazov³ brothers was going to live a happier life (my older

¹ OMON—Russian abbreviation for a Special Forces Detachment; a crack police squad.

² The Communist Party, of course—since there was only one, the word “Party” was sufficient. Party membership was an essential requirement for advancing the career beyond mid-level management—or junior officer rank.

³ An obvious play on the Karamazov name, but sounding quite a bit uglier to the Russian ear—*Krivo* means “crooked”, and *mazov* is derived from *mazat*, “to miss completely” or “to smear”.

brother Ovir⁴ whom my father wanted to become a diplomat died from meningitis when he was in fourth grade; all I remember about him is that he had a big oblong mole on his forehead).

Father's plans concerning my future never quite inspired much confidence in me; he himself was a Party member, and he had a good name, Matvei, but all he managed to scrape together at the end was a meager retirement pension and a lonely alcoholic old age.

I don't remember mom all too well. One single memory is all that's left—how dad, drunk and in uniform, tries to pull the gun from his holster, and she, crying, with messed-up hair, grabs at his hands, screaming: “Matvei, stop it!”

She died when I was very little, and I was brought up by my aunt, only visiting my father on the weekends. He would be puffy and red-faced, with his medal that he was so proud of hanging askew on his worn out pajama top. His room always smelled badly, and on the wall there was a copy of Michelangelo's “Creation,” where the bearded God is floating over Adam who is lying on his back, God's arm outstretched to meet the man's delicate hand. This picture seemed to have a rather odd effect on my father's nature, apparently reminding him of something from his past. When in his room, I usually played with the toy railroad set sitting on the floor, and he would snore on the converted sofa. Sometimes he would wake up, squint at me for a while, and then hang down halfway from the sofa steadying himself against the floor and reach towards me with his big hand, all covered in bluish veins, which I was supposed to shake.

“What's your name now?” he'd ask.

“Krivomazov,” I'd answer, faking the innocent smile on

⁴ OVIR—Russian abbreviation for a local office of Interior Ministry formally charged with adjudicating cases for exit visas for Soviet citizens, as well as registering entry of foreigners into the country.

my face, and then he would pat me on the head and give me candy. All of this he did in such a mechanical fashion that I almost was not disgusted.

There's nothing much I can say about the aunt—she was pretty indifferent towards me, and tried to arrange it so that I spent most of my time in various camps and “extended day care groups.” By the way, it is only now that I can see the extraordinary beauty of that last expression.

From my childhood I only managed to remember that which was related, so to say, to my dreams of the sky. Of course, this wasn't how the life started. Before that, there was a long, brightly lit room full of other children and large plastic blocks, and there were the stairs of a wooden slide glazed over with ice that I was scaling up hurriedly, and some cracked young drummer boys in the yard made from painted stucco, and lots of other stuff. But it can hardly be said that it was I who saw those things; for in the early childhood (just like, ostensibly, after death) a person is going in many directions at once, and therefore it is safe to assume that he is not there yet, his full personality to arrive only later, along with attachment to one fixed, specific direction.

Our apartment was not far from the “Cosmos” movie theatre. An enormous rocket made of shiny metal always reigned supreme over our neighborhood, standing as it were on a narrowing plume of titanium smoke, resembling a huge curved blade piercing the ground.⁵ Surprisingly, it was not the rocket that started me as a person, but a wooden airplane installed on the playground on our block. It was not quite an airplane, rather a small wooden house with two windows which acquired wings and tail made from pickets when the fence was taken down, and then they covered it with green

⁵ The author refers to the “Space Conquerors” monument in the northern part of Moscow, near the Ostankino TV tower (which is, incidentally, much higher). The Space Exploration museum is located at its base.

paint and decorated with several large orange stars. Two, maybe three of us could fit inside, and there also was a small loft above with a triangular window overlooking the wall of the army draft office. By an unspoken agreement honored throughout the block, this loft was always assigned to be the pilot's cockpit, and every time the plane was shot down the people in the main body were to bail out first, and only then, when the earth was already imminently gaining on the windows with a deafening howl, only then was the pilot allowed to join the others—if he managed to do it in time, of course. I always tried to get to be the pilot, and I even mastered the art of seeing the sky with clouds and the Earth floating beneath in place where the draft office was standing, fuzzy violets and dusty cacti looking dejectedly down on us from its windowsills.

I always liked movies about pilots; it was one of these movies that was linked with the strongest experience of my childhood. One time, on an outer-space-black December night, I switched on the aunt's TV set and saw on the screen an airplane swinging its wings gently, with an ace of spades and a cross stenciled on its body. I shifted closer to the screen, and right away the canopy over the cockpit came looming large into view; behind the thick glass an almost inhuman face could be seen smiling, in a soft helmet with shiny black Bakelite earphones, behind goggles resembling ones that skiers put on. The pilot lifted the gloved hand and waved at me. Then the body of another plane appeared on screen, shot from inside; behind two identical sets of controls two pilots were sitting in mutton overcoats, watching intently over the evolutions of the enemy fighter, flying right nearby, through thick translucent plastic braced by steel frame.

“Spot nine,” said one of the pilots to the other. “They're going to bring us down.”

The other one, with the handsome face of a habitual drunkard, just nodded.

“I'm not holding it against you,” he said, apparently continuing the conversation that was just interrupted. “But remember this: you better make sure that with you and Barb—it's for the rest of your life. . . To the grave.”

This was when I stopped acknowledging the happenings on the screen—I was struck by the thought, not even the thought, but its barely recognizable shadow (as if the thought itself floated by somewhere in the vicinity, only touching my head with one of its edges)—about how, if I by glancing at the screen could see the world from the inside of the cockpit where the two pilots in overcoats were sitting—how in fact there's nothing that can stop me from getting into that or any other cockpit without the aid of any television, because the experience of flight is reduced to just a set of perceptions, and the principal ones of them I had already learned to simulate long ago, while sitting in the loft of the winged hut with red stars, looking at the draft office wall that impersonated the sky and making faint humming noises with my mouth.

This indistinct realization had so shaken me that the remainder of the movie I observed with half of my mind, only tuning into the television reality when smoky trails appeared on the screen, or a line of enemy planes on the ground swept by across it. “This means,” I thought, “that you can look from inside yourself as if from inside the plane, and it does not even matter at all where you look—the only important thing is what you see. . .” Ever since, when I trundled along some snowy street, I would imagine that I am in fact flying an airplane over snow-bound fields, making wide turns, and I tilted my head so that the world would tilt obediently—to the left, or to the right.

And still, that person that I am now able to confidently

name “I” have in fact formed later, gradually over time. I consider the first glimpse of my real soul to be the exact moment when I realized that one can aspire not to the thin blue film of the sky, but beyond it to the bottomless black pit of space. It happened the same winter, one evening, when I was wandering around the Industry Achievements Expo.⁶ I was walking down a dark, deserted alley covered with snow, and then I heard a buzzing sound from the left, like a huge phone ringing. I turned and I saw him.

Reclining, sitting on emptiness as if it were an easy chair, he was moving forward slowly, and just as slowly the lines and tubes were straightening out behind him. The glass of his helmet was pitch black, and only a small triangular reflection was burning bright on its surface, but I knew he could see me. He was quite possibly dead for some centuries now. His arms were confidently outstretched towards the stars, and his feet did not require any kind of support to such an extent that I realized once and for all that true freedom can only be attained through weightlessness, and this is why, by the way, all my life I found all those Western radio *voices*⁷ and writings of assorted *solzhenitsyns* so incredibly boring, because while in my heart of hearts I, of course, could not help but be sickened by the Soviet state, the demands of which, vague but powerfully threatening nonetheless, were forcing any group of people, no matter how small, no matter how fleetingly assembled, to endeavor to imitate painstakingly the tawdriest of its members, but upon gaining

⁶ A permanent exposition grounds built in grand style shortly after the WWII to showcase the great state of the Soviet economy. Separate buildings—*pavilions*—were dedicated to different branches of the industry. Referred to later is the *Cosmos* pavilion, housing something similar to the Smithsonian's space collection.

⁷ Radio programs of various shortwave Western stations based in Europe and broadcasting (usually in Russian) to USSR, usually referred to as *golosa*, “voices” or “enemy voices”, after the *Voice of America*.

the understanding that no peace or freedom can exist here on Earth my spirit soared skywards, and anything that my chosen path ever demanded from me from that moment on could never become contrary to my conscience, because the conscience called me to space and paid little attention to what was going on below.

It was just a stained glass mosaic on the wall of the pavilion in front of me, depicting a cosmonaut in open space, but in one instant it conveyed to me more than the dozens of books that I had read to date. I was looking at it for a long, long time, and then I suddenly felt someone looking at me.

I turned around and saw a boy standing behind me, about my age, looking rather strange—he was wearing a leather helmet with shiny black Bakelite earphones, and there were swimming goggles hanging around his neck. He was half a foot taller and probably a little older; as he entered the zone that was illuminated by the floodlights he raised his black-gloved hand, his lips grimaced in a cold smile, and for a second the pilot of the fighter with the black ace flashed before my eyes.

They called him Mityok.⁸ It turned out that we lived very close to each other, even though we went to different schools. Mityok was unsure about many things, but there was one thing he knew for certain. He knew that he would become a pilot first, and then he would fly to the Moon.

⁸ Informal short form of Dimitry.

2

There seems to be some sort of strange connection between the general outline of life and the small episodes that one constantly finds himself in without assigning any significance to them. I can see clearly now that my destiny was quite accurately determined at the time when I had not even started to pay any earnest consideration to the way I'd like to see it unfold, moreover—it was already demonstrated to me then, albeit in a slightly simplified way. Maybe that was just a future echo. And maybe that which we assume to be a future echo is in fact the seed of that future, taking to root at the very moment that later, from afar, we come to regard as an echo that flew back from the future.

Anyway, the summer after the seventh grade was hot and dusty. The first half of it I remember only for the long bicycle rides on one of the suburban parkways. I would attach a special rattler onto the rear wheel of my semi-racing *Sport* bike, made from a piece of cardboard folded over several times and fastened to the frame with a clothespin—when I was moving, the paper would strike against the spokes producing rapid gentle clattering, reminiscent of the roar of an airplane engine. Storming down the paved hill I would again and again become a fighter acquiring the target. The fighter was not usually a Soviet one, but that wasn't my fault, it was just that in the beginning of that summer I've heard an inane song somewhere, and there were lines in it about “Fast as bullet is my Phantom, In the sky all blue and clear It is quickly gaining altitude.” I have to say that the stupidity of this song, while quite apparent to me, never

interfered with the warm sensation that it aroused deep in my soul. What other lines I remember from it? “Cross the sky a smoky trail. . . My dear Texas left behind. . .” And there were a mother and a father in it, and some Mary, made very real by the mention of her last name later in the song.

By mid-July I was back in the city again, and then Mityok's parents got vouchers for us to go to the summer camp named *Rocket*. This was your regular camp in the South, in some ways maybe even better than a lot of others. I only remember well the first few days of it, but everything that would become so significant later on happened in those few days. While in the train on the way there, Mityok and I ran back and forth about the cars and dropped any bottles we could find into the toilets—they would fall down onto the railway tracks rushing by under the small round porthole and explode noiselessly, with the song that was following me around imparting the sweet flavor of the struggle for the freedom of Vietnam to this uncomplicated activity.

Next day our entire group that was traveling together by the same train disembarked at the damp terminal of a Southern town and was loaded onto trucks after a headcount. We were driving on a road winding its way between mountains for a long time, and then the sea showed itself to our right and brightly colored barns were approaching us. We got off onto a paved square, they assembled us in formation and led to the flat-roofed glass building on top of a hill. That was the mess, where we were greeted by a cold dinner, even though it was already supper time,⁹ since we arrived several hours later than expected. The dinner was not particularly tasty—soup with small star-shaped noodles, boiled chicken with rice and stewed dried fruits for desert.

Hanging on the threads from the ceiling of the mess,

⁹ In Russia dinner usually takes place in the early afternoon, while supper, also quite substantial, happens in the evening.

covered with something that appeared to be sticky when you looked at it, there were spaceships made from craft paper. I was observing one of them for some time. The unknown artisan expended a lot of shiny foil to decorate it, splattering it all over with the words *СССР*.¹⁰ The ship was hanging right in front of our table, glowing orange from the sunset, suddenly reminding me of a subway train headlamp lighting up in the black void of a tunnel. I became sad for some reason.

Mityok, on the contrary, was chatty and joyful.

“They had one kind of spaceships in the twenties,” he said, jabbing the air with his fork, “and then it was different in the thirties, and different again in the fifties, and so on.”

“What are you talking about—spaceships in the twenties?” I asked feebly.

Mityok considered it for a second.

“Alexey Tolstoy had those huge metal eggs where explosions would occur at minute intervals, giving energy for the propulsion,”¹¹ he said. “At least that was the main principle. There can be a lot of variations, of course.”

“But they never actually flew, did they?” I said.

“These don't either,” he countered and pointed at the subjects of our discussion, swaying lightly in the draft.

Finally I understood what he meant to say, even though I would hardly have been able to put it precisely in words. The only space where the starships of the Communist future were flying—incidentally, when I encountered the word “starship” in science fiction books, I always thought for some reason that it had something to do with the red stars on the

¹⁰ Russian letters standing for USSR; should be quite familiar in this form to the reader.

¹¹ Referring to the science fiction novel *Aelita*, concerned with a Mars expedition in just such a vehicle. Naturally, the characters find an oppressive capitalist society there, too, and assist in overthrowing it.

bodies of the Soviet space technology—in short, the only place where they did indeed fly was the Soviet citizens' collective consciousness, just as the mess hall around us was the space into which the group who lived in the camp before us launched their starships, so that they would still be traversing the space-time continuum over the dinner tables even when the creators of the cardboard fleet are no longer around. This thought superimposed onto that special unspeakable longing that always took hold of me when I was eating the camp's dried fruit compote to produce a peculiar idea in my head.

“You know, I always liked to assemble plastic airplanes,” I said, “those kits that you glue together. Especially the military ones.”

“So did I,” replied Mityok, “but that was long time ago.”

“The ones from GDR¹² were good. And ours often did not have the pilot included. That really sucked. When the cockpit is empty, I mean.”

“Exactly,” Mityok said. “Why are you talking about it?”

“Know what, I wonder,” I said, pointing with my fork at the starship hanging right over our table, “is there anyone inside there or not?”

“No idea,” said Mityok. “But you're right, it is interesting.”

The camp was situated on a gentle mountain slope, and the lower section of it formed something like a little park. Mityok disappeared somewhere, so I walked there alone; a couple of minutes later I found myself in a long, empty alley lined with cypresses, casting deep shadows in an advanced warning of the approaching darkness. Enormous plywood boards with drawings on them hung off the chain link fence bordering the asphalt walk path. The first depicted a young

¹² German Democratic Republic; East Germany.

pioneer¹³ with a plain Russian face, looking far ahead and clutching the brass horn adorned with a red flag against his thigh. The same pioneer was on the second one, with a drum slung around his shoulders and sticks in his hand. On the third one—him again, continuing to look ahead from under the hand raised in salute.¹⁴ The next board was twice as wide as the other ones, and it was very long—about ten feet, I guess. It was painted in two colors; the side from which I was approaching slowly was red, and then it became white, with a jagged wave that separated the colors overcoming the white field, leaving a trail of red behind it. I did not realize at first what that was, and only when I came closer I recognized in the intertwining red and white splotches Lenin's face, with the protuberance of the beard resembling the battering ram, his face left open. There was no back to Lenin's head—it only had the face, and the entire red surface behind it was in itself Lenin; he looked like an incorporeal god, his manifestation only a ripple on the surface of the world he had created.

I stubbed my toe on the crack in the asphalt and transferred my gaze onto the next board—it was the pioneer, now in a spacesuit, red helmet under his arm, with a sharp pointy antenna and letters *СССР* written on it. The next pioneer was already sticking halfway out of the flying rocket, saluting with his heavily gloved hand. And the last pioneer, still in spacesuit, was standing on the merrily yellow Moon next to his ship, which looked very much like the cardboard rocket in the mess hall. Only his eyes were visible, they were

¹³ The name of the youth organization for children of approximately middle school age, essentially scouts with the Communist twist. Membership was more or less mandatory. Symbols of “young pioneers” included a badge and red neckerchief (to be worn to school daily), as well as the horn and drum mentioned here.

¹⁴ The salute resembled the military one, except the hand drawn a little higher, diagonally bisecting the face with tips of the fingers slightly above the head, not touching it.

exactly the same eyes as the ones he had on the other boards, but now that the rest of his face was obscured by the helmet they seemed to contain an expression of unspeakable agony.

I heard steps coming fast behind me; when I turned around, there was Mityok.

“You were right,” he said, coming closer.

“About what?”

“Look,” he stretched out his hand holding something dark. I managed to discern a small Play-Doh figurine, its head wrapped in foil.

“There was this little paper chair inside, and he was sitting on it,” said Mityok.

“You didn't take apart that rocket from the mess, did you?” I asked.

He nodded.

“When?”

“Just now. Ten minutes ago. It's the strangest thing, everything in there. . .” he crossed his hands, making a lattice with his fingers.

“In the mess?”

“No, in the rocket. When they were making it, they started with this guy. They made him, stuck him to the chair and totally papered him over.”

Mityok handed me a piece of cardboard. I took it and was able to make out tiny, very elaborately drawn gauges, controls, buttons and even some kind of painting on the wall.

“But the most interesting thing is,” Mityok continued dolefully and a little despondently, “there was no door there. The hatch is painted on the outside, but on the inside it's solid wall, with gauges and stuff.”

I looked at the paper scrap once again and noticed a little window in which the small distant Earth was shining bright blue.

“If I could get my hands on the guy that put this rocket

together,” said Mityok, “I’d definitely break his face.”

“Why?”

Mityok did not answer. Instead he wound up his arm to chuck the little figurine over the fence, but I caught his hand and asked him to give it to me. He did not object, and I spent the next half hour looking for an empty cigarette box to put it in.

The echoes of this bizarre discovery caught up with us the next day, during the siesta hour. The door opened, they called Mityok's name, and he stepped out into the corridor. I've heard snippets of conversations, “mess” was mentioned a couple of times, and it was only too clear. I also got up and went out into the corridor. A pair of camp instructors, he—lanky and mustachioed, she—short and red-haired, were handling Mityok in the corner.

“I was there too,” I said.

The male instructor stared me down approvingly.

“You want to crawl together or separately?” he asked. I noticed he was holding a gas mask in a green canvas bag.

“How could they possibly crawl together, Kolya,” said the other one bashfully, “when you only have one gas mask. Has to be one after the other.”

Mityok took a step forward, glancing slightly back at me.

“Put it on,” the instructor said.

Mityok put the gas mask on.

“Get down.”

He got down on the floor.

“Go,” said Kolya, clicking his stopwatch.

The dorm was at least fifty yards long, and the corridor spanned the entire length of it. The surface of the floor was shrouded in linoleum, and when Mityok started forward it squeaked—softly but disgustingly. Of course, Mityok did not make it in the three minutes that the instructor gave him—he

did not even make it one way in that time, but when he crawled back to us, Kolya did not choose to have him do it all over, because there were only a couple of minutes left in the siesta. Mityok took the gas mask off. His face was red, with drops of sweat and tears all over it, and his feet were already covered with blisters where they rubbed against the linoleum.

“Now you,” the instructor said, passing the wet gas mask on to me. “Get set. . .”

It is a mysterious and wondrous sight, the corridor when you look at its linoleum-clad infinity through the fogged lenses of a gas mask. The floor you are lying on is cooling your breast and stomach, the far end of it barely visible, with the pale stream of the ceiling almost coming to a point together with the walls. The gas mask is cinching your face, pressing at the cheeks, making your lips draw forward in a kind of half-kiss, directed apparently at everything around you. Before you are nudged slightly, giving you the go-ahead, at least a couple dozen seconds pass; they drift by agonizingly slow, and you are able to notice a lot of things. There's some lint, and translucent sand grains in the notch where two linoleum panels meet, and a knot in the wood paneling at the very bottom of the wall that was painted over, and this is an ant that became just two dried-out thin drops but left a reminder of itself in the future, in a form of a small wet spot a couple of feet further, where the foot of a person walking down the corridor stepped a second after the catastrophe.

“Go,” I heard over my head, and I was on my way, merrily and earnestly. The punishment looked like a joke to me, and I couldn't understand why Mityok suddenly came apart. First ten yards flashed by in an instant, but then it became harder. When you crawl, at some point you have to push against the floor with the upper part of your foot, where the skin is thin and tender, so if you haven't anything on you

get blisters right away. Linoleum was clinging to my body, it seemed like hundreds of insects were drilling into my feet, or like I was crawling on the freshly paved asphalt. I was surprised how slowly the time was dragging on—there was a large amateur watercolor painting on the wall, depicting the *Aurora* cruiser¹⁵ in the Black Sea, and I noticed that I have been crawling past it for quite some time, while it hasn't moved an inch.

And then suddenly everything changed. I mean, everything continued as it was—I was still crawling down the corridor, just as before, but the pain and the tiredness, after having reached the point of being unbearable, switched something off inside me. Or switched on, I don't know. I noticed all of a sudden that everything is very quiet around me, only the linoleum is squeaking under my feet, like something being dragged on rusty little wheels, and somewhere far below the windows the sea is rumbling, and farther still, as if from beyond the sea, the loudspeaker is singing with the voice of many children.

The life was a gentle green miracle, the sky was still and cloudless, the sun was shining—and in the middle of this world there was the two-storied dorm building, and inside it was a long corridor, and I was crawling along it in a gas mask. And this fact was, on one hand, so obvious and natural, and on the other hand—so hurtful and grotesque, that I started crying under my rubber second face, taking comfort in my real face being hidden from the instructors and especially the door frames, from where dozens of eyes were peering at my glory and my shame through the cracks.

My tears dried up in another few yards, and I began to feverishly scramble for at least one thought that would have

¹⁵ This WWI cruiser is purported to have given the signal for the October 1917 Bolshevik coup by firing a blank from its anchored position in the Neva river in St. Petersburg (where it is still on display).

given me the strength to go on, because the terror before the instructor was no longer sufficient. I closed my eyes, and it was night, its velvet darkness disturbed from time to time by the stars lighting before my eyes. The distant song became audible again, and very, very softly, probably even silently, I began to sing along.

The tinny sound of the trumpet spread over the camp—it was the wake-up signal. I stopped and opened my eyes. I still had about three yards to go before the end of the corridor. There was a shelf on the slate gray wall in front of me, with a yellow Lunar globe standing on top of it; through the glass that was sprayed with tears and fogged over it seemed fuzzy and washed out, as though it was not standing on the shelf but instead floating in the grayish void.

3

The first time in my life that I drank wine was in winter, when I turned fourteen. It happened in an industrial garage; Mityok would bring me there because his brother, a morose hippie who conned his way out of the draft,¹⁶ worked there as a night guard. The garage occupied a large fenced-off plot strewn with cement blocks, which Mityok and I have taken to climbing for hours on end, sometimes finding ourselves in wondrous places, isolated completely from the rest of the real world and looking like sections of a long-abandoned spaceship, with its empty hull (strangely resembling a pile of cement blocks) the only thing left standing. The streetlights over the crooked picket fence also contributed to the illusion with their mysterious, otherworldly glow, and the clear, empty sky displayed only a smattering of small stars—in other words, if you didn't count the empty wine bottles and iced-over urine flows, it was the outer space that surrounded us.

Mityok suggested that we go inside, where it's warm, and we directed our steps to the corrugated aluminium half-sphere of the garage, its shape also vaguely related to something from space. It was dark inside, and the outlines of

¹⁶ The military draft was (and still is) mandatory for every male age 18, with a 2 year (3 in the Navy) tour of duty as a private (crewman). Young males with enough sense to try to avoid it would fake (often successfully) psychiatric disorders. Top-rank universities provide deferment, while training the students so that they attain the junior officer (ensign) rank upon graduation and are not required to enter active duty.

the trucks that smelled of gasoline were hulking indistinctly. There was a small wooden cubicle with a glass window tucked against the wall in the corner; the light was shining inside. Mityok and I squeezed in, sitting ourselves on the narrow and uncomfortable bench, and silently drank some tea from an old peeling tin pan. Mityok's brother was smoking long *papirosy*,¹⁷ thumbing through an old issue of *Technology Review for the Youth*, and did not acknowledge our presence in the slightest. Mityok produced a bottle from under the bench, placed it on the table with a thump and asked:

“Want some?”

I nodded, even though I had a bad feeling about this inside. Mityok filled the glass from which I was just drinking tea to the brim with the dark-red liquid and handed it to me; clicking into the rhythm of the process, I grabbed the glass, put it to my lips and drank, amazed at how little effort one has to expend to do something for the first time. While Mityok and his brother were busy drinking the rest, I was listening to the experiences inside me, but nothing was really happening. I took the magazine, opened it randomly and stared at a two-page spread filled with tiny pictures of various flying contraptions that you had to guess the names of. I liked one of them better than the others—it was an American plane that could use its wings as a propeller for vertical take-off. There was also a small rocket there with a cockpit for the pilot, but I didn't get a good look at it because Mityok's brother, without as much as a single word or even a glance at me, pulled the magazine back from my hands. That hurt me, and in order to hide it I shifted to the other table where the can with plug-in boiler stood, surrounded by dried-out sausage scraps. Suddenly I was overcome with disgust

¹⁷ Cheap cigarettes with recessed paper filters, loosely filled with second-grade tobacco.

over the thought that I was sitting here in this rat hole which smelled of garbage, over the fact that I have just drunk cheap port from a grubby glass, and that the entire vastness of the country where I live was just a multitude of similar rat holes, also smelling of garbage, where people also just finished drinking cheap port, and most importantly it was painful to think that all the wonderful multi-colored lights that take my breath away every time I pass by a window situated far enough over the night capital—they all were lights of exactly those stinky shacks. It hurt most of all when compared with the beautiful American flyer from the magazine spread. I lowered my eyes and saw the newspaper on the table, serving as a tablecloth; it was covered in greasy stains, round marks from glasses and bottles and cigarette burns. The headlines were scaring me with their icy inhuman briskness and might—nothing was standing in their way now, not for a long time, but they continued to strike into the emptiness, blow after monstrous blow, and in that emptiness, especially when drunk (I noticed I was already drunk, but did not pay much attention to that), one was liable to get his lumbering soul in the way of a “principal task of our time” or “greetings from cotton pickers.” The room around the table became completely unrecognizable, and Mityok was staring at me intently. Catching my glance, he winked and asked me, his tongue slightly unwieldy:

“So, are we going to the Moon or what?”

I nodded, and my gaze transfixed on the small column titled “NEWS FROM ORBIT.” The lower part of the text was torn off, and the column now consisted of only “The twenty eighth day started. . .” in a bold type. This was quite enough—I understood everything and closed my eyes. Yes, it really was like that—the holes in which we spent our lives were indeed dark and soiled, and we ourselves were, probably, a good match for the holes, but in the deep blue sky overhead

between sparsely sown feeble stars a special kind of bright points existed, artificial, crawling slowly through the constellations, made right here, on the Soviet soil, in the midst of puke, empty bottles and noxious tobacco smoke, fashioned out of steel, semiconductors and electricity, and flying now through space. And every one of us, even the blue-faced drunk cowering toad-like in the snowdrift whom we passed on our way here, even Mityok's brother and, naturally, Mityok and I—we all had in that cold clear blue ether our own small embassy.

I ran out into the yard and stared for a long, long time, choking on tears, at the yellowish-blue, unbelievably close disk of the Moon in the translucent winter sky.

4

I don't really remember the exact moment I decided to apply to Air Force academy. I guess I don't remember it because this decision had ripened within my soul (and Mityok's as well) long before we graduated from high school. For a brief time we were faced with the problem of choice—there were many academies scattered throughout the country, but we have decided very quickly, upon seeing in the *Soviet Aviation* magazine a full-color fold-out describing the life in Lunar City of the Maresyev¹⁸ Red Banner¹⁹ Flight Academy in Zairaisk. Right away we could almost feel being in the throng of first-year cadets, among the plywood mountains and craters painted yellow, we recognized our future selves in the buzz-cut guys doing flips on the bars and throwing bath water, frozen in time by the camera, from huge enameled pans of such a tender shade of peach that it immediately evoked childhood memories, and this color for some reason was more compelling, aroused more trust and desire to go study in Zairaisk than all of the adjoining photos of flight simulators, which resembled nothing so much as half-decomposed airplane corpses teeming with crawling people.

¹⁸ A. Maresyev, historical figure and main character in B. Polevoy's novel *Story Of The Real Man*. His plane shot down over German-occupied territory in the summer of 1942, and he himself wounded in both legs, he managed to crawl back over 18 days back to Russian positions. Later, with legs amputated below the knees, he taught himself to fly airplanes again on prosthetics and insisted on being reinstated as pilot. He is still alive (now 85 years old). The book is required reading in the Russian Literature School curriculum.

¹⁹ This means it was awarded the *Order of the Red Banner*.

Once the decision was made, the rest was pretty uncomplicated. Mityok's parents, frightened by the murky fate of his older brother, were glad that their youngest son would be attached to such a sure and stable business, and my father has finally drunk himself into stupor by that time, and spent most of his days just lying on the sofa facing the wall with the bulge-eyed moose woven on the rug hanging on it; I wouldn't be surprised if he did not even understand that I was going to become a pilot, and to my aunt it was all the same.

I remember the town of Zarsk. More precisely, I can neither say that I remember it nor that I forgot—so few things were there that one can remember or forget. In the very center a whitestone belfry was standing tall, famous for some duchess having jumped off of it in times immemorial, and even though it has been many centuries since, her feat was still remembered in the town. The town history museum was right next to it, with post office and police station nearby.

When we got off the bus, an unpleasant driving rain was falling, it was cool and damp. We cowered under the canopy of some basement with an “Elections Office” banner on top, and waited for half an hour until the rain abated. Behind the basement door there seemed to be drinking going on, we could feel the thick onion stench and hear voices, someone was insistently proposing that they sing a song from a popular movie; finally, tired male and female voices started singing.

The rain ended, we ventured out in search of the next bus and found the exact same one that brought us here. It turned out that we did not have to get out of it at all; we could have waited out the rain inside the bus, while the driver was having lunch. We drove past small wooden houses, then they disappeared and we entered the forest. It was in this forest, outside of the town, that the Zarsk Flight

Academy was located. We had to go on foot about three miles from the final stop of the bus, which was called “Vegetable Market;” there was no trace of any market in the vicinity, and someone explained to us that the name carried over from before the war. We got off the bus and started along the road sprinkled with soggy pine needles, it led us further and further into the forest, and just when we started thinking that we were going the wrong way it abruptly terminated at the gate welded from steel pipes, bearing huge tin stars; all around it the forest was pressing against the unpainted gray wooden fence, with rusty barbed wire snaking its way on top of it. We showed our letters of recommendation from the draft office and newly-minted passports to the sleepy guard at the checkpoint, and he let us in, directing us to the clubhouse where the meeting was about to begin.

A paved road was leading into the small camp, and the Lunar City that I saw in the magazine revealed itself immediately to the right of it, consisting of several long, one-storyed yellow barrack buildings, a dozen or so tires dug halfway into the ground and the lot imitating the lunar landscape. We went past it to the clubhouse, where the boys who came for the entrance exams²⁰ were swarming around the supporting columns. Soon we were visited by an officer who appointed someone to be “in charge” and ordered us to register with the entrance commission and then go receive the “inventoried items.”

On account of warm weather the entrance commission was sitting in a Chinese-looking open-air gazebo. It was actually three officers who were drinking beer to the eastern

²⁰ Soviet institutions of higher education relied (and still do) not on standardized tests but entrance exams, in order to evaluate applicants, who have to be physically present on site over a certain time in summer to pass them.

music that played quietly on the radio and distributing pieces of paper with numbers in exchange for the documents we gave them. Then they led us to the edge of the stadium which had been overrun with waist-high weeds (it was obvious nobody had been playing anything on it for ten years at the least) and presented us with two military tents—we were going to live in them during the exam session. The tents were tightly packed sheets of multilayer rubber, and we had to pitch them on the wooden poles stuck in the ground. We all got acquainted while lugging the cots into the tents; we made bunk beds out of them, the cots were ancient, very heavy, with nickel-plated balls that you could screw on top of the posts when they weren't connected to the upper bunk. These balls they gave us separately, in special bags, and when the exams were over I sneakily removed one of them and hid it in the same cigarette pack that housed the Play-Doh pilot with a foil head, the only living witness of that unforgettable Southern evening.

It seemed like we spent a very short time in those tents, but when we took them off we discovered that under them a thick, vigorous and disgustingly white pillow of weeds managed to grow out. I don't recall much about the exams themselves, only that they turned out to be quite uncomplicated, and it even upset me not to be able to fit on the exam sheet all the graphs and formulas into which the long spring and summer days spent poring over the textbooks have been distilled. Mityok and I got the points required for admission effortlessly, and then there was the interview which we dreaded most. It was conducted by a major, a colonel and some old-timer with a jagged scar across the forehead, dressed in well-worn technical forces uniform. I said I wanted to be in the cosmonaut detachment, and the colonel asked me what is the Soviet cosmonaut. I was scrambling for the right answer for so long that finally

the faces of my interviewers began to reflect deep grief, from which I concluded that I was about to be shown the door.

“All right,” said the old timer, who was silent until then, “do you remember how you first thought of becoming a cosmonaut?”

I panicked, because I had absolutely no idea what the right answer to that question was. Motivated, apparently, by utter despair, I began to relate the story of the red Play-Doh figurine and the cardboard rocket with no exit. The old timer perked up instantly, his eyes began to glow, and when I came to the place where Mityok and I had to crawl along the corridor in the gas mask, he grabbed my hand and burst into laughter, which made the scar on his forehead turn purple. Then he suddenly became somber.

“Do you know,” he said, “that this is not your average daily chore—flying in space? What if your Motherland asks you to give your life for her? Then what, eh?”

“Well, I’m as good for it as the next guy,” I said, furrowing my brow.

Then he stared straight into my eyes, and looked at me for what seemed like three minutes.

“I believe you,” he said finally, “you can do it.”

When he heard that Mityok, who wanted to go to the Moon since he was a kid, was also applying, he scribbled his name on a piece of paper. Mityok told me later that the old man was grilling him on why it had to be necessarily the Moon.

The next day, after breakfast, they pinned the lists with the names of those accepted to the columns of the clubhouse, Mityok and I were there next to each other, out of the alphabetical order. Somebody dragged himself to the appeals committee, the others were jumping for joy on the asphalt criss-crossed with white lines, or running to the phone booth, and above all of that I remember a white swath left by a jet in

the faded sky.

Everyone accepted was invited to the meeting with the instructor-teaching staff, the professors were already waiting for us in the clubhouse. I remember the heavy velour drapes, a table across the entire stage and the officially-austere officers sitting behind it. Leading the meeting was a youngish lieutenant-colonel with a pointed gangly nose, and all the time while he spoke I was imagining him in the flight suit and helmet, sitting in the cockpit of a MiG, camo-stripped like an expensive pair of jeans.

“Guys, I don't wish to frighten you, I don't want to start our talk here with scary words, right? But you all know—we don't choose the times we live in, it's the times that choose us. It might be inappropriate on my part to give you this information, but I am going to tell you anyway. . .”

The lieutenant-colonel interrupted himself for a second, leaned over to the major sitting next to him and whispered something in his ear. Major furrowed his brow, tapped the end of his pencil against the table, apparently deciding something, and then nodded.²¹

“All right,” the lieutenant-colonel started again softly, “recently at a closed meeting of morale officers²² the times in which we live were defined as pre-war period!”

Lieutenant-colonel became silent, expecting some kind of reaction—but the audience apparently did not get it. At any rate, Mityok and I definitely did not get it.

“I'll explain,” he said even more softly, “the meeting was held on June 15, right? So, until June 15 we were living

²¹ The seeming incongruity of a senior officer asking permission from one of lesser rank is explained on the next page: while the lieutenant-colonel is Air Force, the major is KGB, and therefore is above all other officers in the Academy when it comes to policy decisions or “state secrets.” *See also next note.*

²² More precisely “political officers,” Party bosses (formally bearing officer ranks) attached to every sufficiently large military unit.

in the after-war period, and since then—a full month—we live in the pre-war period. Clear now? ”

For several seconds there was complete silence.

“I am not telling you this to scare you,” the lieutenant-colonel continued, now in his normal voice, “it's just that you have to understand the kind of responsibility put on our shoulders, right? You made the right choice when you came to our Academy. I would like to tell you now that our primary goal here is not to simply make you into pilots, but to make you into real men, right? And when you receive your diplomas and military ranks, you can be sure that by that time you are going to become Real Men, with the capital M, as capital as it only can be in the Soviet country.”

The lieutenant-colonel sat down, adjusted his tie and caught the edge of the glass with his lips—his hands were shaking, and I could swear I heard his teeth clanking almost inaudibly against glass. The major rose.

“Guys,” he said in a sonorous voice, “though it would be more correct to call you cadets now, but I still would like to address you in this manner—guys! Recall the famous story of the legendary character glorified by Boris Polevoy! The one whose name our academy proudly bears! He, who after losing both of his legs in battle, did not surrender but instead soared as Icarus into the sky to continue pounding the Nazi beast! Many have told him it was impossible, but he always remembered that he was a Soviet man! Don't you forget that either, never forget that! And we, the instructor-teaching staff, and I personally, the flying morale officer of the Academy, we promise you—we will make real men out of you in the shortest possible time!”

Then we were shown our bunks in the first-year dorm, where we were being moved from the tents, and led to the mess. Hanging on threads from its ceiling were dusty MiG's and Il's, resembling giant islands suspended in the air among

the fast squadrons of houseflies. The dinner was not particularly tasty—soup with small star-shaped noodles, boiled chicken with rice and stewed dried fruits for desert. After the meal we immediately felt like sleeping, Mityok and I barely dragged ourselves to our cots and I fell asleep at once.

5

Next morning I was awakened by a moan right over my ear, a moan filled with deep pain and disbelief. In fact, I must have been hearing noises through my sleep for some time, but I was jolted into the full consciousness by only this, particularly loud and tormented cry. I opened my eyes and looked around. On the cots everywhere there was some kind of slow groaning motion, I tried to prop myself on my elbow but couldn't, because I was apparently locked in place with several wide straps, like ones used to keep together overstuffed luggage; the only thing I could do is turn my head slightly from side to side. From the nearby cot a boy named Slava from the Siberian town of Tynda, whom I met yesterday, was looking at me, his eyes full of intense suffering, the lower part of his face hidden under some kind of tightly stretched cloth. I wanted to open my mouth to ask him what was going on, but found out that I couldn't move my tongue, and moreover I did not feel the lower half of my face at all, as if it fell asleep. I figured that my mouth was gagged and bound as well, but did not have time to get surprised over it, because I felt sudden horror: in the place where Slava's feet were supposed to be, his blanket stepped sharply down instead, and the freshly starched sheet there was bearing fuzzy reddish blots, the kind you see watermelon juice leave on white kitchen towels. The most frightening thing was that I couldn't feel my own feet and couldn't raise my head to look at them.

“Fifth deta-ach-mint!” the deep booming voice of the

sergeant at the doors was unusually full of subtle intonations and replete with innuendo, “bandage time!”

Right away about a dozen of second- and third-year students (or to be more precise, cadets of the second and third year of duty, I figured that by looking at the patches on their sleeves) entered the room. I never saw them before; officers told us they were “on potatoes”.²³ They were wearing strangely rigid high boots and moving about awkwardly, steadying themselves now and again against the walls and bedframes. I noticed unhealthy pastiness in their faces, also bearing the marks of prolonged suffering which have molded into some kind of unspeakable readiness, out of place here as it seemed, and in that moment I recalled the words of the pioneer salutation that Mityok and I repeated along with everybody else in the pioneer camp, on that faraway plot of asphalt—I recalled it and finally understood what it was that we actually meant when shouting “Always ready!”,²⁴ deceiving ourselves, our comrades at the rally and the clear July morning.

One after another they rolled the cots out into the corridor, with moaning and thrashing first-years strapped to them, and then there were only two cots left—mine and the one by the window on which Mityok was lying. The straps did not allow me to look at him, but out of the corner of my eye I could make out that he was awake and lying quietly.

They came for us in about ten minutes, turned me around feet first and started rolling along the corridor. One of the cadets was pushing the cot while the other was pulling it

²³ Every fall thousands of civilians (especially college students) as well as military personnel were required to help the agricultural communities in their area with the harvest for several weeks—usually vegetables (most often potatoes, hence the expression) around Moscow, but it could be fruit or cotton, depending on the climate.

²⁴ The standard response required of pioneers when addressed with “Be ready for struggle in the name of Lenin and the Communist Party!”

backing up, it appeared as if he was trying to contain the cot that was gaining on him. We maneuvered into a narrow long elevator and went up, then the second-year backed away from me again through another corridor and we stopped before the door covered with black imitation leather, with a large brown sign on it which I could not read because of my uncomfortable position. The door opened and I was wheeled into the room, under the enormous crystal chandelier in form of a bomb; the top of the walls had a figured ornament of alternating hammers, sickles²⁵ and vases wrapped in vines.

The straps were taken off and I propped myself on the elbows trying hard not to look at my feet; ahead of me in the room's depths was a massive desk with the a green lamp on it, illuminated by the grayish light filtering sideways through the tall narrow window. The man sitting behind the desk was obscured from sight by an issue of *Pravda*,²⁶ a kind wrinkled face with glowing eyes looking straight at me from its front page. The linoleum squeaked and Mityok's cot came to a halt right beside mine.

The pages being turned rustled several more times, and then the paper came to rest on the table.

We were facing the same old man with the scar across the forehead who was grabbing my hand at the interview. He was now decked in a lieutenant-general uniform, complete with golden brooms on the shoulders,²⁷ his hair carefully combed and his gaze sober and clear. I also noticed that his face seemed to copy the one from the front page of *Pravda* which had been looking at me the previous moment, so that

²⁵ Hammer and sickle—symbols of the Soviet Union, present on its flag and state seal (coat of arms).

²⁶ “Truth,” the official daily of the Communist Party.

²⁷ Shoulder patch insignia; top officers starting from general/admiral and up had the state seal (globe bordered by wheat stalks—hence the broom analogy) in gold at the bottom of the gold-tone patch, with large stars (two of them in this case) above it denoting the rank.

it was almost like in that movie²⁸ where they show you one icon at first and then it is slowly replaced by another one—the images similar but not exactly the same, and because the actual moment of the transition was glossed over the icon appeared to be morphing in front of your eyes.

“Since we are going to be working with you guys for a long time now, you may call me “comrade mission chief,” said the old man. “I would like to congratulate you—based on the results of the exams and especially the interview (he winked as he was saying that) you have been enrolled directly in the first year program of the secret cosmonaut academy under auspices of First Department of the KGB.²⁹ So you will have to become Real Men some other time, and right now get your stuff—you're going to Moscow. We'll meet you there.”

I got the full meaning of those words only when we were back in the empty dorm room, wheeled there again through the same long corridors, linoleum singing something soft and full of nostalgia under the tiny steel wheels of the cot, prompting me to recall all of a sudden a long-forgotten July afternoon by the sea.

Mityok and I slept through the rest of the day—I guess they spiked our yesterday's dinner with some kind of drugs (we were really sleepy the next day, too), and in the evening we were visited by some merry straw-haired lieutenant in shoes that were squeaking as he walked. He wheeled our

²⁸ Described is the last reel of *Andrey Rublyov*, the film by Soviet director A. Tarkovsky, which has the camera panning silently over icons (religious paintings on wood) created by Rublyov, a genius XIV century Russian painter.

²⁹ This is in fact a meta-reference, Pelevin's specialty: usually the “first department” at any state enterprise is the more or less official name of the KGB officer(s) assigned to monitor political conformity and handling of “state secrets”; what would the “first department” of the KGB itself do?

cots, one after another, with jokes and laughs along the way, to the asphalt platz in front of the cement shell of an open-air stage, where several top generals with kind intelligent faces were sitting behind the table, our comrade mission chief among them. We could, of course, get there on our own, but lieutenant told us that this is the standing order for the first-years and asked us to lie still so as not to confuse others.

Because of the multitude of cots standing side by side the square resembled the yard of a car factory or farm equipment show, and above it, following a convoluted trajectory, a stifled moan was fluttering; disappearing from one place, it reappeared in the other, then the next one, like a giant mosquito darting over the cots. On the way there the lieutenant said that the graduation ceremony was now going to take place, combined with the final exam.

Soon he, first among several dozen lieutenants just like him, pale and anguished but still with inimitable grace, was dancing the *kalinka*³⁰ to the deliberately sparse accompaniment of the flying morale officer's accordion. Lieutenant's last name was Landratov, I heard it when he was presented with a small red booklet and congratulated on his diploma. Then all the others were performing the same dance, and finally I got bored looking at them. I turned my head towards the stadium field that started right at the edge of the platz and suddenly came to realize why it was so overwhelmed with weeds.

I was looking at them swaying in the wind for a long time, and imagined that the cracked, peeling gray fence with barbed wire on top, running behind the decrepit goalposts,

³⁰ Referring to a dramatic moment in the *Story Of The Real Man*: Maresyev is dancing *kalinka*, a rather acrobatic Russian solo dance, at an officers' party; when a general approaches him afterwards to commend his performance, he reveals the prosthetic legs, thereby prompting the astonished general to cast aside doubts about Maresyev's abilities and consider restoring his flying privileges.

was in fact the Great Wall, and despite all the pickets that were either hanging loose or missing altogether it still stretches as it did for millennia from the rice fields of the faraway China right down here to the town of Zaraisk, imparting the ancient Chinese spirit to everything around it—the lacy gazebos where the entrance commission sits in hot weather, decommissioned rusted-through fighter, and antique military tents I am staring at from my cot, holding fast under the covers to the small nickel-plated ball I screwed off the bedpost.

The next day a truck was carrying Mityok and I through the summer forest and the fields, we were sitting on our backpacks against the cool metal truck bed. I remember the swaying canvas awning above us, the tree trunks and withered gray poles of an abandoned telegraph line rushing past. From time to time the trees would give way and allow the triangles of pale gloomy sky to peek through. Then we had a short stopover and five minutes of blissful silence, interrupted only by heavy faraway thuds, which the driver (who had to go into the bushes) explained to us were large-caliber machine guns coming in short bursts at the firing range of the nearby Matrosov³¹ Infantry Academy. Then the incessant jolts resumed and I dozed off, waking for just a few seconds when we already reached Moscow, in time to catch a glimpse of *Child's World*³² arches, as if a reminder of some long-forgotten summer school vacation.

³¹ A. Matrosov, a historical WWII figure. With his detachment pinned down by a German machine gunner in a fortified concrete firing position, he managed to sneak on it and then threw himself onto the slot, thereby interrupting the fire long enough for others to get closer and destroy the position with hand grenades. Came to symbolize the heroism of the Soviet soldiers.

³² A large department store in the center of Moscow, on Lubyanka square, right next to the headquarters of CheKa/NKVD/MGB/KGB. Both of those late XIX—early XX century buildings occupy an entire city block.

6

When I was a kid I would often imagine the newspaper spread, still smelling of fresh ink, with a large portrait of myself in the middle (with the helmet on, smiling), titled:

“Cosmonaut Omon Krivomazov reported in excellent spirits!”

Hard to understand why I wanted that so much. I guess I always wanted to live part of my life through the eyes of other people—those who would look at that photograph and think of me, imagine my thoughts, feelings, the delicate fabric of my soul. And most importantly, of course, I wanted to turn into one of those other people myself, stare into my own face composed of the typographic dots, think about what kind of movies this man likes, who his girlfriend might be, and then suddenly realize that this Omon Krivomazov is in fact me. Since those times I have changed, in a subtle and unhurried way. I stopped caring about opinions of others, because I realized the others would never care about me, and they are going to be thinking about my photograph, not even me personally, with the same indifference as I think about photographs of other people. So the news that my heroism was to remain hidden and unknown was not a big blow for me; the big blow was that I was going to be a hero.

Mityok and I took turns visiting the mission chief the next day after our arrival, right after we were outfitted with black uniforms like the ones in other military academies—only the shoulder patches were bright yellow, with

mysterious letters “BKY”³³ on them. Mityok went first, and about an hour and a half later they sent for me.

When the tall oak doors swung open before me I was a little stunned by the degree to which the view unfolding before me copied a set of some war movie. There was a big table in the middle of the room, covered with a yellowish map and surrounded by several people in military uniform—the mission chief, three other generals who looked nothing like each other but at the same time all very much like a popular author and playwright Borovik, and two colonels, one short and stout, his face a shade of purple, the other — lean and thin-haired, resembling an aged sickly boy, wearing dark glasses and sitting in a wheelchair.

“The chief of Flight Control Center, colonel Halmuradov,” said the mission chief pointing at the fatso with the purple face.

He nodded.

“Morale officer for the special cosmonaut squadron colonel Urchagin.”³⁴

The colonel in the wheelchair turned his face towards me, leaned forward a bit and took off his glasses, as if to study me closer. I shuddered involuntarily—he was blind, eyelids of one of his eyes fused together, between the lashes of the other one I could make out the glistening whitish mucus.

“You may call me Bamlag³⁵ Ivanovich, Omon,” he said in a high-pitched tenor. “I hope we're going to be good

³³ Probably abbreviation of *Senior Cosmonaut Academy* in Russian.

³⁴ Obvious allusion to P. Korchagin, a fictional main character in A. Ostrovsky's book *Thus The Steel Was Tempered*, set in the early years after the Revolution. Becomes blind and paraplegic due to illness but continues his heroic work as a Party representative at some grandiose steel mill project.

³⁵ In fact, an official abbreviation for *Baikal-Amur Railroad Camp*, one of the largest labor camps in the USSR.

friends.”

For some reason the mission chief did not introduce the generals, and they did not by their manner demonstrate that they even saw me. On the other hand, I thought I saw one of them at the final exam in the Zارايسк Academy.

“Cadet Krivomazov,” the mission chief introduced me. “Shall we begin now?” He turned to me, resting his hands on his stomach, and started talking.

“Omon, you probably read the newspapers, see movies and so on, and you know that Americans have landed several of their cosmonauts on the Moon, and even drove around there in a motorized conveyance. This would seem like an entirely peaceful endeavor, but that depends on how you look at it. Imagine if you will a common hard-working man from a small country, let's say in Central Africa. . .”

The mission chief scrunched his face and imitated rolling his sleeves and wiping sweat off his brow.

“Then he sees that Americans landed on the Moon, while we. . . You get the picture?”

“Yes sir, comrade lieutenant-general!” I answered.

“The principal goal of the space experiment for which you, Omon, are now beginning to be prepared is to demonstrate that in technology terms we roughly match the capabilities of the Western countries, and that we are also capable of sending missions to the Moon. To send there a piloted, returnable craft is beyond our means at this point. But there is another possibility—to launch an automated vehicle that we won't have to bring back.”

The mission chief was bending over the relief map with protruding mountain ranges and minuscule crater holes. Right through the middle of it there was a bright-red line, like a fresh scratch from a nail.

“This is a section of the Lunar surface,” said the mission chief. “As you well know, Omon, our space science

is mostly concerned with the dark side of the Moon, in contrast to the Americans, who prefer to land on the visible side. This long line is the *Lenin Fault*, discovered several years ago by our domestic satellite. It is a unique geological formation, and in that region we have recently dispatched a automated expedition to obtain samples of the Lunar soil. According to results of the preliminary analysis, there formed an opinion concerning the need for further exploration of the fault. You are probably aware that our space program is oriented chiefly towards the use of automatic devices. Let the Americans risk their own human lives; we only endanger mechanisms. And so there is now an idea of sending a special self-propelled vehicle, so called *lunokhod*,³⁶ that will drive along the bottom of the fault and transmit valuable scientific data back to Earth.”

Mission chief opened a drawer in the desk and began grasping inside while keeping his eyes on the table.

“The combined length of the fault is a hundred miles, but its width and depth are insignificant, measuring mere yards. We assume that the lunokhod will be able to travel along it for fifty miles—this is how long the batteries should last—and then place in its center a pennant with a radio beacon, which would transmit into space the words *PEACE*, *LENIN* and *USSR*, encoded in electromagnetic impulses.”

His hand appeared from under the table clutching a little red-colored car. He wound it up with a key and placed it at the beginning of the red line on the map. The car began crawling forward with a whir. It was just a child's toy: a body very much resembling a tin can, sitting on top of eight small

³⁶ Literally *Lunar Rover*. In fact, there was a *Lunokhod*, even two of them, deposited successfully on the Moon surface by the Soviet *Luna* series spacecraft on 17/11/1970 and 15/1/1973. I will leave the word untranslated, since it plays a significant part in the narration and can be perceived as similar to *sputnik*—which even my word processor recognizes as valid.

black wheels, with *СССР* painted on its side and two bulges in front that looked like eyes. Everyone stiffly followed its progress, even colonel Urchagin was turning his head in sync with the others. The car reached the end of the table and fell over.

“Something like that,” the mission chief said contemplatively and shot me a glance.

“Permission to address the senior officer!” I heard myself saying.

“Fire away.”

“But the lunokhod is automated, comrade lieutenant-general! ”

“Absolutely.”

“So what do you need me for?”

The mission chief lowered his head and sighed.

“Bamlag,” he said, “your turn.”

The electric motor of the wheelchair whirled softly, and colonel Urchagin drove out from beside the table.

“Let's go for a walk,” he said, approaching me and grabbing my sleeve.

I turned quizzically to mission chief. He nodded. I followed Urchagin into the corridor and we started along it—I was walking and he was driving beside me, controlling the speed with a lever crowned with a homemade little pink plastic ball, containing a figured red rose inside. Several times Urchagin would open his mouth, attempting to say something, but he shut it again every time, I started thinking that he probably does not know where to start, and then he grabbed my wrist in a very precise movement with his slightly damp narrow hand.

“Listen to me closely, Omon, and don't interrupt,” he said intimately, as if we had just finished singing a song together by a campfire. “I am going to begin from a distance. You see, the fate of mankind consists to a very large extent of

things that are convoluted, seemingly absurd or unnecessarily bitter. You have to be able to see very clearly, very distinctly, to keep yourself from making mistakes. History is never the way they write in the textbooks. There is dialectics in the fact that Marx's teachings, directed towards a prosperous country, took hold in the most backward one instead. We communists just did not have time to formally prove the validity of our ideas—too much effort spent on the war, too long turned out to be the struggle with the remnants of the past and the internal enemies of the state. We could not defeat the West technologically. But the struggle of ideas is the field where you cannot take a rest for even a split second. It is a paradox, and it is again dialectics, that we are aiding truth with deception, because Marxism is bringing the all-conquering truth with it, while that for which you are going to give your life—formally represents a deception. But the more deliberately. . .”

I felt cold in the pit of my stomach and reflectively tried to snatch my wrist away, but colonel Urchagin's hand seemed to have transformed into a small steel cuff.

“. . .more deliberately you are going to accomplish your heroic feat, the greater degree of truth it will actually attain, the greater justification your short but beautiful life will acquire! ”

“Give my life? What feat?” I asked in a croaking voice.

“The very same,” replied the colonel very-very softly, almost as if he was frightened, “that more than a hundred of boys just like you and your friend have already accomplished.”

He fell silent, and after a while continued in the normal tone.

“Have you heard that our space program relies on the use of automatic devices?”

“I have.”

“Well, right now we're going to go to Room 329, so you can find out what our automatic space devices look like.”

7

“Comrade colonel. . .”

“Comrade co-olonel!” he shot back mockingly. “They asked you in the Zraisk Academy quite clearly if you were ready to give your life, didn't they? You remember what you answered, huh?”

I was sitting on a metal chair that was fastened to the floor in the center of the room, my arms were strapped to the armrests, my feet—to the chair's legs. The heavy drapes on the windows were drawn shut; there was a telephone without the dial standing on a small desk in the corner. Colonel Urchagin was sitting across from me in his wheelchair, smiling and joking as he talked, but I could sense that he was dead serious.

“Comrade colonel, please understand, I am just a regular guy. . . You seem to be mistaking me for someone else. . . And I am absolutely not the one who. . .”

Urchagin's wheelchair whirled, he moved from his place, drove up to me very closely and stopped.

“Now wait, Omon,” he said. “Wait just a moment. This is where you go wrong. You think our soil is drenched in what kind of blood? Non-regular? Some special blood? From some uncommon people? ”

He stretched his hand towards me, felt my face and then struck with his dried-out fist against my lips—not hard, but enough for me to get a taste of blood in my mouth.

“It is drenched in this exact blood. From normal, regular guys, like you are.”

He patted me on my neck.

“Don't get angry,” he said, “I am now like a second father to you. If need be, I can even punish you with a belt.”

“Bamlag Ivanovich, I don't feel I'm ready to be a hero,” I said, licking the blood off. “I mean, I feel I am not ready. . . I think I'm better off returning to Zaraisk than this. . .”

Urchagin bent over towards me and started talking softly and gently, stroking my neck:

“You silly boy, Ommie. Just understand, my dear, that this is precisely the essence of heroism, that the hero is always someone who is not ready for it, because heroism is a thing that is impossible to prepare for. You can, of course, be trained to run to the firing slot very quickly, you can get accustomed to throwing yourself onto it, we are teaching all that stuff, but the spiritual act of heroism cannot be learned, you can only accomplish it. And the more you wanted to live before it, the better for heroism. Heroism, even invisible, is essential for the nation—it nourishes that principal force which. . .”

Suddenly a loud screech reached our ears. A black shadow of a large bird flying very close to the window darted by the drapes, and the colonel fell silent. He contemplated something for a minute in his wheelchair, then switched on the motor and rolled out into the corridor. The door slammed shut behind him, then opened again after a minute or two, and a straw-haired Air Force lieutenant with a length of a rubber hose in his hands entered the room. His faced looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

“Remember me?” he asked.

I shook my head. He approached the table and sat on top of it, his feet in shiny black boots hanging down; one look at them was enough for me to recall where I have seen him—it was that lieutenant from Zaraisk Academy who wheeled our cots onto the square. I even thought of his last name.

“Lan. . . Lan. . .”

“Landratov,” he said, flexing the hose. “They sent me here to have a talk with you. Urchagin did. What are you, nuts? Do you really want to go back to the Maresyev's?”

“It's not that I particularly want to go back,” I said, “but I sure don't want to go to the Moon. To be a hero.”

Landratov chuckled and slapped his hands against his stomach and thighs.³⁷

“That's rich. Listen to him—he doesn't want to. And you think maybe they're going to leave you alone now? Let you go? Or return you to the Academy? And even if they did return you, do you have any idea how it feels to get up from the bed and take your first steps on crutches? Or the way you feel when there's a rain coming?”

“No, I don't,” I said.

“Or maybe you expect that when your legs heal it's going to be peaches and cream? Last year we court-marshaled two guys for treason. Starting with the fourth year, we have the simulator training—know what that is?”

“No.”

“Well, in short it is very much like the real thing, you sit as if in the cockpit, got all your controls, pedals, but you look at a monitor screen. So these two are conducting the exercise, and instead of practicing immelman turns they just fucking take off to the west at extreme low altitude. And no response to the hails. So then we pull them out of there and ask: what's with you, guys? What the hell were you thinking? And they just stand there. One did answer, though. Later. He said: “Just wanted, you know, to find out how it feels, you know. For just a moment. . .”

“So what happened to them afterwards?”

Landratov slapped the hose hard against the table he was sitting on.

“What's the difference,” he said. “Main thing is—you

³⁷ The slaps are part of the *kalinka* routine.

can kinda really feel for them. You always hope that you will eventually start flying. So when they tell you the whole truth. . . Think about it: who needs you with your prosthetics? Besides, we only have a handful of planes in the country anyway, they fly along the border so Americans can snap pictures of them, and even those. . .”

Landratov fell silent.

“*Even those* what?”

“Never mind. Here's what I'm saying—you don't really believe that you are going to traverse the skies in a fighter jet after the Zarsk Academy, do you? Best case—you'll end up in the dance ensemble at some Air Defense regional command center. But most likely you'll just dance your *kalinka* in restaurants. A third of our guys drink themselves to death, another third, the ones for whom the operation goes badly, simply commit suicide. How do you feel about suicide, by the way? ”

“I don't,” I said. “Never thought about it.”

“I did. Especially in the second year. Especially one time when they were showing Wimbledon on the TV, and I was on guard duty at the clubhouse, with the crutches and all. That got me really depressed. And then I got better, you know. You see, you have to decide something here for yourself, then it all becomes easier. So be careful, when you get those thoughts you just don't give in to them. Think instead about all the cool stuff you'll see if you really haul your butt to the Moon. These motherfuckers aren't letting you out alive anyway. Get with the program, OK? ”

“You don't like them very much, do you?”

“What's there to like? They won't say a word of truth ever. This reminds me: when you talk to the mission chief, never mention anything about death or even that you're going to the Moon. You are to talk exclusively about automatics, understood? Otherwise we'll be having another talk in this

room. I have my orders, you know.”

Landratov waved the hose in the air, took a pack of *Polyot*³⁸ from his pocket and lit up.

“That friend of yours, he agreed right away,” he said.

When I finally got out into the open air my head was spinning slightly. The inner patio, isolated from the city by the enormous brownish-gray square hulk of the building, resembled very much a piece of a suburban subdivision, cut out in the exact form of the yard and transferred here intact: it had the crooked wooden gazebo with peeling paint, a gymnastics bar welded from steel pipes that now supported a green rug, apparently someone was beating the dust out of it, left it hanging and forgot about it; there were rows of vegetables in the ground, a chicken coop, a training circuit, a couple of ping-pong tables and several tires dug in halfway and arranged in a circle, evoking images of Stonehenge in my head. Mityok was sitting on the bench near the exit, I came closer, sat beside him, stretched my legs and looked down at the black britches of my uniform—after my meeting with Landratov I couldn't chase away the feeling that those weren't my legs inside them.

“It cannot all be true, can it?” asked Mityok quietly.

I shrugged. I did not know what exactly he was talking about.

“OK, about the aviation I can believe,” he said. “But nuclear weapons. . . I suppose you could make two million political prisoners jump at the same time in '47. But we don't have them anymore, and nuclear tests—they're like every month. . .”

The door that I just came out of opened and colonel Urchagin's wheelchair rolled out into the yard, he braked and traced the yard several times over with his ear. I understood that he was looking for

³⁸ *Flight*, generic Russian cigarettes.

us, to add something to the things he already said, but Mityok fell silent, and Urchagin apparently decided not to bother us. The electric motor started whirring again and the wheelchair took off towards the far section of the building; passing in front of us, Urchagin turned his head with a smile and seemed to look into our souls with the kind hollows of his eyes.

8

I assume most of the inhabitants of Moscow know full well what is beneath their feet during the time they spend in endless lines of the *Child's World* or pass through the *Dzerzhinskaya*³⁹ station, so I'm not going to waste my time here.⁴⁰ Suffice it to say that the mock-up of our rocket was real size, and there was enough space left to put another one next to it. Interestingly enough, the elevator was really ancient, pre-war, and was descending so slowly that one had time to read a couple of pages from a book.

The mock-up was thrown together quite roughly, in places the lumber showed through, but the workstations for the crew were exact replicas of the real ones. All of that was designed for practical exercises, which Mityok and I weren't supposed to begin for some time. In spite of that, we were transferred and assigned quarters deep below, in an expansive room with two pictures on the wall depicting windows opening to the panorama of Moscow being built. There were seven cots inside, so we figured we were going to get company soon. The dorm was separated from the training facility where the model of the rocket was located by a three

³⁹ A centrally located subway station, with exits to the Lubyanka (formerly Dzerzhinsky) square.

⁴⁰ An urban legend asserts that there is a vast top secret city under the central part of Moscow, and the sewers and tunnels of the subway are but a small part of the “real” network of tunnels and access corridors, stretching in some places far beyond the boundaries of the city itself. According to the legend, the hub of this network, a giant multi-level underground “building,” is located under the KGB headquarters.

minute walk through a corridor, and a weird thing happened to the elevator: where it was very slowly descending just recently, it now turned out to have been ascending, just as slowly.

But we weren't going up very often, and the best part of our free time was spent inside the training hall. Colonel Halmuradov was teaching the course in basic theory of rocket flight, using the mock-up for clarifications. While we were studying the hardware the rocket was just a learning aid, but come evening the floodlights were turned off, and by the dim glow of the wall fixtures the mock-up would turn into something wondrous and long-forgotten for a few moments, sending to Mityok and me the last salute from the childhood.

We were first. Other guys who formed our crew gradually appeared later on. Syoma Anikin was first to arrive, a short sturdy fellow from Ryazan region; he was enlisted in the Navy before. He looked great in the black cadet uniform which made Mityok look like a clothes hanger. Syoma was very quiet and composed and spent all his time practicing, a habit we all would be better off picking up, even though his task was the simplest and least romantic. He was our first stage, and the young life of his (as Urchagin would say with his penchant for transposing words in a sentence to underscore the gravity of the moment) was designed to be cut short after four minutes of flight. The success of the entire mission depended on the preciseness of his actions, and were he to make even a slightest mistake we would all meet a swift and pointless demise. He seemed to take it very close to heart, so he was practicing even when left alone in the dorm, trying to make his movements completely automatic. He would squat, close his eyes and start moving his lips—counting to two hundred and forty, then turn counterclockwise, pausing every forty five degrees of the arc, performing elaborate manipulations with both his hands.

Even though I knew that in his mind he was undoing the latches that fastened the first stage to the second, every time it looked like a fight scene from a Hong Kong blockbuster to me. After completing this complex job eight times, he would fall on his back and kick up hard with both legs, pushing the invisible second stage away.

Ivan Grechka was our second stage, he came a couple of months after Syoma. He was a blond blue-eyed Ukrainian, taken here from the third year of the Zbarsk Academy, so he still was not too sure on his feet. But he possessed a certain inner clarity, a perpetual smile directed to the outside world, which endeared him to everyone he met. He and Syoma became very close friends. They would needle each other jokingly and compete for the fastest time and cleanest separation of their respective stages. Syoma was, of course, much quicker, but then Ivan only needed to undo four latches, so from time to time he did come ahead.

Our third stage—Otto Pluzis—was a rose-cheeked introspective Baltic⁴¹ who, as far as I can remember, never joined Syoma and Ivan in their practice sessions in the dorm; it seemed that the only thing he ever did was crossword puzzles in the *Red Warrior* magazine while lying on his cot (he would always cross his legs in shiny boots on the gleaming nickel-plated bedframe). But seeing the way he disposed with his portion of latches on the mock-up it became crystal clear that if any of the systems in our rocket were reliable at all, the third stage separation was it. Otto was a little on the weird side—he loved to tell stupid stories after “lights out,” like those kids scare each other with in camps and on sleepovers.⁴²

⁴¹ A collective name for peoples of the Baltic republics (now independent): Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. *See also note #82.*

⁴² One of Pelevin's short stories, *Blue Lantern*, for which he was awarded in 1993 the Russian Booker Prize (Best Russian-Language Book of the

“So this one time this mission is going to the Moon,” he would say in the darkness. “They fly like really long time. So they're almost there. And then the hatch opens and all these people in white scrubs come in. So these cosmonauts are, like, “We're flying to the Moon!” And those in the scrubs go: “Sure, sure you are. Just don't get so excited. We'll have a shot of this really nice medicine now. . .””

Or something like this:

“So these people are going to Mars. And they're almost there, so they look out the window. Then they turn around and see this man, short and dressed all in red, and he's got this huge switchblade in his hand. “So, guys,” he asks, “you want to go to Mars, don't you?” ”

Mityok and I finally were granted access to our hardware when the training of the guys from ballistics turned up a notch. Syoma Anikin was almost unaffected by the change—the altitude of his heroism was only three miles, so he would just put a cotton-filled overcoat on top of his uniform. It was harder for Ivan, since the moment for his march into eternity came up at thirty miles, it was cold up there and the air was pretty thinned out, so he had to train in a fur coat, fur boots and oxygen mask which made his entry into the narrow porthole on the mock-up really tight. Otto, surprisingly, got it easier—they were supposed to outfit him with a special spacesuit with electric heating system fashioned by the “Red Hill” factory seamstresses from several American high-altitude flight suits we took in Vietnam, but the suit was not ready yet, so he was training in scuba gear; I still have before my eyes an image of his reddened, sweaty poke-marked face behind the glass mask rising over the edge of the porthole. Upon emerging he would say something that sounded like “Zweigs!” or “Tsveiks!”.⁴³

Year), describes an evening of Zen-like scary stories in a pioneer camp.

⁴³ *Sveiks*, “safe” (Latvian).

The general theory of the space automation was taught in turns by mission chief and colonel Urchagin.

Mission chief's name was Pcadzer Vladilenovich Pidorenko. He was born in a small Ukrainian village of Pidorenka, and so the name was inflected on the first "o". His father worked in CheKa as well, and gave his son a name constructed from the first letters of "Party Committee for Agriculture of Dzerzhinsky region;" besides, the names "Pcadzer" and "Vladilen"⁴⁴ combined to give exactly fifteen letters—corresponding to the number of Soviet republics. But he couldn't stand being addressed by name anyway, so his subordinates linked to him through varied work-based relations either called him "comrade lieutenant-general" or, like Mityok and I, "comrade mmission chief." He pronounced the word "automation" with such dreamy and pure intonation that the Lubyanka office to which we ascended to listen to the lectures resonated like a soundboard of a giant piano for a moment; however, even though the word itself popped in his speech quite often, he never conveyed any technical knowledge to us, relating instead stories from his life or reminiscing about the times he was conducting guerilla operations in Belarus during the war.

Urchagin never touched any technical subjects either; he would chuckle and shell sunflower seeds into his mouth,⁴⁵ or tell us something humorous. He asked us, for example:

"How do you break farts in five parts?"

When we told him we didn't know, he gave the answer himself:

"You got to fart into a glove."

⁴⁴ From *VLADimir LENin*; this name is not uncommon. There was a short period in which it was fashionable to give children unpronounceable names "with a meaning," usually clumsy patriotic abbreviations.

⁴⁵ An archetypal Russian leisure activity; compare to American habit of eating popcorn.

And broke out in high-pitched giggles. I was astonished by the constant optimism of this man: blind, paraplegic, bound to a wheelchair—but still carrying out his duty while never failing to take enjoyment in his life. We had two morale officers in the Space Academy, who we called political instructors sometimes behind their backs—Urchagin and Burchagin, both alumni of the Korchagin Military-Political Academy, both looking very much like each other. They had only one electric-powered Japanese-made wheelchair among them, so while one of them was busy conducting the morale-boosting activities, the other one would lie quiet and motionless on a bed in a tiny room on the fifth floor—in uniform, with the blanket drawn up to the waist to obscure the bedpan from prying eyes. Sparse furnishings of the room, a special cardboard pattern for writing with narrow slits for lines, the invariable glass of strong tea on the desk, white blinds on the windows and a potted plant—all that moved me almost to tears, in those minutes I even stopped thinking that all communists are cunning, double-crossing calculating bastards.

Dima Matyushevich was the last to come on board, assigned to be in charge of the lunar module. He was extremely introverted and his hair was completely gray despite his young age. He always carried himself very independently; the only thing about him that I knew was that he served in ground forces. Upon seeing the posters with nighttime landscapes above Mityok's cot which he ripped out of the *Working Woman* magazine, Dima pinned up a piece of paper over his cot, with a picture of a tiny bird and large printed letters:

OVERHEAD

THE ALBATROSS

Dima's arrival coincided with introduction of a new learning subject. It was titled like that movie—*Strong In Spirit*. This wasn't a subject in the normal sense of the word, even though it featured prominently in the curriculum. We got visited by people for whom heroism was in their job description—they told us about their lives simply, without any pathos, their words were plain as talk around the kitchen, and because of that the essence of heroism appeared to grow out of the mundane, from the little everyday things, from that gray cold air of ours.

Among all the strong in spirit I remembered one retired major best, Ivan Trofimovich Popadya.⁴⁶ Funny name. He was tall, a regular Russian warrior (his forefathers fought in the battle of Kalka River,⁴⁷ his face and neck all red, covered in whitish beads of scars, and with a patch over his left eye. He had a very unusual life story: he started out as a simple ranger in a state wildlife preserve, where Party and government bosses used to hunt, and his responsibility was to drive the animals—bears and wild boars—onto the shooters behind the trees. Then the disaster stroke. A mature male boar jumped the pennant line and mortally wounded with his tusks a member of government, who was hiding behind a birch. He died en route to the city, and the conference of the government officials decided to prohibit the top brass from hunting wild prey. But such necessity, of course, continued to arise—and so one time Popadya was called to the Party meeting at the preserve headquarters, they explained everything to him and said:

“Ivan! We cannot order you—and even if we could, we

⁴⁶ Literally “priest's wife,” from Russian “pop.” Russian Orthodox priests are not sworn to celibacy.

⁴⁷ A crucial battle (1223) lost by Russians, first confrontation with Mongol forces under Genghis Khan, precursor to the subsequent almost century-and-a-half (1236–1380) occupation of Russian duchies by the Golden Horde.

wouldn't, such is the nature of the offer. But you see, we really need this. Think about it. No one is going to force you.”

Popadya thought long and hard, all through the night, and the next morning went back to the Party committee and told them he agreed.

“I never expected anything less from you,” said the local secretary.

Ivan Trofimovich was issued a bulletproof vest, metal helmet and a boar's skin, and thus began his new line of work—which could be justly called daily heroism. He was a little apprehensive the first couple of times, especially fearing for his exposed legs, but then he kind of got used to it; also the government members (who knew what the deal was) tried to aim for his sides, protected by the vest, under which Ivan Trofimovich always placed a little pillow for softness. Naturally, from time to time some enfeebled Central Committee veteran would miss, sending Ivan Trofimovich onto disability pay; he used the time to read a lot of books, including one that became his favorite—*Memoirs* by Pokryshkin.⁴⁸ To give you an idea just how dangerous his job really was, comparable as it was to armed combat, his Party membership card that he carried in the internal sewn-in pocket had to be replaced every week because it would be riddled with bullet holes. In those days that he was seriously wounded other rangers would step in, his own son Marat among them, but Ivan Trofimovich was still considered to be the most experienced worker, so the most important cases would fall on him, and they even held him back if some insignificant regional committee was coming for a routine hunt (each time that happened Ivan Trofimovich took

⁴⁸ Soviet WWII ace pilot. Colonel, thrice Hero of the Soviet Union. 48 dogfight victories flying Bell Cobra; 11 more in MiG-3. Shot down four times. Famous for his use of ramming of the enemy aircraft.

offense, just like Pokryshkin when denied a sortie with his own squadron). Ivan Trofimovich was cherished. In the meantime, he and his son studied the behavior and vocalizations of the wild inhabitants of the forest—bears, wolves, boars—and thus improved their skills.

It was already some time ago that the capital of our Motherland was visited by an American politician Kissinger. He was participating in a crucial round of negotiations on a nuclear arms reduction treaty—made all the more important by the fact that we never had any, but our adversaries were to never find out. Because of all that Kissinger was cared for at the highest state level, all branches of service were involved—for example, when it became known that the sort of women he likes most were voluptuous short brunettes, four of such exact swans floated in formation over the Swan Lake of the Bolshoi in front of his turtleshell-rimmed eyeglasses gleaming in the darkness of the government luxury box.

Negotiations were easier to conduct amidst a hunt, so they asked Kissinger what kind of prey he prefers. Apparently attempting a fine political joke he said that he'd like to bag a bear, and was quite surprised and frightened when the next morning he was indeed taken hunting. On their way there he was told that the round was closed on two bruins for him.

These were Ivan and Marat Popadya, communists, the best special rangers of the entire preserve. The guest felled Ivan Trofimovich with one well-aimed shot, as soon as he and Marat emerged from the forest on their hind legs growling; his carcass was hoisted by specially designed loops attached in the fur and dragged to the truck. But the American couldn't quite get at Marat, even though he was firing almost point-blank while Marat was deliberately moving as slow as he possibly could, squaring those broad shoulders of his against American's bullets. And suddenly the

unexpected happened—the rifle of our guest from over the ocean misfired and he, even before anyone was able to understand what was going on, threw it into the snow bank and charged at Marat with just a knife. A real bear would have disposed of such a hunter in no time, but Marat remembered the grave responsibility he was entrusted with. He lifted his paws and roared, hoping to scare the American away, but instead Kissinger—whether he was drunk or very brave, who knows—ran closer and struck Marat in the stomach with the knife, the thin blade penetrated between the strips of the vest. Marat fell. All of this happened in full view of his father, lying just a few yards away, Marat was dragged to him and Ivan Trofimovich realized that his son was still alive—he was moaning softly. The blood trail he was leaving behind on the snow was not a special fluid from a hidden container—it was real.

“Hold on, son!” Ivan Trofimovich whispered, choking on tears, “hold on! ”

Kissinger was beyond himself with excitement. He suggested to the officials accompanying him that they should share a bottle there on the *mishki*,⁴⁹ as he said, and then sign the agreement right away. They put the Employee Of The Month board taken off a nearby rangers' hut on top of Marat and Ivan Trofimovich, forming a makeshift table, with their photographs among others right there on the board. All Ivan Trofimovich could see over the next hour was the multitude of feet shuffling about, all he could hear was drunken foreign talk and quick babbling of the translator; the Americans dancing on the table almost crushed him. When the darkness fell and the horde has left, the agreement was signed and Marat was dead. A thin thread of blood was dripping from his muzzle onto the bluish evening snow, and on his fur a

⁴⁹ *Mishki*, “bears” (Russian).

golden Hero's star⁵⁰ glistened in the moonlight, put there by the chief ranger. All through the night the father lied across his dead son crying, not ashamed of his tears.

Suddenly the words “There is always a place for heroism in our lives” that looked at me every morning from the wall of the training facility, after having lost their meaning and becoming stale long ago, filled with fresh significance for me. It was not some romantic gibberish anymore, but instead a precise and sober statement of the fact that our Soviet life is not the instance of reality but instead a kind of a forechamber to it. I don't know if that was clear or not. Take America, for example. Nowhere between the sparkling shop window and a Plymouth parked at the curb is there a place for heroism, and there never was, if you don't count the moments when a Soviet intelligence agent passed by, of course. And here, you can found yourself standing by an exact same window, on exact same curb—but the times around you are going to be either post-war or pre-war, and right there the door leading to heroism is going to crack open for you, even though it is actually going to happen on the inside.

“You've got it,” said Urchagin when I confided my thought in him, “ but be careful. The door to heroism does open from the inside, but you accomplish the actual feat on the outside. Don't let yourself slide into subjective idealism. Otherwise right away, in a blink of an eye, your path upward, so high and proud, shall have lost its meaning.”

⁵⁰ The Hero of the Soviet Union award, highest military honor, has the form of a star.

9

It was May already, some of the peat bogs around Moscow were on fire and the sun, pale but hot nonetheless, was looking down from the smoggy sky. Urchagin gave me this book by a Japanese writer who was a kamikaze pilot in WWII, and I was amazed to no end by the similarities of the state of being he described to my own. Just like he did, I never took time to think about that which was waiting for me, lived only in the here and now, lost myself in books, forgot about everything when looking at the movie screen flashing with explosions (every Saturday night they showed military-historic films to us), was really upset about my not-too-high marks for training. The word “death” was always present in my life in a way of a reminder note stuck to the wall—I knew it was there in place, but I never looked at it long enough. I never discussed this topic with Mityok either, but when they told us that our equipment training is finally about to start we looked at each other and seemed to have felt the first breeze of the icy storm imminently gaining on us.

At the first sight the lunokhod looked like a large metal clothes hamper put on eight heavy wheels resembling those you find on streetcars. Its body featured loads of assorted protuberances, differently shaped antennae, robotic arms and other stuff—none of it functional; it was there just for the sake of TV cameras, but made a profound impression all the same. The roof was sporting diagonal serrated notches—this wasn't done on purpose, it's just that they used the sheetmetal

for the subway station floor where it meets the escalators, and it's always like that there. Nevertheless, it made the machine appear even more mysterious.

Strange are the depth of the human psychology! First thing it needs is detail. I remember when I was young, I would often draw tanks and airplanes and show them to my friends. They always liked those pictures where there were lots of superfluous lines, so that I would even put more of them all over. So was the lunokhod—a convincingly complex and clever piece of machinery.

The lid swung away—it was hermetically sealed, with rubber gaskets and several layers of thermal isolation material. There was some space inside—approximately like in the turret of a tank, and fastened to the floor was a slightly modified frame from the “Sport” bicycle, complete with pedals and two gears, one of them welded carefully to the rearmost axle. The handlebars were your regular semi-racing “horns;” by means of a special transfer case they could be used to wiggle the front wheels slightly, but as they told us there should not be any need for that. The walls were equipped with shelves, but those were empty for now; the space between handlebars was occupied by a compass, and on the floor there was a tin box painted green—a transceiver with a phone. In front of the handlebars in the wall there were two tiny lenses, like the fisheyes they put into the doors; if one looked through them, he could see the edges of the front wheels and the pretend manipulator. A radio receiver hung in the back—just a common mass-market brick of red plastic, with a black volume control handle (the mission chief explained to us that in order to prevent the psychological separation from our country every Soviet spacecraft is designed to receive *Mayak*⁵¹ programming). The large convex

⁵¹ A centrally distributed information and entertainment program, with news briefs on the hour, capable of being received almost anywhere in

outside lenses were covered on top and sides by metal shielding, giving the front of the lunokhod an appearance of a face—or rather a muzzle, quite agreeable in fact, like the ones they draw on watermelons or appliances in children's comics.

When I installed myself inside for the first time and the lid clicked shut over me I thought that I would never be able to endure such cramped and uncomfortable surroundings. I had to dangle over the frame, distributing my weight between the hands clutching the bars, feet pushed against the pedals and the saddle which did not so much accept its share of weight as determine the posture my body was forced to assume. The cyclist leans in this fashion when developing higher speed—but then he has an opportunity to flex back which I did not have, since my head was already pressing against the lid as it was. However, truth be told, a couple of weeks after the training started I did get used to this and it turned out that there was quite enough space inside for one to forget for hours on end how little space there actually was.

The round “eyes” were located right in front of my face, but the lenses distorted the view to such an extent that it was utterly impossible to make sense of anything beyond the thin steel of the machine. On the other hand, the spot just in front of the wheels was enlarged and in sharp focus, as was the edge of one of the toothed antennae; everything else disappeared in zigzags and patches, as if you were staring into a long dark corridor through the glass of a gas mask.

The machine was really heavy, and it was hard to cause it to move—so that I even started doubting that I would be able to conquer the entire fifty miles of the lunar surface in it. After just one spin around the yard I got winded, my back was aching, the shoulders hurt too.

Now every other day, taking turns with Mityok, I took

the USSR at multiple locations on both AM and FM dials.

the elevator to the surface, stripped down to my underwear, climbed into the lunokhod and started my regimen of turning circles in the yard to strengthen my leg muscles, frightening the chickens and even squashing them from time to time—I was not doing it intentionally, of course, but I found it absolutely unrealistic to distinguish a wayward chicken from a piece of an old newspaper or, for example, some laundry stripped from the line by a wind gust, and in addition I could never put on the brakes in time to avoid them. At first colonel Urchagin would drive in his wheelchair in front of me, showing me the way—he looked like a greenish-gray blob through the lenses,—but then I got the knack for it and could go around the entire yard with my eyes closed—one only had to dial an exact turn into the handlebars and machine described a sweeping circle all by itself, returning to the starting point of the journey. I didn't even have to peer through the “eyes” most of the time; I just worked my muscles and mulled my own thoughts. Sometimes I would remember my childhood, sometimes—imagine how the rapidly approaching moment of my departure into eternity was going to feel like. From time to time I also tried to wrap up some of the older conundrums which started surfacing again in my consciousness. For example, I would start thinking—who exactly am I?

It has to be said that this question bothered me since I was a kid, usually early in the morning when I woke up and found myself staring at the ceiling. Afterwards, when I grew up a little, I began asking it at school, but all I got in response was that consciousness is a property of highly organized matter consistent with Lenin's theory of reflection. I couldn't quite catch the meaning of those words, so I kept wondering—how come I could see? And who is that “I” that is seeing? And what does it actually mean—to see? Am I seeing something on the outside or just looking within myself? And

what is “outside” or “within?” I often felt right on the threshold of solution, but when I tried to make the last step towards it I would suddenly lose the “I” which was just now standing on that threshold.

When my aunt went to work she often asked our neighbor to look after me, an old woman whom I also pestered with all those questions, taking delight in seeing her struggle with the answers.

“You, Ommie boy, have a soul inside you,” she'd say, “it peers out from you through your eyes, and it lives in your body, like your hamster lives in the pot. This soul is a part of God, who created us all. So you are this soul.”

“Why would God have me sit in this pot?” I asked.

“I don't know,” said the old woman.

“Where does he sit himself? ”

“Everywhere,” the old woman answered, showing with her hands.

“So I am also God? ”

“No,” she'd say. “A man is not God. But he is divinely inspired.”

“Is the Soviet Man also divinely inspired?” I asked, having trouble with the unfamiliar words.

“Of course,” said the old woman.

“Are there many gods?” I asked.

“No. He is one.”

“Then why does the dictionary say there are many?” I asked pointing at the *Atheist's Encyclopedia* on the aunt's bookshelf.

“I don't know.”

“Which one is better?”

But the woman answered again:

“I don't know.”

And then I asked:

“Can I choose for myself?”

“Go ahead, Ommie boy,” the old woman laughed, and so I buried myself in the dictionary, where they had stacks of different gods. I particularly liked Ra, the god in whom ancient Egyptians put their trust many millennia ago—I liked him because he had a hawk's head, and pilots, cosmonauts and other heroes in general were often called “Motherland's hawks” on the radio. So I decided that if I am indeed inspired by a god, let this be the one. I remember I took a large notebook and scribbled this note in it, taken from the dictionary:

During the day Ra traverses the Celestial Nile in the Manjet-boat, the Barque of Millions of Years, shining light on the world, in the evening he transfers to the Mesektet-boat, the Barque of Night, and descends to the underworld where he travels the Nether Nile fighting off forces of darkness, and in the morning he appears on the horizon again.

The ancient people couldn't have known that the Earth was in fact rotating around the Sun, it said in the dictionary, and this is why they created this romantic myth.

Right under the article's text in the dictionary there was an ancient Egyptian picture showing Ra's transfer from one barque to the other; it depicted two identical boats side-by-side in which two girls were standing, one of them passing to the other a hoop with a hawk sitting inside—that was Ra. Most of all I liked that the boats, in addition to a lot of other stuff in them, contained what unmistakably was four Khrushchev-era six-story housing projects.

Since then, even though I continued to respond to the name “Omon,” I would always call myself “Ra,” and that was the name of the main character in my private adventures that I experienced before falling asleep, with my face turned to

the wall and eyes closed—until the time, that is, when my dreams have undergone the usual age-related transformation.

I wonder if anyone seeing the photo of the *lunokhod* in the paper would be visited by a thought that inside the steel box, whose existence is justified by its task to crawl fifty miles on the Moon and fall forever motionless, there is actually a person peering out through its two glass lenses? On the other hand, what's the difference. Even if someone does get an inkling, they still would never guess that this person was in fact I, Omon Ra, the true hawk of our Motherland, as the mission chief said once embracing me by the shoulders at the window and pointing with his finger to the glowing thundercloud in the sky.

10

Another subject that appeared in our curriculum—*General Theory of the Moon*—was considered optional for everyone except Mityok and I. The lectures were conducted by the doctor of philosophy (Ret.) Ivan Evseyevich Kondratiev. For some reason I did not hit it off with him, even though there was no clear rationale for my dislike; his lectures were, as a matter of fact, quite interesting. I remember that the first meeting with us he started in a very unusual fashion—he read poems about the Moon to us from scraps of paper for at least half an hour, becoming so touched himself at the end that he had to wipe his glasses. I was still keeping notes at the time, and this lecture left behind a nonsensical pile of quotational debris: “And like a golden drop of honey The Moon is twinkling sweet and high. . . Not long did moon's vain hopes delude us, Its dreams of love and prideful fame. . . The Moon! how full of sense and beauty Is that one sound for Russian heart! . . . But in this world the other regions, By moon tormentedly beset. . . And in the sky, resigned to everything, The disk of moon in shallow grin. . . The flow of thought he was directing, and subjugated thus the Moon. . . This uneasy and watery moonness. . .”⁵² And two more pages in the same vein. Then he became solemn and started speaking in authoritative voice, almost chanting:

“My friends! Let us remember now the historic words

⁵² Snippets of classic Russian poetry, often with the word “Moon” replacing the actual subject of the sentence. In succession: Nabokov; Pushkin; Pushkin again; Gumilev; Blok; Pasternak; Yesenin.

of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, related by him in the year nineteen hundred eighteen in his letter to Inessa Armand: "Of all the planets and celestial bodies," he wrote, "Moon remains the principal one for us."⁵³ Years have passed since then, many things have changed in the world. But Lenin's judgment had lost neither its incisiveness nor importance, the time having reaffirmed its validity. The radiant fire of Lenin's words casts a special glow on the today's date in the calendar. Indeed, the Moon plays an enormous role in the evolution of the humankind. A prominent Russian scientist Georgy Ivanovich Gurdzhiev, while still in the underground period of his activity, had developed the true Marxist theory of the Moon. In accordance with it, Earth had five different moons—and this is the reason that the star, the symbol of our great state, has five ends. The fall of each of the previous moons was accompanied by social upheavals and catastrophes—thus, for example, the fourth moon which crashed onto our planet in 1904, becoming known by the name of the Tunguska meteorite, caused the first Russian revolution, which was followed closely by the second. The moons that fell before it led to other changes in the socioeconomic formation—though of course the cosmic catastrophes were not affecting the level of development of the productive forces, which formed independently of the will and conscience of the people as well as influence of planets, but instead contributed to crystallization of the subjective precursors of the revolution.⁵⁴ The fall of the contemporary Moon—moon number five, the

⁵³ Parodying an oft-quoted Lenin's utterance; the original phrase concerned the place of cinema among arts.

⁵⁴ A brief, but accurate explication of the communist theory—that confluence of *objective* (certain level of dissatisfaction and political maturity of the “working masses”) and *subjective* (presence of a suitable leader, for example) circumstances would inevitably lead to a revolutionary shift in *socioeconomic formation* (defined as specific relationship of people to the means of production).

last one remaining—shall usher in the full and absolute victory of communism within the boundaries of the Solar system. While studying this particular subject we will pay close attention to the two major works by Lenin regarding the Moon: *Moon And The Uprising* and *Advice From A Stranger*.⁵⁵ We will start today's lesson by addressing the bourgeois falsifications of the topic—the views according to which all organic life on Earth is nothing but food for the Moon, a source of the emanations consumed by it.⁵⁶ This can be proven wrong simply by pointing out that the goal of existence of organic life on Earth is not the nourishment of the Moon but instead, as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin amply demonstrated, the construction of a new society, free from exploitation of man number one, two and three by man number four, five, six and seven. . .

And so forth. He spoke effusively and intricately, but what I remembered best was an example that stunned me with its poetic quality: the weight on the end of a string makes the clock go, the Moon is such a weight, Earth is the clock, and life is the movement of gears and singing of the mechanical cuckoo.

Quite often we would have some kind of medical evaluation—naturally, we all have been studied from head to toe and crosswise. This is why upon hearing that Mityok and I had to pass something that sounded like “reincarnational evaluation,” I just wrote it off as another reflex check or blood pressure monitoring—the first word did not convey anything in particular to me. But when I was called

⁵⁵ Actually *Socialism And The Uprising*; second work exists but has nothing to do with the Moon, of course.

⁵⁶ This is in fact one of the theories by Gurdzhiev, a renowned spiritualist of Russian descent. In true Orwellian fashion, the same person could easily be regarded first as a prominent scientist and then as a bourgeois falsificator, though rarely in the same speech (“Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia”).

downstairs and saw the specialist that was supposed to conduct the evaluation I was overcome with childish fear, very out of place considering what I was destined for in the very near future but insurmountable nonetheless.

It was not a doctor before me in white scrubs with stethoscope sticking out of his pocket but an officer, a colonel, but not in uniform—he was wearing some kind of strange black cassock with shoulder patches. He was big and fleshy, his face red, as if burned by hot soup. Around his neck I noticed a nickel-plated whistle and a chronometer, and but for his eyes, which resembled the visor hole of a heavy tank, he would look like a soccer official. He conducted himself very amiably, though, laughing often, and by the end of our talk I did feel more at ease. He talked to me in a small office where there were only a desk, two chairs, an examination table wrapped in plastic and a door into the next room. After filling out several yellowish forms he gave me a measure of some bitter liquid to drink, put a small hourglass on the desk in front of me and exited through the second door, instructing me to follow him there when all the sand has fallen to the bottom.

I remember myself looking at the hourglass, amazed at how slowly the grains of sand roll down through the glass neck, until I realized that this was happening because each grain possessed free will and did not want to fall down, for this was tantamount to death for them. And at the same time their eventual fall was inescapable, and both our and “other” world, I thought, were very similar to this hourglass—when all who lived die in one direction, the reality turns upside down and they become alive again, that is, begin to die in the other direction.

I was really sad about this for some time but then noticed that the sand was not falling anymore, and remembered that I'd better go and show myself to the colonel.

I felt trepidation and at the same time an unusual lightness; I recall trying for quite a while to reach the door behind which they were waiting for me, that was odd considering it was two or three steps away. When I finally laid my hands on the door handle I pushed it, but the door did not open. Then I pulled it towards me and discovered that I was pulling on a blanket instead. I was on my cot, Mityok was sitting at its edge. My head was spinning slightly.

“So? How was it?” asked Mityok. He was strangely agitated.

“How was what?” I asked, pushing up on my elbows and attempting to ascertain what had happened.

“The reincarnational evaluation,” said Mityok.

“Wait,” I said, recalling how I was pulling the door handle, “wait. . . No. Can't remember a thing.”

For some reason I was feeling empty and alone, like I had just traveled across a barren autumn field, and the sensation was so peculiar that I forgot about everything else, including the feeling of impending death, ceaseless in the last months, though it had lost its edge by now, becoming just a background for all other thoughts.

“I see. You signed it for them, didn't you?”⁵⁷ asked Mityok with a hint of loathing in his voice.

“Get lost,” I said turning towards the wall.

“These two burly corporals in black frocks haul you in,” Mityok continued, “and tell me: "Here, take back your Egyptian." And your shirt is all covered with puke. Is it really true you don't remember a single thing? ”

“True,” I answered.

“Well then, wish me luck,” he said. “It's my turn to go

⁵⁷ Meaning the so-called “non-disclosure note” in which person acknowledged being barred from discussing the details and the very fact of his encounter with KGB officials; demanded, and given, customarily at the end of such encounters.

now.”

“Break a leg,” I said. More than anything else in the world I wanted to sleep, because I had a feeling that if I fall asleep fast enough, I would wake up being myself again.

I heard the door squeak behind Mityok, and next it was already morning.

“Krivomazov! To the mission chief, on the double!” one of our guys shouted in my ear. I started to wake up, but managed to come to completely only when I was already dressed. Mityok's cot was empty and undisturbed, all the other guys were in their places, still in underwear. I was feeling a certain tension in the air, everybody was stealing awkward glances at each other, even Ivan was not shooting off his usual morning jokes, very funny even though totally stupid. I realized something must have happened, and on my way up to the third above-ground floor was trying to figure out what. Walking down the corridor and squinting at the sun which tried to force its way in through the drawn blinds I caught my reflection in an enormous dusty mirror, marveled at the ghostly paleness of my face and realized that my heroic feat had, for all intents and purposes, already begun.

The mission chief rose to greet me and shook my hand.

“How is your training?” he asked

“Progressing, comrade mission chief,” I said.

He stared probingly into my eyes.

“Good,” he said after a while, “I see. Here's what I called you here for, Omon. You are going to help me. Take this tape recorder,” he waved at a small Japanese Walkman on the desk in front of him, “take the forms, a pen, and go to room three twenty nine, it should be empty now. Have you ever transcribed recordings?”

“No,” I answered.

“It's simple. You cue the tape forward a little, write what you heard and then cue it further. If you didn't catch

something the first time, you rewind and listen again, several times if you need to.”

“Understood. Am I dismissed? ”

“Yes. Wait. I think you should understand why I asked you to do this and not someone else. You will soon face questions, the kind that nobody down there,” the mission chief pointed to the floor, “will be able to answer for you. I would be within my rights not to answer you either, but I think it's better for you to be in the loop. But keep in mind, neither the morale officers nor the crew have to ever find out what you are about to learn. What is happening now is a breach of protocol on my part. As you can see, even generals commit those.”

I silently took from the desk the recorder and several yellow forms like those I saw yesterday, and went to three twenty nine. The shades were drawn shut, the familiar metal chair with leather straps on the armrests and legs was still standing in the center, but now some wires were going from it to the wall. I sat behind the small desk in the corner, placed the ruled pad in front of me and turned on the tape.

“Thank you, comrade colonel.” Very comfortable, it's a recliner, not a chair, ha-ha-ha. . . Of course I am nervous. This is kind of like a test, right? . . . I see. Yes. With two “i”s —“Sviridenko. . .”

I switched the recorder off. This was unmistakably Mityok's voice, but it was strange, like someone have attached bellows instead of lungs to his vocal cords—he spoke sonorously and effortlessly, on a continuous exhale. I rewound the tape a little, pushed *Play* again and did not stop the tape anymore.⁵⁸

“. . .test, right?. . . I see. Yes. With two “i”s —“Sviridenko. . . Thank you, but I don't smoke. Nobody in

⁵⁸ The following text (the content of the recording) had been published by Pelevin as a separate short story under the title *Lunokhod*.

our group does—they'd throw you right out. . . Yes, for more than a year now. I can't quite believe it myself. Since I was a boy I always dreamed of going to the Moon. . . Of course, of course. Precisely, only those with the soul that is crystal clear. To think—with the entire Earth below. . . About who on the Moon? No, never heard about it. . . Ha-ha-ha, so that was a joke, you're funny. . . This place look weird, though. Well, unusual. Is it like that everywhere or only in the Special Department? All those skulls on the shelves, oh my God, standing like books. And labeled, just look at that. . . No, no, not in that sense at all. If they're here, it means they need to be here. Research, databases and stuff. I understand. I understand. You don't say. . . So well preserved. . . And this one, above the eye—from a pickaxe?⁵⁹ . . . That's mine. They had two other forms there as well. The last check—before Baikonur.⁶⁰ Yes. Ready. Comrade colonel, I have already described in detail. . . Just talk about myself, starting from the childhood? No, thank you, I am comfortable. . . Well, if that's a general order, sure. Why don't you install headrests, like in cars. Otherwise the pillow is going to fall down if it shifts. . . Aha, and I was just thinking—why do you have this mirror on the wall. And you're going to put another one on the table. Wow, that's a thick candle. . . From whose fat? Ha-ha-ha, that's a joke again, right, comrade colonel. . . Amazing. First time I see something like that, honest. I only read in books that you could do that, but never seen it for myself. Mind-boggling. Like a corridor. Where? Into this one? Jesus Christ, how many of those mirrors you have here—a regular barbershop. No, of course not, comrade colonel. . . Never had. It's just a saying, I picked it up from my grandma. I am a

⁵⁹ Leon (Lev) Trotsky, a Russian revolutionary, was killed in 1940 while in exile in Mexico City with a pickaxe blow to the head by a fanatical Stalinist.

⁶⁰ Near this Kazakhstan town the Soviet space launch site was located.

devoted atheist, or I wouldn't have gone to the flight academy. . . I remember, but very roughly. I was already eleven by the time we moved to Moscow; I was born in that small town—you know, it just sits there by the rail line, a train comes by every couple of days and that's all. It's quiet. The streets are dirty, geese walk around. Many drunks. And everything is just so gray—doesn't matter if it's summer or winter. Two factories, a movie theater. Well, there's also the park—but you understand, no one in his right mind would show his face there. And then, you know, something rumbles above, so you just look to the sky. Well, what's there to explain. . . And I also read books all the time, I owe to them everything that is good in me.⁶¹ My most favorite was, of course, *The Andromeda Nebula*.⁶² Very big influence on me, that book had. Imagine, this Iron Star. . . And on that very black planet there's our cheerful Soviet starship with a swimming pool, a spot of blue light around it, and where the light ends—adversary life forms, they are afraid of light and can live only in darkness. Some kind of jellyfish, I didn't quite understand that part, and also the Black Cross—I guess he was making a dig at the clergy there. This Black Cross was there, he was stalking in the darkness, and where the blue light is the people are working, mining for anameson. And then this Black Cross like shoots something mysterious at them! It was aiming for Erg Noor himself, but brave Nisa Krit shielded him with her body. And then our guys really got back at them, like revenge—a nuclear blast from there to the horizon, they saved Nisa Krit, and they caught the principal jellyfish, and back to Moscow. I was reading it and thinking

⁶¹ A popular saying attributed to M. Gorky: “Everything that is good in me I owe to books.”

⁶² A rambling futuro-philosophical science fiction novel by Soviet writer A. Efremov. Described below are some of the more dramatic scenes from the book.

—how do people work in our embassies abroad! A very good book. And there's another one I remember. They had some kind of black cave there or something. . .

“ . . . ”

“No, the cave was afterwards, and it was not a cave, more like corridors. Very low corridors, and ceiling all covered with soot from torches. The warriors always walked with torches at night, protecting his highness the prince. From Accadians, they said. But really they were protecting him from his brother, of course. . . You, sir Master of the Northern Tower, please forgive me if I said something wrong, but everybody thinks that—warriors and serfs, both. You may order my tongue cut out, but still everyone would tell you the same. The Queen Shubad herself posted this squadron there, against Meskalamdug. Every time he rides by on his way to the hunt, he always passes the Southern Wall, and those two hundred warriors with him in copper helmets—what's that for, fighting lions? Everybody's talking about it. . . What do you mean? What's with you, sir Master of the Northern Tower, were you chewing too much five-leaf again? I am Ninhursag, Arrata's priest and carver of seals. I mean, I'm going to be carver of seals when I grow up, I am still little. . . come on, why are you writing, you must know who I am. You gave me that bridle with copper figuring. You don't remember? Why. . . Wait. . . So we're sitting with Namtura—you know, the one with his ears lopped off, he was teaching me to carve triangles. This is the hardest one for me. You have to make two deep cuts, and then from the third side you just dig with a broad chisel, and. . . Right, so then somebody from the outside tears away the curtain, and so brazenly—so we look up, and those two warriors are standing there. Rejoice, they say, with the great joy! Our prince is prince no more, but King Abarraggi! Just embarked on his way to the Goddess Nanna, so naturally, we have to be

going too. Namtura is crying—from happiness, I guess, singing something in Accadian, and starts gathering his rags in a big bundle. And I went out into the yard right away, only told Namtura to pick up the chisels. And in the yard—Urshu Victorious!—all those warriors, and with torches, like broad daylight. . . No, not at all, sir Master of the Northern Tower! Of course not. It's what Namtura is mumbling all the time. . . Never had, and I never brought sacrifices either. Don't. I am the nunn of the great King Abarraggi now, you can't just cut my ears off all of a sudden, you need a royal decree for that. . . Apology accepted. Right, so the chariots with bulls were ready. Here's when sir Master of the Locks came to me—here, Ninhursag, he said, take this dagger made from the government bronze, you are an adult now. And also he gave me a small sack of barley meal—you cook that along the way, he said. So I look around and I see those, in the copper helmets, walking around. So I think: Urshu the Great! I mean, Anu the Great! This must mean that Meskalamdug finally buried the hatchet with Abarraggi. . . Wise decision, I thought, you don't quarrel with the King—not when his every word is Anu. And then they showed me to my chariot, so I climb into it. There was also this boy standing there—he was directing the bulls. I never saw him before. I only remember that he had the turquoise necklace, very expensive. And the dagger tucked under his belt—must have just gotten it too. So, I looked back at the fortress, and I got a little sad and stuff. But then the clouds parted, and in the clearing the Moon just burst out. . . I felt so happy and light right away. . . So then they push away this stone slab near the stables—and there's the entrance into the caves. I never knew there was a cave there. Really I didn't. . . Why, may I never distinguish myself in battle! That was you, wasn't it? Now I remember. So right there you, sir Master of the Northern Tower, approached us with two goblets of beer, and you said—here,

from Meskalamdug, the king's brother. And the same skirt you were wearing as now, only you had the copper helmet on your head. So, we drank. I never drank beer before that, ever. Then the second boy shouted something, and we drove ahead—right into a crack in the cliff. I remember the road was descending, and around me—I didn't see a thing, it was so dark. . . Afterwards? Afterwards I found myself here in the tower. That's from beer, isn't it?.. Are they going to punish me now? Put in a word for me, sir Master of the Northern Tower. Tell them how it was. Or just pass them the tablets, now that you wrote everything down. Of course I have it with me. . . No, I'm not going to give it to you. I'll affix it myself. Nobody better lay a hand on my seal, by U. . . Anu the Great. Here. You like it, don't you? I made it myself. Third time a charm. This is god Marduk. What do you mean—"fence," those are the Elder Gods standing. Please help me, sir Master of the Northern Tower! I will carve three seals for you, I will. No, I'm not crying. . . There, I won't anymore. Thank you. You are truly wise and mighty man, I say this with all my heart. Please don't tell anyone I cried. . . They'd say: what kind of Arrata's priest is he —let him drink a little beer and he's ready to cry. . . Of course I want to. Where? From the South or North? Cause you have this wall all covered in mirrors here. I see. . . Sure I know that. That was when Ninlil went to the clear stream to bathe herself, and then she stepped out to the shore. Her mother would tell her again and again, but she went just the same, so she's stepping onto the shore, see, and that's when Enlil knocked her up. So then he comes to the city of Kiur, but the Council of Gods says to him—Enlil, you rapist, away from the city with you! But Ninlil, she went after him, sure thing. . . No, not blinding at all. The other two? That was after, once when Enlil turned into watchman near the crossing, and then when Nanna was already in Ninlil's womb. . .”

“ . . . ”

“And then, those two are just different manifestations of the same. You can say thus: Hecate is the dark and mysterious side, while Selena—light and wondrous. I must admit I am off my horse here—just heard a couple of things here and there in Athens. . . Sure, sure I've been to Athens. Under Domician that was. I was hiding there. Or we wouldn't be talking right now, Abbas Senator, we wouldn't be riding in this palanquin of yours. . . Impugning the royal name, what else. Presumably I said that the master has a statue of the princeps in his yard, and that they went and buried two slaves nearby. But he never had any statue in the first place. Even under Nerva we were still apprehensive about returning. But with our current princeps there's nothing to worry about. He sent to us Plinius Secundus himself to be the Legate—these are the times that we live in, glory be to Isis and Serapis! Not for. . . No, not at all, Abbas Senator, by Hercules! This I picked up in Athens, they have Egyptians there now like you won't believe. . . What interesting tablets you have, one almost can't see the wax. And these lions' muzzles—are they made of electron? Corinthian bronze, you don't say. . . First time I see that. . . Sextius Rufinus. No, of freed slaves. Here's the nice thing about palanquins—when the slaves are skilled, of course—you can ride and write. And the light is shining just like in a room, the pines passing by. . . It's like you look inside my soul, Abbas Senator. Constantly within myself I compose them. Not in the Marcial's order, I am afraid—just dulling the stylos. . . Songs I sing with brief verse, like Catullus was singing, and before him Calbus and ancients. What do I care! I have left the Forum in favor of verses. . . Of course I am exaggerating, Abbas Senator. These are verses, after all. As a matter of fact, that's why I was brought along with the Christians' case—because of literature. Just wanted to look at our Legate. A great man, he is. . . Well, not exactly

as a witness. No, I wrote it like it was—that Maximus, he really was from Galilee. They'd assemble at his place at night, inhale some kind of smoke. And then he clambers up to the roof wearing only his caligae, and cries like a cockerel—one look at that, and I knew right away they must have been Christians. . . Well, about the bats I embellished a little, I admit. So what? The gladiator school was already crying for them anyway. And that Legate I liked very much. Right. . . He invited me to the table, listened to my poems. Praised me lavishly. And then he says—why don't you, Sextius, come to dinner. When the Moon is full. I will send for you, he says. . . And he did send, he really did. I gathered all the cartouches with the poems—what if, I thought, he'd send me to Rome? I put on my best cloak. . . How could I wear a toga—I don't have the citizenship. So then we're riding, and out of the city for some reason. For a long time we were riding, I even dozed off in the chariot. I wake up, look around—a villa, or a temple, or something like that, and people with torches. So, you see, we go inside—through the house and into the garden. And they already have tables set there, right under the skies, and the Moon is shining. Such a large Moon it was that night. And the slaves say to me—sir Legate will be right out, why don't you lie beside the table, drink some wine. This is your place, under that marble lamb. Well, I lie down, and I drink, and then I notice everyone around is looking at me funny. . . And not a word. What was it, I'm thinking, that the Legate must have told them about my poems. . . I got chills even, honest. But then two harps started playing behind the screen, and I became so cheerful all of a sudden—simply amazing. I don't even remember how I ended up dancing around. . . And then they brought out the flaming tripods, and then those people in yellow chitons. . . They weren't quite themselves, if you know what I mean—they sit, and sit some more, and then extend their hands toward the Moon and start

chanting something in Greek. . . No, I couldn't make it out—I was dancing, making merry. And then sir Legate shows up—he had the Phrygian helmet on for some reason, with a silver disk, and a flute in his hand. Eyes gleaming. He poured me more wine. Those are some good poems that you're writing, Sextius, he says to me. Then he started talking about the Moon—exactly like you just did, Abbas Senator. Now wait a minute, you have been there too, haven't you? Right. Ha-ha, and all this time I'm thinking—why is it we're traveling in your palanquin. But how. . . You have your toga on now, sure, but then you were dressed in a chiton, and Thracian helmet, just like the Legate. Yeah, and that red spear you were holding, with the horsetail. I was really uncomfortable turning my back to you. But Legate kept saying—here, Sextius, why don't you look at Hecate, he says, and I will play the flute for you. And he started playing—really softly. So I looked up, and I was looking—and then you are asking me about Hecate and Selena. When did I manage to climb into your palanquin? Is everything all right? Well, glory be to I . . . Hercules. Apollo and Hercules. That's fine, I brought them with me, for Legate to read. And you, Abbas Senator, dabbling in literature also? That's why you have been writing and writing all this time. A-a. As a keepsake. So you liked the poems too. This hour is for you—it walks like Leah, and rose is reigning over hair so fragrant. Of course. I can even affix my gemma. That's all right, the cutting is not that deep, it does not require a lot of wax. It'll print through. Are we almost there? Why thank you, Abbas Senator, my hair does seem to be a little messed up. And how much does a mirror like that cost in the Metropolia? You don't say, this kind of money would buy you a house around our place in Viphinia. Is this Corinthian bronze as well? Silver? And some kind of inscription. . .”

“ . . . ”

“I can make it out. There. . . To Lieutenant Wolf, for the Western Prussia. General Lüdendorf. Begging your pardon, brigadenfuehrer, it just opened by itself. An amazing cigarette box, shining like a mirror. So you were already lieutenant in '15? Air Force, too? Please don't, brigadenfuehrer, you are making me uneasy. Because of those three crosses I'm not even allowed to fly sorties anymore. There are lots of Yak's and MiG's in this world, they say, but only one Vogel Von Richthofen. If not for that special mission, I'd probably be covered in mold now, alone in the empty barracks. . . Yes, like “bird.” My mother was upset at first when she found out how my father was planning to name me. But Baldur Von Schirach—they were friends with my father—even dedicated an entire poem to me. They study it in schools now. . . Careful—they're shooting from that window. . . No, the wall is thick enough. . . I can only imagine what he'd write if he knew about the special mission. This was something else entirely. I really bought into that transfer to the Western front business, only found out in Berlin what it was. First off, I got upset, naturally. I thought: don't they have anything better to do in *Ahnenerbe*—recalling combat pilots from the front. . . But when I saw that plane—Holy Virgin Mary! Right away. . . No, not at all, brigadenfuehrer, I just lived in Italy when I was a kid. Right. Never in all my years of flying I've seen such beauty. It was only later that I figured out it was actually Me-109, only different engine and wings a little longer. . . Damn, the ammo belt jammed. . . No, it's all right, I'll manage. . . So, I walked into the hangar and just stood there breathless. So white, so light—like it was glowing in the dark. But what was most amazing—the preparation. I thought I'd be studying hardware, and instead they took me to you guys in *Ahnenerbe*, measured the skull, Wagner playing all along, and don't bother asking questions—everyone's silent. In

short, when that night they woke me up I thought it was skull measuring time again. Then I look out—no, these two Mercedes are standing behind the window, engines working. . . Great shot, brigadenfuehrer! Right under the turret. How come you're so good with this thing. . . So we get in, we ride. Then. . . Yes, it was cordoned off, SS guys with torches. We pass them, then we get out of the forest, then some kind of building with columns and an airport. Not a soul in sight, gentle breeze—and the Moon in the sky. I thought I knew all air fields around Berlin, but I never saw that one. And there's my plane, right on the runway, something attached under the fuselage, also white, kind of like a bomb. But they didn't even let me stand near it, whisked into that building right away. . . No, I don't recall really. Only remember that Wagner was playing. They ordered me to disrobe, then bathed me like I was a baby. . . No, no, save the grenades for later. . . Rubbed my skin with oil—you know, smells of something ancient, very pleasant. And they gave me the flight uniform, except it was all white. And all my awards right there on the breast. Well, Vogel, I thought, this is it. . . I was dreaming all my life about something like that. Then those, from *Ahnenerbe*, say to me: go on, captain, go to your plane. They will tell you everything there. Took turns shaking my hand. So I went. Even the boots were white, I was afraid to step in the dust. . . just a moment. So I go up to the plane, and there. . . Wait a minute, if it wasn't you, brigadenfuehrer, only not in this steel helmet but in some kind of black cap. . . So you begin to explain it to me—climb to eleven thousand, bearing on the Moon, the button is on the left panel. . . Damn. Just missed it. . . And that white pad you gave me, and then coffee with cognac from the thermos. I am saying—no, I never drink before the flight, and you looked at me sternly—do you have any idea, Vogel, who this coffee is from? So then I turn

around and see—I'd never believe that. . . Right. Just like in newsreels, and the suit is the same, double-breasted. Only with a cap on his head, and binoculars around his neck. And mustache a little wider than they draw on the portraits. Or it only seemed that way because of moonlight. He waved at me, like at a stadium or something. . . Anyway, so I drank the coffee, got into the plane, put my oxygen mask on right away and took off. And it became so easy all of a sudden—like I was breathing with two breasts instead of one. I climbed to eleven, bearing on the Moon—it was huge that night, half the sky, and then I looked down. It was all greenish down there, some river glistening. . . That's where I pressed the button. The plane started veering to the right, how I got down—I don't even know. . . Sign it? You also scribble something for me—just to remember you by. Thank you. . . Did many of them manage to get through to Berlin? Sure, that I understand. . . Nothing major, just the brick fragments, I guess. The bridge of the nose is intact. . . Right, I told you nothing major, I can see it now. This cigarette box—you can shave looking into that thing, no mirror needed. . .”

“ . . . ”

“No, I don't need it anymore; I didn't even ask for it in the first place. You put it here yourself, comrade colonel, just after you lit that candle. . . What was later—I read the books, then I made a telescope for myself, a small one. I mostly studied the Moon. I even remember I went as lunokhod to the school matinee party once. . . I remember that evening like it was yesterday. . . No, evening, all matinees were in the evening then, and Saturday was exchanged with Monday that time. . .⁶³ All our guys assembled in the hall—they all had those simple costumes, you know, so they could dance. And I

⁶³ All Soviet holidays were tied to specific dates, so in order to give people a three-day weekend when the holiday fell on Tuesday it was customary to work on Saturday and take Monday off instead.

had this thing on—get down on all fours and it really looked like lunokhod. Music is blaring, everybody's so flushed. . . I stood there by the door for a while, and then just went walking around the empty school building. The corridors are all dark, nobody's there. . . So I crawl towards a window, on all fours, and right behind it in the sky—this Moon, it was not even yellow, rather green somehow, like on that picture, you know? I have a poster over my cot, from *Working Woman*. This is where I gave myself a word that I was going to get to the Moon. . . Ha-ha-ha. . . Well, if you, comrade colonel, are going to do your best, that means I will get there for sure. . . Afterwards? Zaraisk Academy, right after high school, and then here right away. . . You received it? Yes, comrade colonel, I know, it's always better when it's informal like that, on a human level. Right here? Is it all right that the ink is blue? Exactly. The simpler the soul, the shorter the protocol. . . Thank you. Raspberry, if I could. Where do you get these carbonation charges, for the siphon? On the other hand. . . Comrade colonel, may I ask you one question? Is it true that all the lunar soil ends up here with you? I don't remember really, one of our guys, I guess. . . Of course I'd like to, I only saw it on TV. . . Wow. . . How much does this jar hold? Ten ounces or so? Could I really? Thank you. . . Thank you so much. . . Just give me another tissue, to make sure. . . Thank you. Sure I remember. To the right, through the corridor, to the elevators, and then down. I won't make it by myself? Still under the influence? So you just see me along, then. . . Woo. . . No, never. The new uniform? No, I like it, why? We already had caps in the army once—the Budyonny hats.⁶⁴ Looks good, but a little unusual—no bill, and the badge is round. . . No, I didn't forget. . . What do you mean—to the left? Why the torch? Couldn't the electrician. . . oh yeah, the

⁶⁴ A woolen, helmet-like cap with a sharp peak and ear flaps named after S. Budyonny, famous cavalry commander.

secret access. A little light here, the stairs are really steep. . . Almost like our lunar landing module. Comrade colonel, that's a dead end. . .”

There was a loud click and two voices, one male and one female, belted out in unison:

“. . . on their lips. The song to this day can be heard in the depths. . .”

A short pause followed.

“Of grasslands so fresh,” the woman sang half-inquisitively.

“Malachite of the steppes,”⁶⁵ reaffirmed the rich baritone.

I switched the recorder off. I was very scared. I recalled the colonel in the black cassock with the whistle and chronometer around his neck. Nobody was asking Mityok any questions; that to which he was giving answers was just soft whistling noise interrupting his soliloquy from time to time.

⁶⁵ Lines from a popular song *Little Apple*. See also the first sentence of second paragraph in the next chapter, where two more lines from it are related in prose (the song actually mentions its own title, but referring to another song with the same name, one that was popular much earlier—around WWI.)

1 1

Nobody asked me about Mityok. Truth be told, he wasn't friends with anyone except myself, only played homemade cards with Otto from time to time. His cot was already taken out from our dorm, and now only the posters from "Working Woman" with pictures of "Moonlit Night over Dnieper" and "Khan Baikonur" were left as a reminder that there was once someone named Mityok living in our world. At the lessons everyone was trying to look like nothing happened, colonel Urchagin being especially perky and friendly.

In the meantime our small squadron, not noticing the loss of the soldier as it were, was about to sing its "Little Apple" to the end. No one was talking about it directly, but it was clear—the flight is around the corner. The mission chief met with us a couple of times, telling us how he was fighting in Kovpak's battalion⁶⁶ during the war, we all had our pictures taken—one by one at first, and then all together, and then with the teaching staff in front of the banner. Then we started to meet more new cadets, they were training separately from us, I didn't know exactly what for—there was some talk about an automated probe to Alpha Microcephalos right after our mission but I wasn't completely sure that the new guys were in fact the crew of that probe.

One evening in early September I was suddenly called

⁶⁶ S. Kovpak, cavalry commander in the Red Army since the early days of the Revolution; during WWII conducted guerilla raids with his battalion against insurgent Ukrainian forces in Carpathian Mountains.

before the mission chief. He wasn't in his office and the adjutant in the waiting room, idly flipping through pages of an old issue of Newsweek, told me he was in three twenty nine.

From behind the door with the number “329” I could hear voices and something that sounded like laughter. I knocked, but no one answered. I knocked one more time and turned the handle.

A wide strip of tobacco smoke was hanging under the ceiling, reminding me for some reason of the jet trail in the summer sky over Zaraisk Academy. Strapped with his hands and legs to the metal chair in the middle of the room was a small Japanese man—that he was Japanese I figured from the little red circle inside a white rectangle on the sleeve of his flight suit. His lips were swollen and blue in color, one eye turned into a narrow slit in the middle of massive purple haematoma, the flight suit was splattered with blood—some fresh, some brown and caked over. In front of the Japanese I saw Landratov in shiny high boots and dress uniform of an Air Force Lieutenant. By the window, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, a short young man in civilian clothes was standing. The mission chief was sitting in the corner behind the desk—he was looking at the Japanese absentmindedly, tapping against the desk with the end of his pencil.

“Comrade mission chief,” I started, but he waved his hand at me and began collecting the papers strewn across the desk into a folder. I transferred my gaze to Landratov.

“Hi,” he said, offering me his wide palm, and then all of a sudden, absolutely unexpectedly for me, kicked the Japanese as hard as he could in the stomach with his boot. The Japanese gasped.

“This bastard here doesn't want to be on the joint crew!” said Landratov, his eyes wide with amazement,

throwing his arms up, and rattled out on the floor a short tap sequence with double slap on the boots, his feet turning unnaturally outward.

“As you were, Landratov!” the mission chief burred getting out from behind the desk.

From the corner of the room I heard a soft whine filled with definite hatred; I looked there and saw a dog, sitting on its hind legs before a navy blue plate with a rocket printed on it. It was a very old husky, her eyes were completely red, but what startled me was not her eyes but the small light green uniform top covering her upper body, with the shoulder patches of major-general and two Orders of Lenin on the breast.

“Meet Comrade Laika,”⁶⁷ said the mission chief catching my stare. “She's the first Soviet cosmonaut. By the way, her parents are our colleagues. Worked in the Organs,⁶⁸ in the North.”

Mission chief produced a small flask of cognac, which he proceeded to pour onto the plate. Laika made a feeble attempt to nip him in the hand, missed it and started whining again.

“She's quite vigorous, isn't she?” the mission chief said with a smile. “But what she shouldn't have done is pee all over the place. Landratov, why don't you go bring a rag.”

Landratov went out.

“Yoy o tenki ni narimashita ne,” said the Japanese, unsticking his lips. “Hana wa sakuragi, hito wa fujiwara.”

⁶⁷ “Husky” (Russian), the name of the dog which officially was the first animal to have been launched into space (in fact, probably the first animal to have been successfully launched and brought back).

⁶⁸ Informal name for the various incarnations of secret police. What is meant here is that the dogs were guarding prisoners in the Northern labor camps; the special branch of the armed forces charged with such guard duty fell under control of MVD—the Ministry of the Interior, parent organization of KGB.

The mission chief turned quizzically to the young man at the window.

“He's just delirious, comrade lieutenant-general,” the young man replied.

The mission chief picked the folder off the desk.

“Let's go, Omon.”

We ventured out into the corridor, and he put his hand over my shoulders. Landratov, rag in hand, passed us by and winked at me, closing the door into the three twenty nine behind him.

“That Landratov, he's still green,” said the mission chief contemplatively, “hadn't settled yet. But an outstanding pilot. A born pilot.

We walked several yards in silence.

“So, Omon,” said the mission chief, “Baikonur the day after tomorrow. This is it.”

I have been waiting for these words for some months now, but still the sensation was of a heavy snowball, with a steel nut inside, jamming into my solar plexus.

“Your call letters are going to be “Ra”, as you requested. It was hard,” the mission chief jabbed his finger up into the air, “but we pushed it through. Only not a word about it there,” he pointed down, “not yet.”

I didn't remember ever having requested anything of the sort.

At the final testing on the rocket mock-up I was just an observer—other guys were passing the exams, and I was sitting on the bench by the wall watching. I've passed my test a week before, making the fully loaded lunokhod turn a hundred yard long figure eight inside six minutes. The guys made their time precisely, and then they had us all standing in formation in front of the mock-up for the farewell photo shoot. I never saw the actual picture, but I can imagine perfectly how it turned out: Syoma Anikin in front, his face

and hands still bearing the traces of motor oil, behind him—Ivan Grechka, leaning onto an aluminium walker (his stumps ached from time to time because of all the underground dampness), in a long mutton overcoat, an undone oxygen mask hanging low around his neck, then—Otto Pluzis, in the silver spacesuit padded for warmth with a woolen blanket with a merry yellow duckling print, his helmet was drawn back resembling a hood stiffened by interstellar frost. Then Dima Matyushevich in a similar spacesuit, only the patches of blanket were simply green-striped, not with ducklings, and then I, the last of the crew, in the cadet uniform. Behind me, in the electric wheelchair of his—colonel Urchagin, and mission chief to the left of him.

“And now, according to tradition which had turned into a good custom,” the mission chief said when the photographer was done, “we are going to come up for a few minutes to the Red Square.”⁶⁹

We walked across the large hall and paused by the small steel door—to cast the last look on the rocket, exactly like the one on which we were destined to soar into the sky soon. Then the mission chief opened that little hole in the wall with a key from his ring and we started along the corridor I've never ventured to before.

We were weaving for a long time between stone walls with thick multicolored cables snaking their way along them, several times the corridor turned sharply, the ceiling coming down so low now and again that we had to bend under. Once I spotted a shallow niche in the wall with wilted flowers in it, a small memorial plaque was hanging nearby, "Here in 1923 comrade Serob Nalbandyan was viciously murdered with a shovel" inscribed on it. Then a red carpeted strip appeared under our feet, the corridor widened and then ended with a

⁶⁹ A vast brick-paved square in the city center just outside Kremlin wall; about a mile from Lubyanka.

stairwell.⁷⁰

The stairwell was very long, by its side there was an incline with narrow flights of steps in the middle—just like for strollers in the underground passages. I figured why they made it like that when I saw the mission chief rolling the wheelchair with colonel Urchagin up the incline. When he got winded Urchagin would pull the hand brake and they froze in place, so the others didn't need to climb too fast, especially considering that Ivan always had problems with long stairs. Finally we ascended to the massive oak doors with state seals carved into them, the mission chief unlocked them with his key, but the door halves saturated with dampness only gave way when I pushed against them with my shoulder.

We were blinded by sunlight, someone shielded his eyes with a hand, others turned away—only Urchagin was sitting calmly, with the routine half-smile on his face. Once we got accustomed to the light it turned out we were facing the gray crypts of the Kremlin wall⁷¹ and I realized we must have gone through the back door of the Mausoleum.⁷² I haven't seen the open sky for such a long time that my head was spinning.

“All cosmonauts,” the mission chief spoke softly, “all of them, no matter how many there were, came before the flight here, to the stones and stands that are sacred to every Soviet person, to take a fragment of this place in their hearts

⁷⁰ The entire paragraph is a tongue-in-cheek self-reference to Pelevin's own short story *Reconstructor*.

⁷¹ Interred in and close to the Kremlin wall are the remains of Party and military leaders.

⁷² A large red/pink granite and marble structure in the middle of the Red Square against the wall, housing mummified body of Lenin, open for public viewing, and flanked by honor guards (at least it was at the time). Its top also served as stands for highest government officials during state parades and other events.

with them to space. Immensely long and arduous was the journey that our country went through—we started with machine guns mounted on horse-drawn carriages, and now you guys are working with the most sophisticated automatic technology,” he paused and looked us over with a cold unblinking stare, “that our Motherland had entrusted into your hands, which Bamlag Ivanovich and I explained to you in our lectures. I am confident that in this, your last walk on the surface of our Motherland, you will carry away some remembrance of the Red Square with you, even though I cannot know what it will turn out to be for each of you. . .”

We were standing silently on the surface of our dear old planet. It was late in the day, the sky was getting slightly overcast, the bluish firs were waving their branches in the wind. We smelled some kind of flowers. The clock tower started chiming five, mission chief adjusted the hands on his watch and told us we still had a couple of minutes.

We went out onto the steps in front of the Mausoleum. There wasn't anyone on the entire square if you didn't count two just changed honor guards, who never acknowledged they have seen us at all, and three mysterious long coats walking away in the direction of the clock tower. I looked around, trying to soak in everything I was seeing and feeling at this moment—the graying walls of the State Department Store, the empty “fruit market” of the St. Basil's, Lenin's Mausoleum, the red-bannered green copper dome barely discernible over the wall, the fronton of the Museum of History⁷³ and the leaden sky, hanging low and looking away from the Earth, quite probably unaware of the steel penis of the Soviet rocket about to penetrate it.

“It's time,” said the mission chief.

Our guys filed slowly back behind the Mausoleum. A minute later only colonel Urchagin and I were left under the

⁷³ Described is a complete clockwise panorama of the Red Square.

LENIN inscription. The mission chief looked at his watch and coughed, but Urchagin said:

“One moment, comrade lieutenant-general. I'd like to have a word with Omon.”

The mission chief nodded and disappeared behind the polished granite corner.

“Come here, my boy,” said the colonel.

“I came there. The first drops of rain, heavy and sparse, fell onto the stones of the Red Square. Urchagin grasped for something in the air, I stretched out my hand. He took it, pressed it slightly and jerked me towards him. I bent over and he started whispering in my ear. I was listening to him and looking at the way the steps were darkening in front of his wheelchair.

Comrade Urchagin must have been talking for two minutes, making long pauses. After falling silent he pressed my palm once more and took his hand away.

“Now go, join the others,” he said.

I made a movement in the direction of the hatch but stopped.

“And you?”

The raindrops were quickening all around us.

“That's all right,” he said, producing an umbrella from a sheath resembling a holster, attached to the side of his chair. “I'll take a little spin here.”

This is what I brought with me from the Red Square falling slowly into the night—the darkened stone pavement and the slim figure in the old uniform top, sitting in the wheelchair trying to open the stubborn black umbrella.

The dinner was not particularly tasty—soup with small star-shaped noodles, boiled chicken with rice and stewed dried fruits for desert; usually after drinking the liquid I would eat up all the squishy fruit morsels, but this time I only ate the wrinkled bitter pear, then felt sick all of a

sudden and pushed the plate away.

12

I was floating on one of those water bicycles though thick reeds, with enormous telegraph poles sticking out of them, the bicycle was unusual—not the one with the pedals in front of the seat; it seemed to have been converted from the real ground bicycle, between the two long fat floats they installed the frame with the word "Sport" written on it. It was absolutely unclear where all those reeds came from, and the water bicycle, and even I myself. But I didn't care about that. It was so beautiful around me that all I wanted to do was float farther and farther, and look about, and I guess I wouldn't have even thought of wanting anything else for a long time. The most beautiful thing was the sky—slender long purple clouds hung over the horizon, resembling a wing of strategic bombers in formation. It was warm, and the water splashed a little against the paddles, and an echo of a distant thunder rumbled in the west.

Then I figured it was not thunder after all. At regular intervals something within of me, or maybe outside of me, started to shake so hard my ears were ringing. After every blow the surroundings—the river, the reeds, the sky above—looked more and more worn out. The world was becoming familiar down to the smallest detail, like that bathroom wall you have been staring at while sitting on the toilet, and it was happening fast, until I suddenly realized that my bicycle and I were not among reeds, or on the water, or even under the sky, but instead inside a translucent sphere which separated me from everything else. Each blow made the walls of the

sphere harder and thicker, less and less light penetrated through them, finally it got very dark. When the sky over my head was replaced by a ceiling, a dim electric bulb turned itself on, walls began mutating, changing shape, drawing closer, twisting and forming some kind of shelves, crowded with glasses, tin cans and who knows what else. This is where the rhythmic convulsions of the world became that which it was from the very beginning—a ringing telephone.

I was inside the lunokhod, sitting in the saddle, clutching at the handlebars and bent down to the frame. I was wearing the flight coat, fur hat with earflaps and fur boots, the oxygen mask wrapped around my neck like a scarf. The green box of the telephone screwed onto the floor was ringing off the hook. I lifted the receiver.

Fuck you, you shit-faced fag!—the monstrous bass in my ear exploded with tortured desperation.—What are you doing there, jerking off?

“Who's this?”

“Chief of Flight Control Center colonel Halmuradov. You awake?”

“What?”

“Suck my dick, that's what! One minute countdown!”

“One minute countdown, affirmative!” I screamed back, biting my lip in horror, bloodying it, and grabbed the handlebars again with my free hand.

“As-s-s-hole,” the receiver exhaled, and then I caught indecipherable snippets of conversation—I guess the person who was just yelling at me was now talking to someone else, holding the microphone away from his face. Then something beeped in the receiver and I heard a different voice, talking in a detached and mechanical fashion, but still with a thick Ukrainian accent:

“Fifty nine. . . fifty eight. . . fifty se-wen. . .”

I was in that state of profound guilt and shock when

people start moaning loudly, or shout dirty words; the thought that I almost caused something irreparable to happen obscured everything else in my mind. Keeping track of the numbers peeling off into my ear I tried to make sense of what was happening and came to a conclusion that I hadn't in fact done anything horrible yet. I recalled only how I put down the bowl with the stewed fruit and pushed myself away from the table, having lost the appetite. The next thing I remembered was the ringing radio, demanding that I pick up the receiver.

“Thirty three. . .”

I noticed that lunokhod had been fully stocked. The shelves that have always been barren were now tightly packed—oily cans with the Chinese luncheon meat *Great Wall* were glistening on the bottom, while the top shelf contained a pad, a tin mug, can opener and a holster with the handgun, all that drawn together with thick wire. My left thigh was pressing against the large oxygen tank marked *FLAMMABLE*; my right—against the aluminium water canister, its sides reflecting the tiny lamp on the wall. A map of the Moon was hanging under the lamp, sporting two large black dots, of which the bottom one was marked "Landing Site".

“Sixteen. . .”

I pushed myself against the lenses on the wall. Outside was complete darkness—as could be expected, since the lunokhod was covered with the nose cone deflector.

“Eight. . . Se-wen. . .”

“The fleeting seconds of the countdown,” I recalled comrade Urchagin's words, “what are they but the voice of history multiplied by millions of televisions?”

“Three. . . Two. . . Wun. . . Ignition.”

Somewhere deep below I heard roar and thunder—it was becoming louder by the second and soon exceeded any

imaginable limit. Hundreds of hammers were striking into the steel body of the rocket. Then everything started to shake, I bumped my head several times on the wall—if not for the fur hat, I swear my brain would have been splattered all over. Several cans of luncheon meat fell onto the floor, then came a blow so hard I immediately thought of a catastrophe—and the next moment in the receiver I still continued to hold to my ear I heard a distant voice:

“Omon! You're off!”

“Poyehali!”⁷⁴ I shouted. The thunder turned into a steady and mighty rumble, shaking—into vibrations like those you experience in a fast-moving train. I put the receiver back, and it rang again.

“Omon, are you all right?”

It was the voice of Syoma, superimposed onto the monotonous drone of flight information being read out loud.

“Sure I'm all right,” I said, “but why are we. . . On the other hand. . .”

“We thought they were going to scrub the liftoff, you were sleeping so soundly. The moment is calculated very precisely, you know. The entire trajectory depends on it. They even sent a soldier up the rocket, he was banging with his boots on the cone, to wake you up. And they were raising you on the intercom all the time.

“Aha.”

We were silent for several second.

“Listen,” Syoma started again, “I only have four minutes left, even less now. Then I am disconnecting the first stage. We all already said our good-byes to each other, but you. . . You know, we won't be talking anymore.”

I couldn't find any words that would be appropriate in

⁷⁴ “Let's ride!”; the phrase attributed to the first cosmonaut Y. Gagarin on liftoff. Repeated religiously by all commanders of Soviet space missions since, for luck.

this situation, the only thing I was feeling was extreme embarrassment.

“Omon,” called Syoma again.

“Yes, Syoma,” I said, “I can hear you. So we're flying, I guess.”

“Yes,” he said.

“How are you doing?” I asked, fully recognizing the futility and even insult contained in my question.

“I'm all right. And you?”

“Fine. What do you see?”

“Nothing. It's all closed in here. The noise is horrible. And shaking.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Well,” said Syoma, “I should be going now. You know what? When you get to the Moon, you remember me, OK?”

“Of course,” I said.

“You just think about me. Think that I was there. Syoma. The first stage. Promise?”

“I promise.”

“You must complete the mission, and do everything you need to do, you hear?”

“Yes.”

“It's time. Farewell.”

“Farewell, Syoma.”

I heard several clicks in the receiver, and then above the static and the roar of the engines I caught Syoma's voice—he was singing his favorite song on top of his lungs. Then I heard a noise as if a length of canvas was being ripped up, and the receiver turned to the short beeps, but in the moment before that, if I was not dreaming it up, Syoma's song became a scream. I again got shaken violently, smashing with my back against the ceiling, and lost my grip on the receiver. By the changed tone of the engines I figured that

the second stage was now operational. I bet the hardest thing for Syoma was to fire up the engine. I tried to imagine how it must feel—to break the glass over the safety switch and press the red button, knowing all the while that a split second later the enormous wuthering funnels of exhaust ports are going to come alive. Then I remembered Vanya and grabbed the receiver again, but it was still beeping in my ear. I slammed my hand several times against the radio and shouted:

“Vanya! Vanya! Can you hear me?”

“What?” his voice asked finally.

“Syoma, he's. . .”

“Yes,” he said, “I heard everything.”

“Are you. . . soon?”

“In seven minutes,” he said. “You know what I am thinking about now?”

“What?”

“I just remembered my childhood. How we were catching pigeons. We would take this crate, you know, a small wooden one, like they ship tomatoes in from Bulgaria, we'd spread some breadcrumbs under and position it on the edge, and one side we'd prop up with a stick, and tie a rope to it, like ten yards or so. We hid in the bushes, or behind a bench, and as soon as pigeon walked in, we'd yank the rope. And the crate fell over.”

“Right,” I said, “so did we.”

Remember how when the crate falls the pigeon wants to scam right away, and starts flapping its wings against the sides—the crate would jump up and down then.

“I remember,” I said.

Vanya fell silent.

In the meantime it started getting quite cold. And it was harder and harder to breathe—every time I moved I wanted to catch my breath, like I just ran up a long flight of stairs. I

started to press the oxygen mask to my face to inhale.

And also I remember how we were blowing up the spent handgun shells with match heads. You stuff them in, flatten the opening, and there has to be a small hole—and so you put several matches to it side by side. . .

“Cosmonaut Grechka,” the receiver interjected suddenly with the bass that woke me up and swore at me before the start, “get ready.”

“Aye, aye,” said Vanya faintly. “And then you secure them with a thread, or better yet, electrical tape, cause thread slips sometimes. If you want to throw it out the window, like seventh floor, so that it blows up in mid-air, you need four matches for that. And. . . “

“Quit talking,” the bass said. “Put on the mask.”

“Aye. And you don't strike the box against the last match; best thing is to light it from a smoldering cigarette butt. Or they will shift away from the little hole.”

I have heard nothing after that, only the usual rattle of static. Then I got bumped against the wall one more time and the receiver began beeping. That my friend Vanya had just shuffled off this mortal coil at the altitude of thirty miles in the same simple and unassuming fashion which marked everything he'd ever done was not quite getting through to me. I was not feeling bereaved at all, on the contrary, I was strangely upbeat and euphoric.

Then I noticed that I am losing consciousness. I mean, I noticed that I am regaining it, not losing. I have been just holding the receiver to my ear, and all of a sudden it was on the floor, my ears were ringing and I was staring stupidly down at it from my saddle hoisted up there against the ceiling. The gas mask was just draped over my neck like a scarf—and all of a sudden I was shaking my head trying to get my bearings straight, while the mask was lying beside the receiver. I figured I was oxygen-deprived, reached for

the mask and pressed it to my lips—it got better right away, and I felt how cold I actually was. I fastened all the buttons on the coat, raised my collar and lowered the flaps on the hat over my ears. The rocket was vibrating gently. I became very sleepy, and even though I knew it wasn't a good idea I couldn't help it—I crossed my hands on the bars and closed my eyes.

I was dreaming of the Moon—like Mityok was drawing it when he was a kid: black sky, pale yellow craters and a faraway mountain range. Holding his paws in front of his muzzle, a bear with the golden star of the Hero in his fur was moving slowly and fluidly toward the fireball of the Sun burning over the horizon, a dribble of dried-up blood showing in the corner of his agonizingly twisted mouth. Suddenly he stopped and turned in my direction. I felt his stare upon me, raised my head and looked deep into his still blue eyes.

“I and all this world—we are nothing but someone's dream,” said the bear softly.

I woke up. It was dead quiet. I guess some part of my consciousness had been maintaining the link to the outside world, and the silence that enveloped me acted like an alarm clock. I bent over towards the “eyes” in the wall. It turned out that deflector had already detached—I was looking at the Earth.

I tried to ascertain how long I was asleep—and couldn't come up with any specific estimate. Not less than several hours, that's for sure, because I was hungry. I started grappling on the top shelf—I remembered seeing a can opener there, but couldn't find it. I reasoned it must have fallen on the floor and began looking around—and then the phone rang.

“Hello!”

“Calling Ra, over. Omon! Can you hear me?”

“Aye, aye, comrade mission chief.”

“Well, thank goodness, looks like everything's OK. There was this moment, see, very bad, the telemetry just quit on us. It did not exactly quit, see, but we had to activate that other system in parallel, and telemetry wasn't going through. We had to abandon control for a couple of minutes. That's when you started running out of air, remember?”

He was speaking very quickly and seemed strangely agitated. I decided he was nervous, but in the back of my mind flashed a thought that he was simply drunk.

“You, Omon, gave us all a good scare. You were sleeping so tight, we almost had to postpone the launch.”

“My fault, comrade mission chief.”

“No, no, that's OK. It's not your fault, really. They overdid on the drugs before Baikonur. But everything is going smoothly so far.”

“Where am I now?”

“On the working trajectory, the ballistic sector. Going for the Moon. Have you slept through acceleration from the satellite orbit, too?”

“Looks like I have. So, Otto has already. . .”

“Otto has already. Can't you see the deflector have detached? You had to make a couple of extra orbits, though. Otto panicked at first. Didn't want to switch on the booster block. We even thought he chickened out. But then the guy got his act together, and. . . In short, he's sending you his good-byes.”

“What about Dima?”

“What about him? Dima's all right. The landing automatics is in standby mode in the inertial segment. Oh, that's right, he still has that correction. . . Matyushevich, are you receiving us?”

“Aye, sir,—said Dima's voice in the receiver.”

“Get some rest,” said the mission chief. “The next

transmission is tomorrow at fifteen hundred, then the trajectory correction. Mission control out.”

I put the receiver down and pressed my face to the “eyes,” looking at the blue semicircle of the Earth. I often read that all cosmonauts, without exception, were awestruck by the sight of our planet from space. They wrote about some unbelievably beautiful mist enveloping it, about the cities on the night side, gleaming with electric lights, resembling enormous pyres, about even being able to distinguish rivers on the day side—well, just so you know: none of this is true. What the Earth looks most like from space is a smallish school globe when you see it through, let's say, fogged over lenses of a gas mask. This spectacle got real dull real soon, I cozied up to the handlebars and fell asleep again.

When I woke up the Earth was nowhere in sight. Through the lenses I could distinguish only a smattering of stars, faraway and unattainable, made fuzzy by the optics. I imagined the existence of a giant fireball, hanging in icy darkness without being attached to anything, many billions of miles away from the nearest stars, tiny brilliant points about which the only thing we know is that they exist, and even that is not certain, because the star could die, but its light would still continue to spread in all directions—which means that in fact we know absolutely nothing about the stars, except that their life is harrowing and pointless, since all their progress through space is predetermined for all time and subject to the laws of mechanics and gravity, not leaving any hope for a chance encounter. But we humans, I was thinking, we seem to meet, laugh, slap each other on the backs and go our separate ways, but at the same time in some independent dimension where our conscience dreads to peek we instead are hanging motionless, surrounded by emptiness, with no top or bottom, yesterday or tomorrow,

with no hope to ever grow closer to someone else or to express our will and change our destiny in even the smallest of ways; we judge about the events happening to others by observing the deceitful glow that reaches us, and all our life we are marching towards what we think is a light, when the source of that light might have long ceased to exist. And this also, I was thinking, all my life I subjugated to the dream of soaring above the throngs of workers and peasants, members of the military and creative intelligentsia,⁷⁵ and now, hanging in the glistening black void on the invisible threads of fate, I could see that being a celestial body was something akin to receiving a life sentence in a jail railroad car moving perpetually around the city freight loop.

⁷⁵ An established formula of social stratification in the Soviet society.

13

We were flying at a speed of a mile and a half per second, so the inertial segment of our flight took about three days, but I felt it was more like a week. That was probably because the sun passed by the "eyes" several times a day and every time I was treated to a sunset of breathtaking beauty.

All that was left of the giant rocket now was the lunar module, consisting of the correction stage and braking stage, where Dima Matyushevich was sitting, and the lander, or more simply the lunokhod itself fastened to a platform. To save fuel, the nose cone was discarded back when we were accelerating from the circular orbit, so outside the shell of the lunokhod there was nothing but space now. The lunar module was traveling in a way backwards, facing the Moon with its main engines, and my mind performed the same trick as with the chilly elevator back on Lubyanka, which turned from the mechanism of descending into the depths of the Earth into a device for ascending to the surface. At first the lunar module was climbing higher and higher above Earth, and then it gradually turned out that it was falling onto the Moon. But there was some difference, too. In the elevator I was riding with my head pointing up, whether I was going up or down. But I shot out of the Earth orbit with my head down, and only later, after about a day of flying, I found out that I, with my head now up, am falling faster and faster into a deep black well, clutching the handlebars and waiting for the moment when the non-existent wheels of my bicycle crash silently into the Moon.

I had enough time for thinking about all that because I didn't have absolutely anything else to do. I often felt the urge to talk to Dima, but he was constantly busy with numerous and very complex procedures related to course correction. From time to time I would lift the receiver and catch some of his unintelligible cursory communications with the flight control engineers back in the center:

“Forty three degrees. . . five seven. . . Pitching. . . Yaw. . .”

I'd listen to it for some time and then tune out. From what I understood, Dima's main task was to catch Sun into the visor of one optical instrument and Moon at the same time into another, measure something there and relay the results back to Earth, where they would compare the actual trajectory with the computed one and determine the length of the corrective firing of the impulse engines. Judging by the fact that I was jolted several times in my saddle, Dima was acquitting himself admirably.

When the jolts ceased, I waited for half an hour more, lifted the receiver and called:

“Hello! Dima!”

“Speaking,” he answered in his usual dry tone.

“So, have you corrected the trajectory?”

“Looks like it.”

“Was it hard?”

“OK, I guess,” he answered.

“Listen,” I said. “How come you're so good with this stuff? All those degrees and pitch and what not? We never had that in the lectures.”

“I served for two years in the Strategic Missile Forces,” he said, “they have a very similar guidance system, only using stars. And no radio contact—you have to do it yourself, with a calculator. You make one mistake, and you're fucked.”

“And if you don't?”

He didn't answer.

“What did you do there?”

“Tactical watch at first. Then strategic.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing special. If you're sitting inside a tactical missile, you're on tactical duty. And if you're in the strategic, then you're on strategic watch.”

“Was that hard?”

“It's OK. In civilian terms, it's like a night watchman. One full day in the missile, three days recuperation.”

“This is why you're all gray. . . Are they all gray there?”

Dima didn't answer again.

“This is from the responsibility,” right?

“Nah. It's more from the training launches,” he said with obvious unwillingness.

“What training launches? Oh, that's when they have that small print on the last page of *Izvestiya*⁷⁶ that nobody should be traveling in this and that quadrant in the Pacific, right?”

“Yes.”

“And do they make those launches often?”

“It varies, really. But you have to draw the straws every month. Twelve times a year, the entire squadron, all twenty five of us. So the guys are getting gray, naturally.”

“What if you don't want to draw?”

“It's only a saying. Nobody's drawing anything. In reality, before the training launch the morale officer goes around and gives those envelopes to everyone. Your straw is already inside.”

“So, if it's short, can you refuse?”

“First off, it's the long one, not the short one. And

⁷⁶ An official central government (formally non Party) daily.

second, no, you can't. The only thing you can do is apply for the cosmonaut squadron. But you have to be pretty darn lucky."

"Do many guys get lucky?"

"No idea. I did, as you can see."

Dima was not exactly forthcoming with his answers, and often he would make pauses which were rather rude. I couldn't think of anything else to ask him and put the receiver down.

Next time I attempted to talk to him was several minutes before the braking was supposed to start. I am embarrassed to say that I was motivated by a kind of cruel wonderment: whether Dima was going to change his style before. . . In short, I wanted to check if he was going to be as reserved as during our last conversation, or if the imminent end of the flight would make him somewhat more talkative. I picked up the receiver and called out:

"Dima! This is Omon speaking. Please pick up."

And immediately heard the reply:

"Listen, can you call back in a couple of minutes? No, wait, is your radio working? Switch it on, quick!"

And he slammed the receiver down. His voice was brimming with excitement, so I figured they were saying something about us. But *Mayak* was transmitting music instead: when I turned on the radio I heard the jangling of the synthesizer fading in the background, the program was ending, and in a few seconds radio fell silent. Then I heard the "precise time" beeps and found out that in Moscow it was fourteen hundred of some kind of hours. I waited a while longer and picked up the phone again.

"Did you hear?" asked Dima eagerly.

"I did," I said. "Only I caught the tail end of it."

"Remember?"

"No," I said.

“That was Pink Floyd. *One Of These Days*.”

“I can't believe the working masses would ask for that to be played on the radio,” I said with astonishment.

“Of course not,” said Dima. “It's the theme music for the *Life of Science* program. From the Meddle album. Pure underground.

“You mean you're a Pink Floyd fan?”

“Me? I love them. I had all the records collected. What do you think about them?”

This was the first time I heard Dima talk in such lively voice.

“Yeah, they're OK,” I said. “Not all of it, though. They have this record with a cow on the cover. . .”

“Atom Heart Mother,” said Dima.

“That one I like. And there was another one I remember—it's a double album, where they sit outdoors, and there is a picture on the wall with the same place where they sit. . .”

“*Ummagumma*.”

“Could be. That one, I think, is not even music at all.”

“Right! It's shit, not music!” barked someone's voice in the receiver, and we stopped cold for a couple of seconds.

“Well, I wouldn't say that,” Dima started talking finally, “not really. At the end they have a new version of *Saucerful Of Secrets*. The timbre is different from what they had on the *Nice Pair*. And vocals. Gilmore is singing.”

That I didn't remember.

“What did you like on *Atom Heart Mother*?” Dima asked.

“You know, there are those two songs, on the "B" side. One is very soft, just a guitar. And the other one with the full orchestra. It has this beautiful bridge. Dum di-di-di-di-di-di-di-di dum da-dum tri-di-dum. . .

“I know,” said Dima. “*Summer Sixty Eight*. And the

soft one is *If*.”

“Could be,” I said. “So, which was your favorite record?”

“I’m not in the business of picking favorite records,” said Dima contemptuously. “I like music, not records. With *Meddle*, for example, I like the last song. About the echoes. I even break down sometimes when I listen to it. Translated it, with the dictionary and all. “Overhead the albatross. . . And help me understand The best I can. . .”

Dima swallowed hard and was silent.

“You seem to know English well,” I said.

“Yeah, they already told me that in the missile squadron. Morale officer did.⁷⁷ But that's not the point. I couldn't find this one record. The last leave, I even went to Moscow especially for that, took 400 rubles⁷⁸ with me. Hustled all around⁷⁹—no one even heard about it.”

“What was the record?”

“You wouldn't know. It's for a movie. *Zabriskie Point*. Spelled Z-A-B-R-I-S-K-I-E.

“Oh, that,” I said. “I had that one. But it wasn't the album, I had it recorded on a reel-to-reel. Nothing special. . . Dima! What's wrong? Talk to me!”

For a long time there was only static in the receiver, and then Dima asked:

“What was it like?”

“Well, how should I say that,” I said pensively “You heard “Mor,” didn't you?”

“Sure. Only it's “More,” not “Mor”. ”

⁷⁷ Knowing English, the language of the “likely enemy,” could easily land a person in trouble as being politically unreliable or worse—planning treason, which explains the morale officer's interest.

⁷⁸ At the time, a 3–4 months' salary for mid-level technical job—that is, a significant sum.

⁷⁹ Meaning on the black market in Western goods, concentrated mainly in big cities.

“So it was kind of like that, but no singing. Just your regular soundtrack. If you heard "Mor," you can safely say you know what that one was, too. Typical Pinks. Saxophone, synthesizers. And on the “B” si. . .”

The receiver beeped and Halmuradov's roar filled the entire space around me.

“Calling Ra, over! Look at them, just fucking gabbing away! Not enough to do? Get ready with the soft landing automatics!”

“Oh, shut up! It's ready!” Dima answered.

“Then proceed with orientation of the braking booster axis to Lunar vertical!”

“All right.”

I peeked out through the lunokhod's "eyes" and saw the Moon. It was very close—the picture before my eyes would have resembled the Petlyura's Ukrainian flag⁸⁰ if the top part were blue and not black. The phone rang.

I picked up, but it was Halmuradov again.

“Attention! At the count of three activate the braking booster by command from the radio altitude meter!”

“Got it,” said Dima.

“One. . . Two. . .”

I dropped the receiver.

The booster fired. It was working in fits and starts; twenty minutes later I was suddenly thrown with my shoulder against the wall, then with my back against the ceiling, everything started shaking with unbearably loud thunder and I figured that Dima marched off into immortality without saying goodbye. But I was not feeling slighted—if you don't count that last conversation, he was always reserved and unaccommodating, and I imagined for

⁸⁰ Blue field on top of yellow field. Was the official flag of the Ukraine in 1919–1921, under Chairman S. Petlyura; readopted in 1991 as the flag of the independent Ukrainian Republic.

some reason that after spending entire days in his intercontinental ballistic thing he understood something special, something that would forever free him from the obligation of observing the greeting etiquette.

The moment of the landing itself I did not notice. The shaking and detonations suddenly stopped, and beyond the lenses was again the same pitch black darkness as before the start. At first I thought that something unexpected happened, but then I remembered that I was actually supposed to land during the lunar night.

I waited, not quite knowing for what, and then the phone rang.

“Halmuradov here,” said the voice. “Everything all right?”

“Aye, aye, comrade colonel.”

“The telemetry is about to kick in,” he said, “it’ll lower the guide rails. Drive down to the surface and report. And don’t forget to brake, you hear?”

“And then” he added in a softer voice, apparently holding the microphone away from his mouth:

“Un-de-hround. What the fuck.”

The lunokhod swayed back and forth, and I heard a muffled thud from the outside.

“Go,” said Halmuradov.

That was quite probably the hardest part of my job—I had to drive down from the lander using two narrow guard rails that were now leading to the lunar surface. The rails had special notches on them, so it was impossible to slide off, but there still remained the risk of one of the rails ending up on some rock, which would make the lunokhod topple over while riding down. I made several revolutions with the pedals and felt the massive machine tilt and start going by itself. I stepped on the brake but the inertia was stronger, lunokhod was being dragged down, then the brake gave with

a loud bang and my legs rotated the pedals backwards several times, lunokhod lunged unstoppably forward, lurched from side to side and positioned itself evenly, on all eight of its wheels.

I was now on the Moon. But I haven't experienced any particular emotions over this fact; I was more concerned with how I was going to put back the gear chain that had been ripped out. As soon as I finally managed to do that, the phone rang again. It was the mission chief. His voice was very official and solemn.

“Comrade Krivomazov! On behalf of the entire flight command staff being present at the moment at the Control Center, I congratulate you on the occasion of soft landing of the Soviet automatic station *Luna-17B*⁸¹ on the Moon!”

I heard slapping sounds and figured it was champagne being opened. Then snippets of music filtered through, some kind of march, but I could hardly make it out through the static in the receiver.

⁸¹ *Luna-17* (not *B*) was the actual name of the Soviet spacecraft that delivered *Lunokhod-1* to the Moon.

All of my childhood dreams about the future were born of gentle sadness native to those evenings that seem to be detached from the rest of your life, when you lie in deep grass by the remains of someone else's campfire, your bicycle resting nearby, the west still bearing purple bands from the sun that had just set, while in the east there are already first stars popping up.

I haven't seen or experienced very much in my life, but I liked most of what I have, and I always counted on the trip to the Moon to absorb everything that I passed by in hopes of encountering it again later, to take it in more finally and forever this time; how was I to know that the best things in life are always seen as if from the corner of one's eye? While I was a kid, I often imagined extraterrestrial vistas: stone-strewn planes, furrowed by craters and illuminated by otherworldly light, sharp mountain peaks in the distance, black sky with the glowing coal of the sun and stars around it; I pictured the layers of space dust, many feet deep, and the stones resting motionless on the lunar surface for billions and billions of years—I was for some reason strongly impressed by the thought of a stone being able to remain in one place for all that time, and then I would bend down and pick it up with the thick fingers of my spacesuit. I thought of looking up and seeing the blue globe of Earth above, looking like the school globe distorted by the teared-over lenses of the gas mask, and how this ultimate moment of my life will connect me to all those other moments when I felt myself on the verge of something wondrous and unfathomable.

In reality, the Moon turned out to be this tiny space, stuffy, confined and black, with the feeble electricity switching on once in a while; it turned out to be the invariable darkness in the useless lenses and fitful uncomfortable sleep in a scrunched-up position, my head pushing against the hands crossed on the handlebars.

I was moving slowly, no more than three miles a day, and I had no notion of what the world around me looked like. On the other hand, this domain of eternal darkness probably did not look like anything at all—except myself there was no one else for whom something here would have been able to look like something, and I did not switch on the front headlamp to conserve energy in the battery. The ground under the wheels was apparently absolutely smooth—the machine was gliding over it steadily. I couldn't turn the handlebars at all, though—something must have jammed the steering during landing, so the only thing left to do for me was to push the pedals. The toilet was extremely uncomfortable in use—so much so that I always held it in until the last possible moment, just like long ago during the siesta hours in the day care. But still, my journey into space was so long in the making that I was not about to let the sullen thoughts take hold of me, and I was even happy sometimes.

The hours and days passed; I only stopped when I needed to drop my head onto the hands and fall asleep. The stores of luncheon meat were being depleted slowly, there was less and less water in the canister, each evening I extended by half an inch the red line on the map hanging before my eyes, and the end of the line was drawing closer and closer to the little black dot beyond which it will cease to exist. The dot reminded me of the way they mark the stations on the subway map; the fact that it did not have a name was very irritating, and so I scribbled *Zabriskie Point* next to it.

Clutching the nickel-plated ball with my right hand in the pocket of the coat, I have been staring at the label with the words *Great Wall* for at least an hour now. I was feeling the warm breeze over the fields of the faraway China, and annoying buzz of the phone on the floor interested me not a bit, but I picked up the receiver after a while anyway.

“Calling Ra, over! Why are you not responding? What's with the light switched on? And standing in place? I can see everything here through telemetry.”

“Just resting, comrade mission chief.”

“Report the odometer readings!”

I looked at the small steel cylinder with numbers.

“Thirty two point seven kilometers.”

“All right, turn off the light and listen here. We've been looking at the map—you're just coming up to the place.”

My heart skipped a beat, even though I knew that the black dot which was staring at me like a barrel of a gun from the map was still some distance away.

“What place?”

“The landing module of the *Luna-17B*”

“But I am the *Luna-17B*,” I said.

“So what. They are, too.”

He appeared to be drunk—again. But I understood what he was talking about. It was that mission for delivering the lunar soil samples, two cosmonauts landed on the Moon that time, Pasyuk Drach and Zurab Parzwania.⁸² They had a small rocket with them, they used it to launch a pound of soil back to Earth, after which they lived for a minute and a half on the surface of the Moon and then shot themselves.

⁸² First name is made to sound typically Ukrainian, second one—typically Georgian. Considerable effort had been expended to prove that the Soviet space program was truly “international,” that is, involved “ethnic minorities”—the native peoples of the Soviet republics. *See also note #90.*

“Attention, Omon!” said the mission chief. “Be very careful now. Reduce the speed and turn on the headlamp.”

I flicked the switch and pressed against the black lenses of the “eyes.” The optical distortions made the blackness around the lunokhod seem to come around in a kind of an arch above, continuing as endless tunnel in the distance. I only could make out clearly a small patch of the stony surface in front, uneven and scratchy—it must have been the ancient basalt shield; every yard or so across the line of my movement short oblong humps were protruding from it, resembling very much sand dunes in a desert, it was weird that I did not feel them at all while moving.

“Well?” the receiver inquired.

“I can't see anything.”

“Turn off the lights and go. Slowly.”

I was driving for forty more minutes. And then lunokhod bumped into something. I picked up the phone.

“Calling Earth, over. There's something here.”

“Headlamp on.”

Right in the middle of my field of view two hands in black leather gloves were lying, the outstretched fingers on the right one cradling the handle of a scoop still containing a small amount of sand mixed with tiny pebbles, while the left was clutching the glistening Makarov.⁸³ Something dark was visible between the hands. Looking more intently, I was able to discern the raised collar of the officer's coat and the top of the hat sticking out of it; the shoulder and part of the head of the prostrate person were obscured by the lunokhod's wheel.

“Well, Omon, what is it?” exhaled the receiver into my ear.

“I described briefly the picture before my eyes.”

“The patches, shoulder patches, what kind?”

“I can't see them.”

⁸³ Make of a handgun issued to senior officers.

“Back up a couple of feet.”

“Lunokhod does not back up,” I said. “Pedal back is the brake.”

“Ahh. . . Oh shit. . . How many times I told the chief constructor. . .” the mission chief mumbled. “Well, as they say: if I knew where I'd fall, I'd put some hay there. This is what I was wondering—if it's Zura or Pasha. Zura was a captain, you see, and Pasha was a major. All right, turn the light off, you'll deplete the battery.”

“Aye, sir,” I said, but before carrying out the order I looked one more time at the motionless hand and the woolen top of the hat. I couldn't bring myself to start moving for a while, then I clenched my teeth and leaned on the pedal with all my weight. The lunokhod jerked up, and a second later, down.

“Go,” said Halmuradov, who replaced the mission chief at the controls. “You're behind schedule.”

I was saving the battery and spending almost entire time in complete darkness, rotating the pedals doggedly and turning the lights on for just a couple of seconds at a time to consult the compass—even though that did not make any sense at all, since the handlebars were not functioning anyway. But those were my orders from Earth. It is hard to describe the sensation—darkness, a hot confined space, sweat dripping down from my forehead, light swaying motion—I would imagine a fetus in the womb must experience something similar.

I was aware, of course, that I was in fact on the Moon. But the enormous distance that was separating me from the Earth took on a shade of pure abstraction. I felt that the people I was talking to over the phone must be somewhere close—not because their voices were clear in the receiver, but because I could not imagine the duty relationships and personal feelings—something so completely ephemeral—

to be able to stretch several hundred thousand miles. The strangest thing of all was that the memories which connected me to my childhood seemed to have stretched over the same unthinkable distance.

When I was still in school, I usually would while away the summers in a suburban village on a side of the parkway. Most of the time I spent in the saddle of a bicycle, sometimes putting on twenty–twenty five miles a day. The bicycle was not properly adjusted—the handlebars were located too low, and I had to lean forward quite a bit over them, just like in the lunokhod. And so now, apparently because my body was forced to assume the same position for a long time, I began having mild hallucinations. I would drift off, go to sleep while I was still awake—that was especially easy because of darkness—and imagine that I see my shadow on the asphalt flying back from under me, see the dotted white line of the median and inhale the air saturated with exhaust. I even started perceiving the roar of trucks rushing by and the rumble of tires against the asphalt; only the scheduled transmissions from Earth brought me back. But then I would drop out of the lunar reality again, transport myself to that suburban road and realize how significant the hours I spent there were in my life.

Once I was hailed by comrade Kondratiev, who started reading poems about the Moon again. I did not know how to ask him to stop nicely, but then he began to read one poem that seemed like a snapshot of my soul from the very first lines.

“You and I, we believed in the closeness of fate”
But I started to notice as I'm looking back
How my youth that I'm fond of recalling of late
Seems so out of my stripes, and unreal as heck.
It's the glow of the Moon, full of subtle deceit
Right between me and you, like the shore and the
drowned,

Or the telegraph road and your back which I see
As you race to that Moon on the bike that you owned.
For a long time you. . .

I sobbed softly, and comrade Kondratiev stopped cold.
“How does it go next?” I asked.

“I forgot,” said comrade Kondratiev. “Went right out of my head.”

I did not believe him, but I knew that to protest or beg would be futile.

“What are you thinking about now?” he asked.

“Nothing really,” I said.

“This can't be,” he said. “At least one thought is always running around in the head. Tell me, will you?”

“I recall my childhood often,” I said unwillingly. “How I would ride the bicycle. Very much like now. And one thing I still can't understand—there I was, riding the bicycle, and I remember how the handlebars were low, and the breeze so fresh. . .”

I fell silent.

“Well? What's that you can't understand?”

“I was going towards the river, I think. . . So how come I. . .”

Comrade Kondratiev was silent for a couple of minutes and then put the receiver down.

I turned *Mayak* on—by the way, I didn't put much faith in it actually being *Mayak*, even though the radio was trying to assure me of it every couple of minutes.

“Seven sons are the gift to our Motherland from Maria Ivanovna Plahuta from the village of Maly Perehvat,”⁸⁴ related the voice soaring above the working midday⁸⁵ of the

⁸⁴ Literally “Minor Intercept.”

⁸⁵ *Working Midday*—daily program of the *Mayak* network, featuring musical numbers “by workers' request.” The inane texts imitate the syrupy nature of the program quite accurately.

faraway Russia, “and two of them, Ivan Plahuta and Vassily Plahuta, are serving in the military now, in the Tank Corps of the Ministry of the Interior. They asked us to play for their mother the joke song *Samovar*. We are fulfilling your request, boys. Dear Maria Ivanovna, for you today the song will be performed by the People's Joker of the USSR⁸⁶ Artem Plahuta, who responded to our request with all the more willingness considering that he himself demobilized eight years prior to the brothers, in the rank of sergeant major.”

The mandolins tinkled, cymbals crashed a couple of times, and then a voice full with deep feeling started singing, pressing on the r's like on a bystander in an overflowing bus:

“It's r-really hot, the boil-boiling water. . .”

I slammed the receiver down. The words made me physically cringe. I remembered Dima's gray head and the cow from the *Atom Heart Mother* cover, and my back twisted in a slow cold shiver. I waited for a minute or two, then decided that the song must be over by now and turned the black handle again. It was quiet for a second, and then the baritone that went for a moment into hiding burst out into my face:

“Tea it serrved for all the bastards,”

Fiery water was on tap!

This time I waited much longer, and when I turned the radio back again the woman host was speaking:

“. . . us remember our cosmonauts, as well as all those whose earthly toil makes their celestial watch possible. It is for them today that we. . .”

I suddenly went back deep into my own thoughts, or more accurately crashed into one of them, as if under the ice, the hearing returned back to me only several minutes later, when the somber choir of distant basses was already putting

⁸⁶ Mocking the *People's Artist of the USSR* title, the highest form of government recognition for an artist.

the last bricks into the monumental wall of the new song. Despite the fact that I was completely divorced from reality, I still continued to automatically push on the pedals, sticking my right knee far out—this way the blister from the fur boot was not hurting too badly.

Here's what struck me.

If I could now, by closing my eyes, place myself—to the extent a person could be in a place at all—on the illusory suburban parkway, and the non-existent asphalt, foliage and sun before my closed eyes became for me as real as if I was in fact rushing down the hill at my favorite second gear; if, having completely forgotten about Zabriskie Point, which was literally just ahead, I still was from time to time happy for several seconds at a time,—didn't this all mean that while still in my childhood, right then, when I was not simply a detached part of the world immersed in the summer happiness, when I really did fly by on my bicycle along the asphalt strip, towards the wind and the sun, oblivious to everything that was waiting for me ahead,—didn't it mean that at that time I was already rolling forward across the dead black surface of the Moon, only perceiving what was reaching me through the crooked "eyes" of the lunokhod solidifying around me?

15

“Socialism is a society of civilized co-operative workers headed by the monstrous Rasputin, being copied and photographed not only by large groups of collective propagandists and agitators, but also collective organizers, distinguished by their place in the historically determined system of utilizing the airplanes against the needs and tribulations of the low-flying cavalry, which in turn is dying, withering, but is as limitless as we need to reorganize the People's Inspections Office.”

Above the text, printed in gold letters, there was a cartouche with the golden sharp-bearded profile and the word *LENIN* arranged in a semi-circle, bordered by two olive branches made from foil. I passed by this place often, but there were always other people around, and I couldn't inspect it closer with them watching. I stared the entire installation over: it was a largish easel, about a yard in height, clad in purple velvet. It was attached to the wall by two hinges, with the other end of it held tightly by a small hook-and-eye. I looked around. The siesta hour was not over yet, and there was no one in the corridor. I went to the window—the alley leading to the mess hall was empty as well, with only two lunokhods creeping slowly along it towards me from the far end; I recognized that those were Yura and Lena, the camp counselors. It was quiet, only soft clanking of the ball on the ping-pong table was reaching me from down on the first floor—the thought of someone having permission to play ping-pong during the siesta hour filled me with melancholy. I unhooked the easel and pulled it

towards me. It exposed a portion of the wall behind, with a big switch in the middle, also painted gold. Feeling more and more uneasy in the pit of my stomach, I stretched my hand and clicked the switch up.

A soft whistle sounded and I, while still not completely conscious about what it was, felt that I performed something horrible over the world around me and over myself. The whistle came on again, now louder, and all of a sudden it turned out that the switch, the opened purple door and the entire corridor where I was standing—none of it was real, because in fact I was not standing before the wall with the switch on it at all, but instead sitting in a very uncomfortable pose in some strange, very tight place. The whistle sounded once more, and in a couple of seconds the lunokhod congealed all around. Another whistle, and a thought flashed through my mind that yesterday, before lowering my head onto the handlebars, I continued the red line on the map exactly to the black dot signed “Zabriskie Point.”

The whistles were the telephone ringing.

“Had a nice nap, you motherfucker?” rumbled the receiver with the voice of colonel Halmuradov.

“You are a motherfucker yourself,” I said, suddenly getting mad.

Halmuradov burst into laughter, vibrant and infectious—I realized that he was not offended at all.

“I am here all alone again, in the Control Center. All our guys went to Japan, to hash everything out for the joint mission. Pcadzer Vladilenovich is sending his greetings, he was very upset he wouldn't be able to say goodbye in person—everything was decided in the last moment. And they left me here, all because of you. So, today's the day when you are deploying the radio beacon? Your troubles are over, looks like? Happy?”

I did not answer.

“You couldn't be mad at me, huh? Omon? Is it about me calling you an asshole back then? Come on! You were having the entire Control Center doggy style, we almost had to scrub the mission,” said Halmuradov. “What's with you? You're like a broad. . . Are you a man or what? This day in particular. You just remember.”

“I remember,” I said.

“Button everything down as tight as you can,” started Halmuradov with concern, “especially the coat over the neck. Now, about the face. . .”

“I know everything better than you do,” I interjected.

“. . . goggles first, then wrap the scarf over, the hat goes on last. Tie it under the chin. Gloves. The sleeves and boots—cinch around with the string. Vacuum is no joke. If everything is right, you'll have about three minutes. Understood?”

“Yeah.”

“Not "yeah", fuck you, "aye, sir!". Report when ready.”

They say that in the last minutes of his life a man sees it in its entirety, as if in rapid rewind. I wouldn't know. Nothing like that happened to me, no matter how I tried. Instead I vividly, down to the minute detail, imagined Landratov in Japan—how he is walking down a sunlit morning street, in expensive freshly bought sneakers, smiling and probably not even thinking what it was he put them on in the morning. I also imagined all others—the mission chief, now transformed into a graying intellectual in a suit and tie, and comrade Kondratiev, giving a thoughtful interview to the *Vremya* correspondent.⁸⁷ But not a single thought about myself was coming to me. To calm myself down I turned *Mayak* on and listened to a quiet song. I remembered how long ago in my childhood I was crawling

⁸⁷ *Time*, the nightly news program on Channel 1 (of 2) of the state television.

on linoleum in the gas mask, singing along silently with the distant loudspeaker, and started singing in a soft voice.

Suddenly the radio switched off and the phone rang.

“Well,” asked Halmuradov, “ready?”

“Not yet,” I answered. “What's the rush?”

“You really are an asshole,” said Halmuradov, “now I get why in your personal record it said that you didn't have any childhood friends, except that fuck that we shot. Do you ever think about others, and not yourself? I am going to miss tennis again.”

For some reason the thought that Halmuradov, his fat pasty thighs squeezed into white shorts, will be standing soon on the tennis court, bumping the ball on the asphalt, and I will not be anywhere anymore, seemed incredibly insulting to me—not because I was jealous towards him, but because I recalled with blinding clarity a sunny September day at the stadium, from the high school times. But then I remembered that once there is no me, there won't be any Halmuradov or any stadium either, and this thought chased away the melancholy that I dragged with me from the dream.

“Others? What others?” I asked quietly. “Never mind, though. You go, I'll handle it myself.”

“You drop that.”

“No, you can go, really.”

“Drop it,” said Halmuradov earnestly. “I have to fill out the forms, close the books, register the signal from the Moon, put the time and date. You just do your thing fast, OK?”

“What about Landratov, is he in Japan too?”

“Why do you ask?” muttered Halmuradov with suspicion in his voice.

“No reason. Just remembered something.”

“What did you remember? Huh?”

“Nothing really,” I answered.—Remembered how he

was dancing the *kalinka* at the final exam.

“Understood. Hey, Landratov, are you in Japan or not? There's an inquiry about you here.”

I heard laughter and slippery whine of fingers clutching the receiver.

“He's here,” Halmuradov said finally. “Sends his greetings.”

“Same to him. All right, looks like it's time to go.”

“Push out the hatch,” Halmuradov began talking in fast monotone, repeating the instructions that I knew by heart, “and grab on to the handles, so that the air does not throw you. Than inhale from the oxygen mask through the scarf and get out. Fifteen steps along the path of the lunokhod, take out the pennant with radio beacon, put it down and switch it on. Carry it a little farther, will you, or the lunokhod will shield the signal. . . Then. . . Well, we gave you the handgun, one round is in the barrel, and our cosmonaut detachment never had any cowards. . .”

I put the receiver back. The phone began ringing again, but I paid no attention to it. For a moment I was overcome with desire not to switch the beacon on, so that this bastard Halmuradov could sit in the Center until the end of the day and then receive some kind of official Party reprimand, but then I remembered Syoma and his words that I must complete the mission and do everything I needed to do. I couldn't betray the guys from the first and second stage, and silent Dima with them, they died so that I could now be right here, and in the face of their short but exalted lives my anger at Halmuradov seemed petty and shameful in comparison. When I realized that now, in a few moments, I am going to pull together and do everything I was supposed to do, the telephone quit ringing.

I began preparing myself, and in half an hour I was ready. I stuffed my ears and nose extremely tight with

special hydro-compensatory tampons (that is, oiled cotton balls) and performed a check-up of my clothing—everything appeared to be tightly buttoned, tucked and cinched; the rubber band of the motorcycle goggles was pulling too strongly, so that they were cutting painfully into my face, but I decided not to bother—I did not have too long to suffer from it. Taking the holster from the shelf, I extracted the gun, cocked it and shoved it into the pocket of my coat. After slinging the backpack with the pennant-radio beacon over my shoulder I would put my hand on the receiver but then remembered that I have already plugged the ears, and anyway I wasn't much in the mood to spend the last moments of my life in discussions with Halmuradov. I recalled our last talk with Dima and decided that I was right to deceive him about "Zabriskie Point" the way I did. It must feel bitter to leave this world if you are leaving some kind of a mystery behind.

I exhaled like I was going to dive into water and began taking care of business.

The long hours of training made my body remember what it needed to do so precisely that I haven't stopped for a second, even though I had to work in almost total darkness, because battery was depleted to the point that the lamp wasn't giving out any light at all—only the dark red worm of its spiral could be seen. First I had to undo the five screws around the perimeter of the hatch. When the last of them clanked on the floor, I felt my way on the wall for the bump of the glass window of the emergency hatch release port and whacked it hard with the last remaining can of the "Great Wall." The glass shattered. I put my hand inside, inserted my finger into the ring of the actuator and jerked it towards me. The actuator was in fact the *F-1* hand grenade fuse, so it had a delay of about three seconds, which gave me just enough time to grab the handlebars and place my head as low down

as I could. Then I heard a blast above my head and lunokhod shook so violently that I was almost thrown out of the saddle, but I managed to hold on. The next second I raised my head. The bottomless blackness of open space was above me. Between it and myself was only the thin plastic of the motorcycle goggles. It was pitch dark all around. I bent over, took a deep breath from the oxygen mask, then scrambled awkwardly over the rim of the hatch, raised myself up on my feet and started forward—every step coming at a cost of enormous effort because of splitting pain in my back, which I was flexing for the first time in a month. I really didn't want to go the full fifteen steps, so I went down on one knee, unfastened the tie on the backpack with the radio beacon and began pulling it out, but it caught on the fabric with its switch and wouldn't budge. It was becoming harder and harder to keep the air in my lungs, and for a short moment I panicked—I thought that I would die right then without fulfilling that for which I was here. But then the backpack slipped off, I placed the beacon onto the invisible surface of the Moon and turned the switch. The ether was now being filled with the encoded words *LENIN*, *USSR* and *PEACE*, repeated automatically every three seconds, and on the body of the beacon a tiny red lamp was shining, illuminating the picture of the globe floating through wheat stalks—for the first time in my life I noticed that the coat of arms of my Motherland represents the view from the Moon.

The air was burning to rush out of my lungs, and I knew that in a couple of seconds I will exhale it and swallow a mouthful of fiery emptiness. I chucked the nickel-plated ball as far as I could. It was time to die. I took the gun out, placed it against the temple and tried to remember what was most important in my short existence, but nothing would come to my head except the story of Marat Popadya that his father told us. It seemed absurd and even insulting that I

would die with this thought, which did not have absolutely any bearing on my own life, and I was trying hard to think about something else but couldn't, my mind drawing the picture of the winter woods, a clearing, the rangers hiding in the bushes, two bears approaching the hunters growling—and pulling the trigger, I realized suddenly with indisputable clarity that Kissinger knew. The gun misfired, but it was obviously all over even without it, I saw bright lifesavers floating before my eyes, tried to catch one of them, missed it and crashed onto the icy black lunar basalt.

sharp stone was lodged against my cheek—it was not painful because of the scarf, but uncomfortable nonetheless. I propped myself on the elbows and looked around. There wasn't anything to be seen. My nose was itching like crazy, I sneezed and one of the cotton tampons flew out. I jerked the scarf off of my neck, then the goggles and hat, then pulled the remaining tampons out of the nose and ears. I couldn't hear anything, but the smell was distinctly moldy. It was wet and rather cold, despite my having the coat on.

I stood up, tried to feel around with my hands and began moving forward. Right away I tripped over something but managed to regain my balance. In a few steps my hands met a wall; I could feel thick cables hanging low along it, covered in sticky fluff. I turned back and started in the other direction, this time I was walking much more carefully, raising my knees high, but tripped again anyway. Then another wall with cables was under my hands. This is when I noticed the tiny red lamp about five yards away, illuminating the metal pentagon, and recalled everything.

But I wasn't able to rationalize it or even have a single thought on the matter—far away to my right something flashed, I turned my head, shielding the eyes instinctively with my hand and was able to distinguish between the fingers a long tunnel, bright light shining at the end of it,

revealing the walls covered with cables.

Turning away, I saw the lunokhod standing on the rails, my long black shadow falling over it (unknown artisan splattered it all over with stars and the words *СССР*), and moved backwards in its direction, covering my eyes from the blinding light which floated to me over the rails, reminding me somehow of the setting sun. Something banged on the lunokhod's side and at the same moment I heard a loud crack; I realized I was being shot at and dashed behind the lunokhod. Another bullet chimed against its side, for several seconds it was resonating like a giant funeral bell. I heard the soft clickety-clack of wheels on the rails, then another shot, and then the sound of wheels died down.

“Hey you, Krivomazov!” an inhumanly loud voice thundered. “Get out with your hands in the air, you son of a bitch! They gave you a medal!”

I peeked carefully from behind the lunokhod: about fifty yards from me a small handcar was standing on the rails, its headlamp shining brightly, and in front of the light a man with a bullhorn in his left hand and a handgun in his right was swaying on widely positioned legs. He raised the weapon, a shot rang out and the bullet, having deflected several time, whizzed by under the ceiling. I hid my head again.

“Get out, you bastard! One!”

The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

“Two!”

He shot one more time, hitting the side of the lunokhod again.

“Three!”

I peeked out carefully and saw him place the bullhorn onto his handcar, stretch his arms to the sides and trudge in a slow gait between the rails towards the lunokhod. When he

came a little closer, I heard that he was making buzzing sounds with his mouth, imitating the airplane engines, and recognized him immediately—it was Landratov. I started backing away but quickly realized that once he flies past the lunokhod I will be completely defenseless. After a moment's hesitation, I crouched and lunged under the low serrated bottom.

Now the only thing I could see was the pair of feet jumping from tie to tie, very agile but turned somehow outwards. It looked like he did not notice. Approaching the lunokhod he started buzzing in a different, more strained tone; I understood that he was banking sharply, trying to fly around the lunokhod. His boots flashed between the heavy cast wheels and then, unexpectedly for even myself, I grabbed his legs. When my finger encircled his shins I almost let go because of the sickening sensation of emptiness in his boots. He screamed and fell down, I didn't release my hands and the prosthetics under the supple leather turned unnaturally sideways. I gave them one more twist and started climbing out from under the lunokhod; when I extricated myself he was already crawling towards the gun which he dropped when he fell and which was now lying between the rails. I did not have more than a couple of seconds, so I grabbed the massive pentagon of the beacon and lowered it forcefully on the back of Landratov's straw-haired head.

I heard a crunching sound, and the red lamp went out.

Landratov's handcar was much lighter than my lunokhod and was moving much faster. The headlamp attached to a large car battery was illuminating a round gallery, cables strewn along its walls all covered with the same kind of sticky threads that grow, for example, on the twine that you use to hang something from the ceiling in a kitchen or a dining room. The gallery was apparently an abandoned subway tunnel, several times other tunnels

branched off, just as black and lifeless as the one I was traveling in. Rats sometimes crossed the ties—some of them were the size of a small dog, but thankfully they took no interest in me. Then another side tunnel appeared on the right, similar to the previous ones, but when I approached it the handcar swerved to the right so forcefully that I was thrown onto the rails, hurting my shoulder.

Turned out that the switch I was passing was in half-locked state—the front wheels went forward while the rear turned right, and as a result the handcar was lodged dead. I figured that I would have to make the rest of the way on foot in complete darkness, and plodded forward, regretting all the while that I didn't take Landratov's Makarov with me—though it certainly would be useless against the rats anyway if they decided to jump me.

I didn't make it as far as a hundred feet when I heard dogs barking and people shouting ahead. I turned and began running back. Lights went on behind me, looking over my shoulder I could see the gray bodies of two German shepherds jumping over the ties in front of people pursuing me; the only visible part of the pursuers were the swaying dots of the flashlights. Nobody was shooting—I guess they were afraid to hit the dogs.

“There he is! Belka! Strelka!”⁸⁸ Sic him!” someone screamed.

I turned into the side tunnel and scurried ahead with as much speed as I could muster, jumping high to avoid breaking the legs. I stepped on a rat once and almost slipped, and then I saw bright, unblinking, unearthly stars—they were shining to the right of me, I dashed there, bumped into the wall and started climbing, grabbing onto cables and sensing with my back the German shepherds speeding

⁸⁸ *Whitey* and *Arrow*—names of two dogs that (together) followed Laika into space.

towards me. Once I tumbled over the edge, I fell down and didn't break my neck only because I slammed into something soft, like a recliner still wrapped in plastic. I tumbled over it, squeezed myself into an opening between the rows of cartons and crates and started crawling. Several times my hands bumped against plastic covers on backs of chairs and arms of sofas. Then it started getting lighter. I heard someone talking softly right nearby and froze. In front of me was the back of a bookcase—a plywood sheet with a big word *Nevka* stamped on it. The barking and shouting was still going on somewhere behind me, and then I heard someone's voice, amplified through a bullhorn:

“Stop that! Silence! We're live in two minutes!”

The dogs continued barking, and someone started explaining in an impertinent tenor what the problem was, but the bullhorn roared again:

“I said, get the fuck off the set! I'll have you court-marshaled, and those dogs with you!”

The barking faded in the distance—I guess they dragged the dogs away. A couple of minutes later I gathered enough courage to peek from behind the bookcase I was lying next to.

At first I imagined I was inside some kind of an ancient Roman planetarium. On the very high domed ceiling the distant stars were glistening with tin and glass, switched to about one third of full capacity. A hundred feet from where I was I saw an old tower crane; hoisted on its boom about ten feet above the floor the enormous bottle of the *Salyut* space station was floating in the air, with the cargo ship *Agdam T-3*⁸⁹ attached to it, speared by the boom like a plastic model of

⁸⁹ Wordplay: while *Salyut* (“firework”) is the real name of the old Soviet space station (shaped like a bottle), it is also the brand of cheap wine, and *Agdam* is unequivocally the brand of Armenian brandy. Actual cargo ships were called *Progress*, and there was a *T* series of them.

an airplane by its support. Apparently the setup in this configuration was a little too heavy for the crane, because the rear end of the cargo ship was buttressed by a couple of logs; one could kind of distinguish them in the darkness, but once two powerful floodlights switched on right next to me they became practically invisible, because just like the wall behind them they were painted black, with specks of foil stuck to them shining bright under the lights.

The floodlights were equipped with special filters, so that their light was strange, kind of ashen white. Besides the space station, which right away starting looking very realistic, they were illuminating a large TV camera with letters *Samsung* across it (next to the camera two guards with machine guns were having a cigarette break) and a long table stuffed with microphones, plates of food and ghostly translucent vodka bottles, resembling icicles pounded into the table; behind the table two generals were sitting, both looking somewhat like a popular author and playwright Borovik.

Nearby I saw a smaller table with one microphone, a man in civilian clothes sitting at it. Behind him was the plywood board with "Vremya" written on it and the picture of the globe above which a five-- ended star was soaring, its side ends elongated. Bending over the table another person in civilian clothes was discussing something with the man at the microphone.

"Take three!"

Who said that I did not catch. The second civilian ran to the camera quickly and turned it in the direction of the small table. A bell rang, and the man with the microphone started talking clearly and deliberately:

"We are now at the leading edge of the Soviet space science, in one of the field offices of the Central Flight Control. For almost seven years cosmonauts Armen Vezirov

and Djambul Mezhelaitis⁹⁰ have been conducting their orbital watch. This flight, the longest in history, made our country the beacon of the international space exploration. It is symbolic that our cameraman Nikolai Gordienko and I find ourselves here at the exact day when cosmonauts are about to perform a significant scientific task—in thirty seconds they will conduct a spacewalk in order to deploy the astrophysical module *Kvant*.”

The stage was flooded with soft and indistinct light—I raised my head and saw that the bulbs on the ceiling were now switched to full strength. A magnificent panorama of the starry sky unfolded before my eyes, the sky for which humans were yearning for so many centuries, inventing all those beautiful but utterly naive legends about shiny nails in the celestial sphere.

I heard muffled bumps from where the "Salyut" was hanging—like they bump into the stuck door of a cellar, anxious that it would smash the sour cream jugs standing right behind it if opened too hard. After a while I noticed the edge of the hatch raise slightly above the surface of the space station, and immediately from the table with the man and the microphone I heard:

“Attention! We are live!”

The hatch opened slowly, and from inside the space station appeared a round silver helmet with the short antenna on top. Everyone at the table burst in applause, the helmet was followed by shoulders and silver hands—first thing they did was attach the emergency line to a special loop on the body of the space station, the movements were fluid and slow, no doubt perfected during the long hours spent training

⁹⁰ The first name of the first cosmonaut is typically Armenian, while his last name is typically Azerbaijani. The second cosmonaut is the amalgam of last names of noted Soviet poets—one Kazakh, one Lithuanian.

in the pool. Finally the first cosmonaut emerged into the open space and stopped a couple of paces from the hatch—I thought that it must require significant bravery to stand ten feet above ground. Then I had a feeling that one of the generals at the table was looking in my direction and I pulled my head back behind the bookcase. When I decided to stick it out again, both cosmonauts were already standing on top of the space station, shining white against the backdrop of the inky space void strewn with tiny specks of stars. One of them was holding a small box. It was, I guessed, the astrophysical module "Kvant". The cosmonauts slowly and kind of under-watery proceeded across the body of the spaceship, stopped beside a long mast that was sticking out and screwed the module to it rather quickly. Then they turned towards the camera, waved their hands fluidly and with the same diver steps returned to the hatch, in which they disappeared one after the other.

The hatch closed, but I was still looking at the stars blinking in the unimaginable distance—where the Cygnus was stretching its long slender arms, unsure about who to open its embrace to: whether it should be the vast Pegasus, occupying a good half of the sky, or the small but so touchingly bright and clear Lyre.

The man in civilian clothes was all the while prattling excitedly and briskly into his microphone:

“For the duration of the spacewalk complete silence enveloped the Control Center. I have to admit that I was holding my breath as well, but everything went through smoothly. One cannot but marvel at the precision and efficiency of the cosmonauts' movements—it is obvious that the years of training and their orbital watch were not in vain. The scientific equipment installed today. . .”

I crawled back behind the bookcase. A very strange state took hold of me—I was suddenly overcome with

apathy and indifference towards everything that was happening. If they were to try and grab me right there, I doubt I would have put much of a fight or tried to flee—all I wanted to do was get some rest. Placing my head on top of my crossed hands, as was my lunar habit, I fell fast asleep. The voice kept muttering:

“The television transmission of the work in open space was made by a special camera installed by the payload specialist on one of the solar panels of the base block.”

I slept for a long time—five hours at least. Several times someone started to shift the furniture around swearing all the while, then a whiny female voice demanded that the sofa be replaced, but I did not even move, hoping that all this was just a dream. When I came to it was quiet. I raised my head carefully and peeked out. The table with the microphone was empty now, the camera draped over with canvas. Only one spotlight was illuminating the spaceships. There were no people anywhere. I got out from behind the bookcase and looked around: everything was just like during the program, only now I noticed on the floor under the spaceship a rather big pile of waste, disgustingly flashing the cans and white labels of the "Great Wall"; right before my eyes something splashed into it softly. I went up to the table where the remaining vodka and plates of food were still standing; I badly needed a drink. As soon as I sat down my spine curved automatically, assuming the bicycle pose, but I was able to straighten up with some effort, combined the vodka leftovers from several bottles—it made two full glasses—and tipped them into my mouth one by one. For several seconds I pondered if I should chase it down with one of the pickled mushrooms on the plate, but when I saw the fork covered in hardened briny slime, the revulsion won over.

I remembered my crewmates and imagined another

room similar to this one, with five steel coffins probably standing on its floor—four already welded shut and one still empty. I guess in some sense the guys were much happier wherever they were now, but I was feeling sad all the same. Then I thought about Mityok. Soon my head began to spin and I reacquired the ability to think about the happenings of this day. But instead of doing the thinking I started recalling my last day on Earth, the stones of the Red Square darkening from the driving rain, comrade Urchagin's wheelchair and the chance touch of his warm lips whispering in my ear:

“Omon. I know how difficult it was for you to lose a friend and learn instead that from your very childhood you were approaching the moment of your immortality side by side with a skillful and cunning enemy—I don't even want to say his name aloud. But still, try to remember that one conversation where he, you and I were all present.” He said then: “What's the difference which thoughts a person has when he dies? Aren't we all materialists? You remember—I said then that after he dies, a man lives through the fruit of his labor. What I didn't say was another thing, of paramount importance. Know this, Omon: even though nobody really has a soul, of course, still every soul is an entire universe. This is the dialectics of being. And while there is at least one soul where our way is alive and victorious, this way will not perish. For there shall exist an entire universe, and the center of this universe shall be this. . .”

He waved his hand describing a circle over the stones that were already glistening menacingly.

“And now for the principal thing that you must learn, Omon. You will not understand my words now, but I am speaking them for the moment that will be later, when I am no longer beside you. Listen. Even one pure and honest soul is enough for our country to become the leader in space exploration. One such soul is enough for the red banner of

victorious socialism to unfurl high above the Moon. But at least one soul, for at least one moment is indispensable, because it is in this soul that the banner will be soaring. . .”

I suddenly felt a strong stench of male sweat, turned around and tumbled onto the floor, knocked down by a hard blow from a fist in a thick rubber glove.

Towering above me was a cosmonaut in a worn-out woolen spacesuit and helmet with red letters *СССР*. He grabbed an empty bottle, broke it against the edge of the table and bent over me with the glass shard in his hand, but I managed to roll over, leaped to my feet and ran. He lunged after me – his movements were sluggish but at the same time extremely fast, and it was very scary. I caught the second cosmonaut from the corner of my eye—he was hurriedly climbing down the black log propping up the body of "Agdam T-3", sloughing off the foil stars as he went. I ran to the doors, slammed into them with my entire body, but they were locked. I rushed back, avoided the first cosmonaut but bumped into the second; he struck me hard with the heavy magnetized boot, aiming for the groin, but hitting me in the shin, and then tried to spear me with the pointy antenna on his head. I shrank away again. Suddenly I realized that I have just drunk the vodka for which they must have been waiting for probably several years, and that's when I got really scared. I looked around, noticed on one of the walls a small iron door with a red lightning in a triangle and words *CAUTION! DANGER!* and ran towards it.

Right behind the door was a narrow corridor with resonant metal floor. I made what seemed to be only a couple steps along it and heard behind the heavily vibrant clang of the metal soles. This sound tripled my strength and speed, I turned a corner and saw another short corridor ending in a round ventilation shaft with the raggedly torn wire mesh screen, a stationary blade of a rusty ventilator

behind it. I would lunge back, but suddenly found myself so close to the pursuer that I didn't even perceive him in his entirety, taking in instead a set of unrelated sensations—the sphere with the dark plastic visor and the red letters *CCCP*, black rubber fist with the small translucent trident, the overpowering smell of sweat and the patches of a major on the woolen shoulders painted silver. Next moment I was already slithering in the ventilation shaft. I squeezed past the giant blades, resembling a ship's screw, rather quickly, but when I started climbing the narrow well, leading somewhere far above, my coat bunched into a knot, I got stuck and folded over like a fetus in the womb. Then I heard rustling sound underneath, something touched my foot, I shot upwards screaming, covered the remaining yards in mere seconds and started squeezing through a horizontal opening. It ended in a round porthole, beyond which I could distinguish the globe of the Earth covered in opaque haze of the clouds. I sobbed and began crawling to it.

Through the thin film of tears the Earth seemed blurry and indistinct, floating as it were in the yellowish void, I was observing it across this void as I was drawing near, clambering towards it, until the walls constricting me from the sides gave way and the brown tiles of the floor rushed up to meet me.

“Hey! Comrade!”

I opened my eyes. A woman in dirty blue uniform was standing over me, a bucket at her feet; she was holding a mop.

“Are you sick or something? What do you want here?”

I transferred my gaze—there was a brown door in the wall, marked *next inspection 7/14*. Beside it a calendar was hanging with the large photo of Earth and words *For the Peaceful Cosmos*. I was lying in a short corridor with painted walls, three or four doors were around me. I looked up and

saw the black hole of the ventilation shaft in the wall across from the calendar.

“What?” I asked.

“I said, are you drunk or what?”

Steadying myself against the wall, I scrambled to my feet and shuffled away.

“Where do you think you're going,” said the woman and spun me around. I walked in the opposite direction. Around the corner began a short and steep staircase, terminating at a wooden door beyond which an unclear noise could be heard.

“Go,” the woman nudged me in the back.

I climbed the stairs and looked around,—she was still looking at me apprehensively—then pushed the door and found myself in a dark recess where several people in civilian clothes were standing. They didn't pay any attention to my emergence. A growing rumble sounded from a distance, I looked sideways and read the words *V. I. Lenin Library* in bronze letters on the wall.

This must be Earth, I thought suddenly.

I walked out of the nook beside the staircase and began shuffling slowly across the platform towards the large mirror at its end. The menacing orange time signs above it were reporting that it was not evening yet, even though it was rather late in the day, and that the previous train left the station about four minutes ago. In the mirror I was greeted by a young man, his face unshaven, apparently for a long time, his eyes bloodshot and his hair very disheveled. He was wearing a dirty black cotton-filled coat and generally had an appearance of someone who spent the last night hell knows where.

Come to think of it, that was exactly the case. The patrolling policeman with small dark moustache started shooting me suspicious glances, so when the train came I

stepped into the open door without hesitation. The door closed, and I was now riding into my new life. The mission is continuing, I thought. Half of the bulbs in the lunokhod were burned out, and that made the light seem stale. I sat on the bench, the woman beside me reflexively pressed her legs together, shifted away and occupied the opened space between us with her produce sack—it contained several packs of rice, a box of star-shaped noodles and a frozen whole chicken in a plastic bag.

Still, I had to decide now where I wanted to go. I raised my eyes to the subway map hanging on the opposite wall beside the emergency brake and began to look where exactly on the red line I was located.

