**Vitaly Doudko**

**I'M FORTY YEARS OLD**

**A detective story**

**Translated from Russian by Klimets Denis**

**Original title:**

***МНЕ СОРОК ЛЕТ***

**VITALY DOUDKO**

**I'M FORTY YEARS OLD**

**A detective story**

**At the ice rink.**

*There are two at the rink:* ***Vadim*** *and the* ***Girl****. Ninth grade.*

**Girl.** You're from the ninth "B." Recently showed up at our school. I'm from the ninth "A." You didn't see me. I'm watching you.

**Vadim.** Did you see something interesting?

**Girl.** I won't tell. Why are you older than us? Late for school?

**Vadim.** A secret.

**Girl.** Where did you come from? From Siberia?

**Vadim.** Twice a secret.

**Girl.** Is Siberia big?

**Vadim.** Very much.

**Girl.** Beautiful?

**Vadim.** Unbelievable.

**Girl.** Mysterious land. Is it cold in there? I read, up to minus sixty.

**Vadim.** Probably in Taimyr.

**Girl.** Did you go hunting in the wild woods?

**Vadim.** No, I didn't. I was a kid.

**Girl.** The girls are following you around. Why proud, unapproachable?

**Vadim.** I wouldn't say. I'm being ordinary.

**Girl.** Initially. Then you get cocky, you turn up nose. You're doing well in school. I do best with languages. You learn three languages at the same time.

**Vadim.** I like it.

*The* ***boy*** *takes her hand. The* ***girl*** *doesn't take it.*

**Girl.** Are you being cheeky?

**Vadim.** I'm on my best behaviour.

**Girl.** I couldn't be more decent.

*He draws the* ***Girl*** *to him, tries to kiss her. She pulls away.*

Are you getting more cocky?

*There are only two people at the rink. The song "Snow spinning" is playing:*

*lyrics by Kozlova L., composer Berezin S.*  
 Snow is spinning   
It's snowing all day long   
It's falling silently spinning   
You remember, then everything was covered with snow   
It was the snow of our meeting   
It lay before us white-white, like a blank sheet of paper   
And it seemed to me that we would write on this sheet the story of our love   
  
Of such a snowfall, such a snowfall,   
Local places have not remembered for a long time.   
And the snow didn't know, and was falling, and the snow didn't know, and was falling.   
The earth was beautiful, lovely, and pure.   
  
Snow swirls, flies, flies. And blowing snow.   
Winter is sweeping away, sweeping away everything that came before you.

***Vadim*** *forcibly drags the* ***Girl*** *down the aisle, kissing her. The* ***girl*** *kisses the* ***Boy****, too. Against the* ***Girl's*** *will, he pulls down his woollen tights...*

**Girl.** Don't. Please don't. I love you... Stop it. Let me go, don't. Not yet. I love you...

*Snow... A song... Two on the rink....*

**Tverskaya Street. A kissing couple.**

- Stop the slap and tickle at once! - **Vadim** stood beside them.

*The young men uncoupled and stared at him in surprise.*

**Young man.** What do you want?

**Vadim.** Read the rulings of the authorities. Slap and tickle is banned in the centre.

**Young man** (*irritably*). What do you want, man?

**Vadim.** I demand compliance with the law.

*The* ***Young man*** *tries to grab at his jacket, reaching for* ***Vadim's*** *throat.* ***Vadim*** *backs away, the* ***Young Man*** *tries to reach again.*

**Vadim.** Be on your best behaviour. I've been appointed overseer of the Central District.

**Young man.** Man, are you really cracked?

**Vadim.** Just a little bit...

**Young man.** Come here...

**Vadim.** Just catch me up...

***Vadim*** *ran, the* ***Young man*** *after him. Sometimes it seemed that he was about to grab* ***Vadim*** *by the jacket, but at the last moment* ***Vadim*** *gained speed and slipped away. This trick he did several times. The* ***young man*** *looked back: his girlfriend, holding her shoes in her hands, was running after them in her socks.*

**Young man.** Why are you running?

**Young woman.** I want to smack you in the head.

**Young man.** Smack me how?

**Young woman.** With a shoe. We won't catch up. He's a master runner, a master of sports. See his breathing? No shortness of breath.

**Young man.** How do you know? You two know each other?

**Young woman.** He's a bastard! The first kiss with you, he interrupted. Crazy bastard. And he's also running.

**Young man.** If we him catch up, what do we do? We can't kill him?

**Young woman.** No, it's not advisable.

**Young man.** It's always like this: you catch up, you don't know what to do next. We could beat him up a little bit.

**Young woman.** You won't. He'd rather beat us.

**Young man.** On Tverskaya Street?

**Young woman.** He doesn't care where he hits us. See, stubby, bouncy. Let's kiss. It's like he disappeared. Appeared.

**Young man.** Then let's get on with it.

***The young man*** *hugs* ***the young woman,*** *kisses her****.***

*Just then, a loud, "Stop that at once!" thunders beside them. The* ***young men*** *flinched.*

**Young woman.** Are we going to catch him up?

**Young man.** What's the use?

**Young woman.** Can you fight? For real.

***Vadim*** *stands quite close to the couple and - as if nothing had happened - listens to their negotiations.*

**Young woman.** Rawbone, tough, quick to kill. Where did he come from? We continue kissing and then I instantly throw myself at him.

***Vadim*** *stood next to the couple for a few seconds... and ran away.*

**Folk festivities.**

**The Palace of People's Welfare.**

*Housed in a long building with columns. The interior space is divided into compartments: "Intellectual Development Rooms." Each has its own audience, its own mores, its own passions. Above the doors hang signs with the name of the Cabinet. They're run by their own moderators.* ***Vadim*** *enters the Cabinets.*

**CABINET**

**of high poetry**

*Thoughtful poetry lovers sit in the chairs. An atmosphere of solemnity and conscious concentration. The poem by B.L. Pasternak is heartfelt read by* ***Marina****, the girl from the 9 ‘A’ class, who was abused by* ***Vadim*** *at the skating rink many years ago.*

The snow will dust the roadway,  
And load the roofs still more.  
I'll stretch my legs a little:  
You're there outside the door.  
  
Autumn, not winter coat,  
Hat-none, galoshes-none.  
You struggle with excitement  
Out there all on your own.  
Far, far into the darkness  
Fences and trees withdraw.  
You stand there on the corner,  
Under the falling snow.  
  
The water trickles down from  
The kerchief that you wear  
Into your sleeves, while dewdrops  
Shine sparkling in your hair.  
  
And now illumined by  
A single strand of light  
Are features, kerchief, figure  
And coat of autumn cut.  
  
There's wet snow on your lashes  
And in your eyes, distress,  
And your external image  
Is all, all of apiece.  
  
As if an iron point  
With truly consummate art,  
Dipped into antimony,  
Had scribed you on my heart.  
  
Those modest, humble features  
Are in it now to stay,  
And if the world's cruel-hearted,  
That's merely by the way.  
  
And therefore it is doubled,  
All this night in snow;  
To draw frontiers between us  
Is more than I can do.  
  
But who are we and whence,  
If, of those years gone by,  
Scandal alone remains  
And we have ceased to be.

***Vadim*** *enters the hall.* ***Marina*** *jumped off the stage, rushing towards him. There was a hail of blows. Crying and punching. He doesn't defend himself, just covers his face with his hands. Beats him into complete silence. The audience is shocked. There are timid voices:*

- Reading a heartfelt lyric.....

- Beating so furiously....

- The poet Andrei Voznesensky wrote the poem "A woman beats..."

- Don't you see? They're lovers...

- He apologises.

***Vadim*** *exits the hall.* ***Marina*** *sinks to the floor, crying.*

**CABINET**

**of inspired dreams**

*In the room, excited ladies wander from corner to corner. Conversations ensue, which are immediately cut short.*

**Moderator.** Today we're discussing women's secrets. The basic mystery is hidden from view. The topic of the discussion is "The Role of Low Neck in Contemporary World Politics." For your information, please be advised. People's artist finally found female happiness thanks to her sixth husband.

**1st dame.** Not the sixth, but the seventh.

**Moderator.** All right, the seventh. Let's jointly rejoice for the People's Artist. (*Applause breaks out.*) I declare an open discussion.

**1st dame.** One socialite feared that her knickers would fall down at a formal high society gala. And indeed, at the climax began to subside. She managed to intercept at knee level.

**2nd dame.** Looking at a woman, a man visually notices the...

**3rd dame.** a global configuration.

**Moderator.** Anchor?

**4th dame.** Selected dominant details.

**Moderator.** Excellent.

**2nd dame.** It's not uncommon for me to go out without underwear. What's that for?

**3rd dame.** Heartache torments my heart.

**5th dame.** Suddenly I feel a man touching me. The touch was awe-inspiring. I got all hot and bothered. Blood pulsed in my veins. I gasped in anticipation. When he came close, I could smell his scent. That's how I came to know a man. You have to be sure: you are the most gentle, the most optimal. And then you'll achieve your goal.

**6th dame.** Men are primitive creatures. A little above the knee, the skirt is raised, they start to get chills, they close in on themselves, they can hardly orientate themselves in time and space. We don't care if it's knee-high or above. A critical alternative.

**1st dame.** What's the difference between a courtesan crawling in an oligarchic party and a homeless bum from three railway stations?

*Seeing* ***Vadim*** *enter, the ladies became excited: "And here is their representative. We'll deal with him now."* ***Vadim*** *rushed out of the Cabinet.*

**CABINET**

**of choral art**

**Moderator** (*on stage*)**.** Today's topic is "Old Songs About the Main." There is a choir and a soloist on stage.

Performing the last verses of the song "Our General Secretary." The soloist is soloing.

Kazakh region - you have worries there too,   
so that the bread spike grows like amber.  
Thank you for your labour exploits,   
Comrade Party Secretary!  
Thank you for your labour exploits,   
Comrade Party Secretary!  
  
The temple is already in the glimmer of silver,   
But the fervour of the heart warms all matters.  
To the ambassador of peace and creator of goodness   
the people of the whole planet are listening with love.  
The temple is already in the glimmer of silver.  
  
You are a communist, the head of the country of the people,   
calling the earth to the sunny distance.  
Thank you for your sacred exploit,   
Comrade General Secretary!  
Thank you for your sacred exploit,   
Our General Secretary!

**CABINET**

**of sublime painting**

4 paintings

"The Scream" by E. Munch

"The Obstacle of Emptiness" by R. Magritte.

"Above Eternal Rest" by I. Levitan

"Troika" by V. Perov

*Several visitors stand motionless by the paintings. Keep their eyes up. One of the women says to her friend, "The hall is subject to a ban. I can't stand witchcraft: I'll go mad."*

**CABINET**

**of sublime literature**

4 books

**"The Overcoat" by N.V. Gogol.** Akakiy Akakievich steps off the cover of the book, walks around the hall, approaches his colleagues in turn, shakes hands with each of them with a short remark: "And you are honoured? Well, that's right, they know better,

- **Gregor Zamza** from **Franz Kafka's The Transfiguration**,

- **The Master** and **Margarita from the** novel **The Master and Margarita by M.A. Bulgakov**,

- **Romain Gary**, author of **The Promise at Dawn**, who states: "Life is not lived in vain."

*All five of them stroll down the hall in a friendly manner. Everyone's thinking about their own thing, but it's their own -- human.*

**CABINET**

**of historical truth**

*There's a noisy gathering of activist historians in the audience.*

**First activist** (*with anguish*). This strip of coastline belonged to our tribe in the fourteenth century. You were nowhere near it.

**Second activist** (*overheated*). How could we not be if we were! The curve is ours! And the hillside is ours! And the ravine is ours!

**First activist.** The ravine is ours. And the hillside is ours.

**Second activist.** The village is ours.

**First activist.** Choke on the village. And the whole fourteenth century is ours.

**Third activist.** We're not going to get anywhere that way. Paperwork needed.

**Fourth activist.** Paperwork, paperwork! They don't prove anything.

**First activist.** Yes, we're going to request the birchbark letters now.

**Second activist.** This is where the river has flowed for centuries. There are villagers alive who have not forgotten.

**First activist.** Instead of a river, a ravine was formed. As plain as the nose on your face. The river has dried up.

**Third activist.** We should bring in some real historians.

**Fourth activist.** Let them confuse the whole thing?

**CABINET**

**of natural gifts**

**The first section, "Vegetables."** The counters are lined with carefully washed vegetables: potatoes, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, corn, white cabbage, red cabbage, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower cabbage, broccoli sprouts, radishes, beetroot, aubergines, sweet peppers, onions, garlic, courgette, radishes, asparagus, parsley, dill, sorrel, lettuce, patisson, pumpkin, artichoke, beans.

**The second section "Fruits and Gourds."** The counters are lined with carefully washed fruit: apples, pears, plums, peaches, apricots, cherries, cherries, lemons, oranges, mandarins, grapes, watermelons, melons, pumpkins.

**The third section, "Tasty Exotics."** The counters are lined with avocados, pineapples, bananas of various calibres, papaya, kiwi, mangoes.

***Vadim*** *rejoices at the extraordinary sight, leans over to the gifts of nature, inhales the aroma. "We should buy some for home."*

**The end of the People's Welfare Palace.**

**Brasserie - Beer Parlour.**

***Vadim and Alexander*** *used to work together, now* ***Alexander*** *is the head of the department. Drinking beer.*

**Alexander.** How are you doing?

**Vadim.** Chauffeuring. Half a year. I used to underestimate this profession. I like it now. The slow ride lulls you to sleep. Got to know the metropolis better. Unremarkable alleys, marginal streets. "Heavy rain with hail is expected in the northwest," the announcer reports. Does "northwest" make sense to the average resident? Now I'm getting it. There are marvellous little parks, alleys.

**Alexander.** Give me a break! How are you doing?

**Vadim.** They gave me the papers: "Go away."

**Alexander.** Did you at least say some comforting parting words?

**Vadim.** Nothing.

**Alexander.** That's not how it works. You deceive.

**Vadim.** I've been chauffeuring for six months.

**Alexander.** Give me a break! What's the need?

**Vadim.** Will you talk to my personnel officer? At least give a reason for the dismissal.

**Alexander.** You don't get fired for no reason. No offence, it's a tough day. We're running out of time. We're meeting in a month.

**It's been a month.**

***Alexander*** *and* ***Vadim****, in the same beer hall.* ***Vadim*** *stares tensely into* ***Alexander's*** *face.*

**Alexander.** It pisses me off when people mess with my head. Especially close friends. Back in the day. You asked, I said yes. For old times' sake. But then you're obliged to tell the truth. Otherwise, there's no help.

**Vadim.** I don't know what you're talking about.

**Alexander.** Well, think about it.

**Vadim.** So much to think about...

**Alexander.** You really don't get it or are you trying to make me look like an idiot?

**Vadim.** Sasha, no offence, I really don't understand.

**Alexander.** You've had an accident, you've been to the police! For us, the police there are the worst! A report was made, you wrote an explanatory note. They let him go - minor accident, probably staged. But you didn't tell your superiors! You rumbled to the police and didn't report it to his superiors!

**Vadim** (*shocked*). What police? What kind of accident?

**Alexander** (*in great irritation*). You're being weird? I'll send you... wherever you wish to go. The police papers came from the embassy.

**Vadim.** Which embassy?

**Alexander.** Our own, the Russian embassy.

*Both interlocutors were a little dazed, staring silently into each other's eyes.*

**Vadim.** When did it happen?

**Alexander.** In May last year.

**Vadim.** What's your country?

**Alexander.** Austria.

**Vadim.** Last May, I was on another continent. I haven't been to Austria.

**Alexander** (*echidically*). You've never been to Austria?

**Vadim.** No.

**Alexander.** Are you sure?

**Vadim.** Absolutely.

**Alexander.** Everyone's stupid but you? The papers are in.

**Vadim.** Colossal mistake! How it happened should be sorted out. But a mistake. Or a set-up.

**Alexander.** Against you specifically?

**Vadim.** Yes, against me. Or against someone.

**Alexander.** Don't you think you're more brilliant than everyone else?

**Vadim.** I do.

**Alexander.** But you've never been to Austria?

**Vadim.** I wasn't last May.

**Alexander.** Experienced personnel officer, slob? Yapping, do you have any idea? The personnel officer at Head Office made an oversight?

**Vadim.** I didn't say HR. There's a third person.

**Alexander** (*shouts, then calms down*). There are no thirds there. All their own, tried and tested dozens of times.

**Vadim.** The paper gets to the personnel officer not directly, but through second or third hands. There could have been a mistake made, unintentional, accidentally slipped in. Wrong desk, wrong safe. You have to go all the way down the chain. And it's better if it's not the personnel officer personally, but his meticulous assistant. The whole chain, it'll pop out. There's a chance. I believe it. For one simple reason: I haven't been to Austria. Misled.

**Alexander.** Official paperwork to wipe the slate clean?

**Vadim.** They should be dealt with.

**Alexander.** Do you realise who you're picking on?

**Vadim.** Nobody yet. Thanks, you're helping. I'm grateful to you.

**Alexander.** A liar, really? It's easy to check.

**Vadim.** Check it. I haven't been to Austria.

**Alexander.** I know you from your old job, I trust you. You're a knowledgeable employee. If I'm involved, I'll see it through. Here in a month. (*Leaves*.)

**It's been a month.**

***Alexander*** *and* ***Vadim****, in the same beer hall.*

**Alexander.** You were born under a lucky star. At first, they wouldn't give me the documents. Strictly limited access. Considering my merit and rank... In the presence of their employee, sat at the table opposite. That's a tough one. Specially singled out. Watching my fingers. Gave papers relating only to that period. The girl who made the mistake was dragged through the commissions. Twenty-two years old, student, someone's daughter. Undergoing training. The father didn't interfere. Crying all over the place. Wet as a shag. Didn't do much harm. You're the only one who got hurt. A hooch in one letter. It's a rare occasion. A vigilance order has been issued. Surname and first name coincide completely, but in the patronymic one letter is different. What's your patronymic?

**Vadim.** Ernestovich.

**Alexander.** That's right. Father's name was Ernest. And that man's patronymic was Ernstovich. Father's name was Ernst. The difference is quite tiny, but there is still a difference. The pretty intern didn't see it coming and put someone else's files in your folder. So we didn't look any further. It's twisted. If it's in the folder, that's the way it's supposed to be.

**Vadim.** Is the man being punished?

**Alexander.** He was fired immediately. They decide, they think. With the girl, too. So far, I've been reassigned to a lower position in the library.

**Vadim.** I am forever in your debt. If it wasn't for you...

**Alexander.** Come on... We'll figure it out. Asked for you in my department. It's a tempting position. It hasn't been given yet. Oh, by the way. The accounting department's working hard. Compensate for six months of downtime while absent from work. That's a decent profit.

**Vadim.** Thank you, old and new friend. It all counts.

**Jogging through the park's alley**

***Vadim's*** *easy jog down the park's alley. Suddenly* ***Marina*** *jumps out of the bushes, in a tracksuit and windbreaker unbuttoned to the navel. They silently run side by side. As they run, they look lovingly into each other's faces.*

**Vadim.** Who are you?

**Marina.** Don't be a goat.

**Vadim.** I've never seen it before.

**Marina.** Of course you have! It's been years. Do you like the song? (*Humming*, *holding back tears*.)

 Of such a snowfall, such a snowfall,   
Local places have not remembered for a long time.   
And the snow didn't know, and was falling, and the snow didn't know, and was falling.   
The earth was beautiful, lovely, and pure.   
**Vadim.** The memory's jammed.

**Marina.** There's a special memory

**Vadim.** A very special memory.

**Marina.** To keep a record of everything. Things that have come true and things that have gone wrong.

**Vadim.** Who are you? Jumped out of the bushes...

**Marina.** Decide for yourself, though: do you call me "you" or "thou?"

**Vadim.** How would you like it?

**Marina.** I'd like it to be thou. Acknowledged me?

**Vadim.** So many years... Noticed you long ago... Tried to slip away.....

**Marina.** Now you can't. Is the song playing in your head?

**Vadim.** Stuck in memory?

**Marina.** I want to be sure first. Did you acknowledge me?

**Vadim.** Put your tits away.

**Marina.** Put them where?

**Vadim.** Put them away.

**Marina.** My belonging. Put them where? As it is, so it will be. By nature.

**Vadim.** What's the lightning for?

**Marina.** All right. If you're so bashful. (*Pulls up the zip a little*.) Acknowledged?

**Vadim.** You're an outsider.

**Marina.** You have a very decent language of an African people. Added value. Probably going to be sent there soon.

**Vadim.** You're an outsider.

**Marina.** Don't be picky. I want to brag.

**Vadim.** Go ahead.

**Marina.** Graduated from the institute with a diploma in honours. I'm persistent, pully. I've been running for six months since I tracked you down. It was difficult at first, short of breath. Gradually, thanks to training, my legs got stronger and my breathing levelled out. At a slow pace, I can run for a long time. For my own pleasure. I read that running is bad for everyone.

**Vadim.** There was shortness of breath. I'm gonna stop running. I'm gonna crash in the middle of the park. With no one around.

**Marina.** I can be there for you...

**Vadim.** We'll see. Old age is coming. I'm sensing symptoms.

**Marina.** What an old age! Half or less has been lived. Only forty in seventeen days.

**Vadim.** How do you know?

**Marina.** Naive question.... I know a lot... about you.

**Vadim.** There's a lot I don't know about myself.

**Marina** (*with a tremor in her voice*)**.** Well...I'm guessing. It's been many years. **I love you. I always have. Don't leave me. I've forgiven.** Why don't you say anything?

**Vadim. I haven't forgiven myself.**

**Marina.** That's what I thought. That's what I thought... Nothing happened. And if it was, it was only for fun. It's all forgotten. Our secret. For the rest of my life. I've forgotten forever. **I love you.** You can make it good for me.

**Vadim.** How?

**Marina.** I want a baby. With you.

***Vadim*** *froze at loss.*

**Vadim.** Are you nuts? What a slip of the tongue... **I love you too... I can't forget.** I have a decision to make. A radical decision.

**Marina.** I like it when you swear in my presence. Very well-mannered, though. You come from a poor family. I can guess where you work. The clouds are thickening. The girl who's running in the back is the infiltrator. Accompanies me everywhere. I've lost confidence. Circumstances can be dramatically disrupted. I need a baby now. You'll be killed, I'll be alone.

*They ran again.*

**Vadim.** I've got a million and a half saved up. Dollars. I bequeathed the whole amount to you. I'm afraid they might take it away. The money's in Geneva. A small, inconspicuous bank, on the mountain, near the Russian Orthodox Church. (*Shows a piece of paper*.) Its name and account number. The account is only four digits. Note to self. I'm going to destroy the paper. (***Vadim*** *holds the paper in front of her eyes*.) Have you learnt well?

**Marina** (*closed her eyes, put her hands on* ***Vadim's*** *shoulders, raised her head to the sky, opened her eyes*). Forever.

**Vadim.** If you have any difficulties, you can go to the bank director. We know each other. I did him a favour. A long time ago. He's grateful. You'll give him my name. Do you remember?

***Marina*** *leans over to* ***Vadim*** *and whispers in his ear.*

**Vadim.** Brilliant. Good girl. (***Vadim*** *swallows a piece of paper.)*

**Marina.** I don't need the money. It's yours. I make enough.

**Vadim.** Everybody needs money. My friend will come to my aid in times of need. He agreed. You'll pinch him half.

**Marina.** Got it. In a thicket of bushes I found a bench. A lover's retreat, apparently. Now there's a bend in the alley, we'll dive into the thicket, try to get away from the pushy girl, look for a bench.

***Vadim*** *and* ***Marina*** *are near the bench.*

***Marina*** *quickly removes her gym trousers. Spreads them out on the bench.*

**Marina** (*to* ***Vadim***). You're frozen as a statue? After that incident, I've never...

*She herself pulls down* ***Vadim's*** *trousers. Staring at his loins. Rapidly jumping up, hugging, kissing. In the next instant she was already lying broadside on the bench with her legs held high....*

**In Stoleshnikov Lane**

*In Stoleshnikov Lane, a poorly dressed* ***Old Man*** *looks at the shop windows of expensive international brands. Finally decides to enter the boutique. A guard immediately rushes over to him.*

**Guard.** What do you want?

**Old man.** I want to see the fabric for the coat. It looks bright, attractive, but is it sturdy. When I was young I worked as a tailor, sewing coats out of hard fabric - drape, tweed, covert.

**Guard.** Look, old man, this is a shop, not an underground workshop. You're not supposed to touch it. Keep walking and wash your hands more often.

*From behind the* ***Old Man****'s back comes* ***Vadim's*** *voice.*

**Vadim.** He's only gonna feel it with his eyes, he's not gonna touch it.

**Guard.** There's a whole bunch of you pansies in here.

*Placing a hand on* ***Vadim's*** *shoulder. Takes a punch to the face, falls to the floor. His partner rushes to his aid and tries to twist* ***Vadim's*** *arms. Also gets an instant hard hit. Nose is smashed, bleeding. The* ***Manager*** *comes down the stairs.*

**Manager.** Tut-tut, you're not being nice. We'll draw up a report, put you in jail. Tut-tut! (*Also gets hit.*)

*A police car stops at the door. The saleswoman had time to press the panic button. Two policemen enter the shop.*

**First policeman** (*examining the disposition*). What's the problem?

**Vadim.** Trying to teach an old man about life.

**First policeman.** It happened once before. Go away. (The ***old man*** *and* ***Vadim*** *head for the door*.)

**Second policeman** (to ***Vadim*** *in pursuit*). You don't like rich people?

**Vadim.** Poor people, too.

**Second policeman.** Don't spread your arms around.

**Old Man** (*in the street, saying goodbye*). The colouring is enticing, bright. But the quality is worse. See you! You're being followed. Stay on your guard.

**Steppe. The vast expanse.**

*There are two people in the car:* ***Vadim*** *and* ***Sergei****.* ***Vadim's*** *make-up: moustache, beard, dark glasses.*

**Sergei.** I don't like to rush through the steppe, I like to take it slow. How long has it been since we've seen each other? Three? Four years? Well done, you've got it figured out. I didn't recognise you at the masquerade. You can't stand to come in. I suspect why you're going. When he asked me if I had a pig, I knew right away you'd be here soon. I don't dare to stab the piggy, it's a pity. My hand is shaking, I can't stand the squealing. Invited the butcher to come tomorrow.

**Vadim.** Wear a masquerade in front of him?

**Sergei.** You'd better wear it.

**Vadim.** Who are you living with now?

**Sergei.** A friend, a common-law wife. My son is four years old. Svetik absolutely refused. Scared of the silence. Barely made it through the week. She's right. Can't do without Moscow's noise, uproar, underground. I agree with her. My daughter is sixteen, graduating from high school, an excellent student. Both lovely ladies. I love them.

**Vadim.** Did the bosses let you off easy?

**Sergei.** No, they didn't. "We spent so much on you!" Showed up here, made sure there was a farm. Calmed down. Three people flew in: the department head, the personnel officer, the security office. Without warning, at full speed. We stayed a day. One wanted to stay the night, the other two refused. I wanted to watch the sunrise in the steppe, listen to steppe sounds: beetles, dragonflies, wind. I was reading Chekhov's "Steppe." Reading and re-reading. I wondered how Chekhov managed to write about nothing, about the steppe, in a hundred pages. He and I had a lovely chat. The other two were hurrying back. They were stunned by my peasant lunch. Borscht with a piece of veal, lard with fried potatoes, with homemade sausage. Homemade sour cream, homemade butter, homemade kvass. The drinks they brought for themselves. I don't drink.

*We drove up to the house. A young* ***Woman*** *comes out of it.*

**Sergei.** I'd like you to meet her. Olga. And Vadim.

**Olga.** Pleased to meet you. How was your flight?

**Vadim.** Thank you. Fine.

**Olga.** Lunch is ready. We can sit down. We timed it.

**Vadim.** What's the hurry? We need to look around, get settled in.

**Olga.** Let me show you where to wash up from the road, your room. Did you work alongside your husband?

**Vadim.** Yes, at neighbouring desks.

**Olga.** So, mouth shut, then?

*The men laughed out loud. All three of them made their way into the house. They come out of the house, stopping by the barn.*

**Vadim.** So many tools.

**Sergei.** Self-service. There's nowhere to go for help.

**Vadim.** I want to hold it in my hands.

*Tools are indeed plentiful: shovels, rakes, scythes, buckets, spanners of all sizes, hammers, screwdrivers, chisels, nails, bolts, nuts, switches, drills, spare wheels, pumps, jacks...*

***Vadim*** *picks it up, examines it, puts it back.*

**Vadim.** A real money grubber.

**Sergei.** You have to have supplies. It is thirty kilometres to the regional centre.

***Vadim*** *and* ***Sergei*** *are sitting under the canopy of the mill. There is red wine in the glasses, friends are tasting with pleasure.*

**Vadim.** Is the government oppressing you?

**Sergei.** On the contrary, it facilitates. They're prestigious, there's an independent farmer in the area. A decommissioned small tractor and other inventory were sold cheaply. One day the bandits came.

**Vadim.** Did you throw them in parts? Always been in top physical shape.

**Sergei.** I don't feel like doing anything. Four burly jocks, armed. Walked around, looked around. Seeing if there was anything to be had. "You're not afraid alone in an open field?" I said: "No." "Hey, soldier, you got a gun stashed away, don't you?" "I'll show you next time." We had a glass of wine each, I was wary. They were being polite. Sent them to the district chief of police, who had already received a call. Never showed up again. I've got a Saiga stashed away. It will quickly be in your hands when you need it. Officially registered. The wine is donated by a neighbour, his vineyards. He'll be here tomorrow.

**Vadim.** When do I cut it?

**Sergei.** The zootechnician and the head butcher will be here by ten o'clock.

*They drink thick red wine.*

**Sergei.** Falernian, sweet. Should I believe the Greek?

**Vadim.** Are you referring to the famous novel?

**Sergei.** Yes. A neighbour's treat. Went to Greece. A Greek acquaintance gave me a vine. He keeps it safe. It shelters it from hurricanes, from frost. Makes a hundred bottles for himself, for close friends. Doesn't tell anyone about the vine, only I know about it. Sounds like a myth. It doesn't matter.

***Olga*** *and* ***Son*** *are coming out of the house.*

**Olga.** Sitting in the twilight?

**Vadim.** Can I hug your wife?

***Olga*** *looks questioningly at her husband.*

**Sergei.** Sit on his lap.

*The* ***woman*** *sits down cautiously. Vadim**hugged and immediately let go.*

**Olga** (*jokingly*). You're giving up your wife?

**Sergei.** No way, never! No-one! An extreme situation.

**Olga.** I get it.

**Sergei.** Now let's say goodbye to Uncle and go to bed.

**Olga** and **Son** at the same time: Good night. (*Walking away*.)

**Sergei.** Are you plotting destruction? Tell me.

**Vadim.** I'm not ripe for a story.

**Sergei.** You've decided to do a desperate act? Did you come to say goodbye? The office was wary of you.

**Vadim.** Once told a story...well about a girl...in ninth grade.....

**Sergei** (*instantly, abruptly*). We decided once and for all - there was no violence. He's probably looking for you and you're hiding.

**Vadim.** He's probably looking for it. A big favour. Help her if you have to.

**Sergei.** He was up to something fatal after all. There's no other way. There was no violence.

**Vadim.** Promise? She's got money. She'll share. Promise?

**Sergei** (*shouting at the top of his voice*). Bastard, scoundrel! How can you offer money? Best mate money?!

*An excited* ***Wife*** *runs out of the house, hugs her husband.*

**Sergei** (***to Olga***). Don't worry. It's all right. Я сорвался. It's not a big deal. Go back to sleep.

***Olga*** *returns to the house. Long pause.*

**Vadim.** I'd like to take a walk on the prairie.

**Sergei.** Would you like some company?

**Vadim.** I'd rather be alone.

**Sergei.** Well, go on, slop. Don't come back late. I'll give you beans. Prepared just in case. A bear cub showed up. Affectionate, silly. Wandered off from his mum. I fed, it ate with gusto. Came back twice. The second time it was pretty funny. Grabbed a piece of meat and dashed off into the steppe. It must have taken it to his family. I read somewhere that wild animals can't be tamed. Starting to lose track of where is wild territory and where is tame territory. Self-preservation instincts are weakened. When the zootechnician gets here, I'll ask him. Do you want a dog? Central Asian Shepherd. Smart, savvy. He won't sneak off into the steppe, walking next to his left foot. Waiting for orders. Tear the uninvited stranger to shreds.

**Vadim.** Thank you. I'll be quick. I'm going for a walk with a stick.

*Goes into the steppe.*

**And the ice rink again.**

*Joyful, flushed faces.*

*The girl says to her friend, "Even the heaviest shoes will seem like nothing after skates."*

***Vadim****, in his security guard uniform, winds up in a general mass of circles.*

*Suddenly the song "Snow spinning" sounds: either in* ***Vadim's*** *head or, as many years ago, in reality. He looks around him worriedly, looks at the skaters beside him, trying to determine from their faces whether the shrill song is really playing over the rink, leans against the edge - the melody disappears.*

*A hut of security guards ensuring order at the rink.*

**First guard.** We're gonna beat up, thresh? Rolled out...wasn't taken for that. Who's with me?

**Second guard.** I'll pass.

**Third guard.** I'm with you.

**Fourth guard.** So am I.

***Vadim*** *enters. First, third, fourth* ***guards*** *made a movement in his direction and immediately froze:* ***Vadim*** *stood waiting for an attack with a brass knuckle and a knife in his hands.*

**Third.** Wow!

*All three faded away. Taking a break,* ***Vadim*** *rolls out onto the rink again.*

**Fourth.** We should warn Pasha.

**First.** Warn him, go on. It's weird, though. Three were scared of one. We have a team...

***Pavel****, the senior member of the group, enters.*

**Third.** Pasha...

**Pavel.** Shut up. Mind your own business. Don't grab the others.

**First.** There is no making head or tail of it. Specifically fell out of the sky.....

**Pavel.** No one was asked. Sounds like someone's much-needed. Who sits up high. It's none of our business. He'll be gone soon.

**Bruges.**

***Vadim*** *is on the train from Brussels to Bruges. Elegantly dressed. He looks at the scenery flickering outside the window, covers his eyelids, looks at the passengers sitting next to him.*

*Marvellous Bruges. Cathedrals. Canals. Swans. At first he joins a group of tourists, visits the cathedrals, listens to the guide's explanations, then separates, gets on a bicycle, slowly rolls along the canals, past a street market of antiques, through deserted streets, rides out on the squares where many children are frolicking.*

**Vadim's at the pizzeria. *Vadim*** *takes part in the preparation of the pizza: he puts salami, olives, cheese, pepper in a tiny dish and gives it to the pizza maker, who rolls out the dough to a narrow strip, spreads your set on it and puts it in the oven.* ***Vadim*** *waits a few minutes; with the pizza ready, lightly crisping, he heads for the long table d'hôte. There are only two people in the room: the culinary chef and* ***Vadim****. He sits down at the table, pouring olive oil on the bottom of a huge plate. He cuts off pieces, eats them. Suddenly a* ***stranger woman*** *sits down at the table opposite* ***Vadim****. He didn't realise when she had time to enter, as he could see the front door, and when she had time to make herself a pizza. The* ***stranger woman*** *is marvellously beautiful (according to the canons of the detective genre), she is about forty. Eating slices of pizza, she stared at* ***Vadim****, squirming, not hiding her impatience. She smiled, wiggled her shoulders. Waiting for a reaction. The silence was lingering, it was time for tête-à-tête honours.*

**Stranger woman.** Hello! Bon appetit.

**Vadim.** Hello! Thank you. Likewise.

**Stranger woman.** You're lucky. Beautiful weather. It's quiet, it's warm, it encourages reflection, meditation. There were thunderstorms yesterday. Do you like thunderstorms?

**Vadim.** I adore them.

**Stranger woman.** I feel sorry for Akakiy Akakievich. Especially terrible when bandits in the cold pull off his new overcoat... He caught a cold, got seriously ill, and then... Sometimes you do something dishonourable... shameful... Then you regret it all your life, but you can't fix it... I'll introduce you to the city.

**Vadim.** Your city?

**Stranger woman.** Hometown. We'll take a leisurely wander. Naturally, without interference. How many days will you stay with us? Since you're not talking, I have to keep the conversation going. Do you like me?

**Vadim's thoughts.**

*It doesn't work that rough. Should I or shouldn't I? No authorisation. Maybe she'll talk his way out of it, or at least prove herself. Chatty, though surely an act, a contrived image. They picked up a hottie. Very decent French, but still not native. The pronunciation gives her away. A contemporary French writer of Russian origin composed thirty amazing novels, and his ineradicable accent gave him away as a foreigner. Served as a diplomat, consul, but his accent gave him away everywhere.*

**Vadim.** Would you like me to pass the olive oil?

**Stranger woman.** Yes, thank you. Couldn't be bad. No butter, dry dough.

***Vadim*** *pushed the spice kit aside in her direction.*

*The* ***stranger woman*** *touched his litre beer mug with her hand.*

**Stranger woman.** Ice-cold beer. Usually you ask for heat. There are special pins in the beer hall. Or poured into a hot mug. You can't have a cold one. Because of your throat. No cold or hot, it gets inflamed immediately. With a fever. The pain pierces the whole neck.

*They stare intently into each other's eyes.*

*Suddenly a fog obscures his vision and consciousness. Someone's words come out, "Her gaze makes the buttons of my fly bounce off my fly." Who said that? After all, someone said."*

*From somewhere in the distance comes the voice of the* ***Stranger woman****:*

*- Well, Colonel? Did you like the pizza?*

***Vadim*** *turned to the pizza man with difficulty: his face was blurred either in an ugly grimace or in a snide smile.*

*"Run, you won't make it in time," was the thought that pierced the inflamed mind.*

*He dashed out of the brasserie and ran down the street. Collapsed, sprawled on the ground under a towering tree on the bank of the nearest canal. He managed to pull out a vial and inhale the scent from it, splashing water on his face.*

*In the back of my mind, a childhood memory resurfaces: His mum works as an incoming laundress for a well-to-do, childless family. Mum always took it with her, there was no one to leave it at home with. Little* ***Vadik*** *sits on a chair, and next to him, standing on his hind legs, leaning his front legs on a cardboard box, obediently stands a clever little dog. A sad woman sits on a chair, breaks off slices from an orange and gives them to the boy.* ***Vadik*** *bites off half of the slice and gives the other half to the doggy and doesn't remove his hand. The doggie deftly swallows his half and immediately licks his hand in gratitude. As it waits for the next portion, it freezes in the same nonchalant pose. The scene is repeated several times. A joyous ritual game. The woman's husband appears unheard and embraces her.*

**Husband.** Well, stop it.

**Woman** (*through tears*). And we could have a boy like that right now.

*Both of them walk out of the room.*

*The memory dissolved.*

*Vadim loses consciousness.*

*In flashes of consciousness,* ***Vadim*** *sees two old Benedictine nuns walking along the canal in his direction. They whispered about something at the tree: one continued on her way, and the other rushed to the lifeless* ***Vadim****. Her further actions are deft, co-ordinated, invisible from the outside thanks to the thick tree crown. With a sudden movement she pulled down the right sleeve of her jacket, pulled the sleeve of her shirt up to her shoulder, unzipped her compact wooden chest with lightning speed, took out a pre-prepared syringe of liquid, gave the injection. She opens* ***Vadim's*** *mouth, puts a pill under his tongue. After a few seconds, the body begins to shudder in convulsions, vomiting. The nun turns his head on its side to prevent him from choking; deftly places a cellophane bag over his head. When the vomiting has stopped, tighten the pouch with a string. She gives a second injection, puts on an oxygen mask, looks at* ***Vadim's*** *face. She puts a pulse oximeter on his finger, looks at the numbers. After a while his eyes opened with difficulty. Benedictine nun gives a third injection, puts the pulse oximeter back on her other finger. Smiling.*

**Nun** (*in a manly voice*). The train to Brussels is in an hour. You're on time.

**Vadim.** Do you speak Russian?

**Nun.** I have to. Don't go into the hotel. Now a rubbish truck will slowly drive by, get in the back seat without delay, you will be taken to the railway station. Don't stand on the platform. Go up to the compartment at once. You must not be seen from the platform.

*The* ***nun*** *packs the chest. Moving away.*

*Night train.* ***Vadim*** *returns to Brussels. He dozed off a little. When he opened my eyes, the same pizza-loving* ***Stranger woman*** *was sitting across from him. She takes off her thong, pulls her skirt up high.....*

*When he opens his eyes again, there is a young couple sitting across from him kissing.*

**Moscow International Airport.**

*Passport Control.* ***Vadim*** *holds out his passport to the border guard, who scrutinises it, stamps it. He walks out into the arrivals hall, then outside. The* ***Driver*** *immediately rushes to him.*

**Driver.** Welcome.

**Vadim.** Thank you.

**Driver.** And the bag? On the plane?

**Vadim.** A gift to the hotel, coincidentally. It's empty. I'll buy a bigger one.

**Driver.** How was your flight?

**Vadim.** Good. Good luck.

**Driver.** No turbulence?

**Vadim.** Yeah, calm.

**Driver.** The car's a little lower.

**Vadim.** Thank you.

*They get into a car, driving down a wide motorway. The* ***Driver*** *occasionally casts a glance at him through the rear-view mirror.*

**Driver.** Pull over at the crossroads?

**Vadim.** Yeah, as usual.

**Secret address.**

***Vadim*** *is walking down the alley. He's being watched from behind the curtains. He walks slowly past the house, then returns, presses the code on the door and enters the entrance. He walks up the stairs. A* ***Workwoman*** *comes down to meet him. He blinked faintly - she reciprocated: signal received. Standing at the door of the safe house. The door opens noiselessly: three cameramen, with joyful faces, noisily embrace him, clapping him on the shoulder: - Hero! Great!*

*There's a table set up in the room. Carefully arranged sandwiches with white fish, with salmon, with sausage, with bacon. Olives in a loaf, cheeses, a bottle of vodka and wine.*

**First** (*looking in the fridge*). A decent supply.

**Second.** You have a skilful, practical hostess.

**First.** Yeah, she's not bad. Neat. (*To* ***Vadim***.) You met her on the stairs.

**Third.** The flat is cosy, quiet. It's a quiet place to work. No one's getting in the way. Where's the bag?

**Vadim.** Decided to play along with the hotel. It's empty. An object in your hand is a superfluous omen. Sometimes I use a simple trick.

**Third.** Who owns the flat?

**First.** I do. Change the lock, it's time. (*To* ***Vadim***.) First the main thing in a nutshell, then a small snack, and tomorrow a full written report. More like tonight. As it turns out...

**Third.** Odd... There's a bag missing. Was there any paperwork?

**Vadim.** Completely empty.

**Third.** A void will arouse suspicion. Stolen at the train station? The thieves ripped it out of your hands? And ran faster than you? How long were you at the station?

**Vadim.** There's a cop every metre. The bag wasn't at the railway station, it was left at the hotel.

**Third.** Where did you leave it at the hotel? In the room, in the loo, under the bed, in the corridor?

**Vadim.** While waiting for a taxi, I left it with the concierge.

**Third.** The colour of the taxi?

**Vadim.** Chocolate.

**Third.** There's no brown taxis. You're a little confused.

**First** (*angrily*). A fucking bag? I'll go to the shop and get a new one.

**Third.** When you check in at the hotel, they write down your residential address. You'll get it back within a week.

**Vadim.** Shall I start?

**First.** Looking forward to it.

**Vadim.** All in all, it went well. Didn't notice any breakdowns. Smooth, no jagged edges.

**Third.** Let's cut to the chase. Did you see him?

**Vadim.** Yes, I did. He's in the city.

**First.** What happened­­, you saw him and he didn't see you?

**Vadim.** It's very likely he saw it, too.

**Second.** No offence: I'll call you by your first name. Much older. Sounds like fiction. It's not honoured in our department. You saw him and he missed you. Give me the details.

**Third.** You're mistaken, aren't you? Mistaken for someone else?

**Vadim.** Seen at arm's length.

**First.** Where did it happen?

**Vadim.** First we climbed the stairs of the 16th century St Sebastian's Archery Guild tower. It's a little dark and a little steep. In the Middle Ages, archers were part of the municipal militia and made up a powerful class. Then there's the Citizens' Lodge, the original building. From the 11th century onwards, the Lodge held state archives, church and communal records.

**Second.** What do ladders have to do with it?

**Vadim.** It was told, he can barely walk, sore legs. He is supported under the arms, bouncing along the marches. Go on. Watchtower, 83 metres high. The authorities announced laws and regulations from there regarding the operation of the covered market. After climbing 366 steps, one admires the Flemish expanse. The climb's no good, it's too steep. We met on the thirtieth step. There was no doubt about it. I'll put it in the report. Classified information.

**Third.** Don't throw dust in my eyes with medieval architecture.....

**First.** A lovely characterisation of a medieval village. Don't miss a thing. The mental baggage will be replenished. Did you go to the Benedictine convent?

**Vadim.** Unfortunately, no.

**First.** Too bad, or I'd tell you what they're doing there.

**Vadim.** We couldn't miss each other. Walking towards each other. It's unequivocal: Jakub is in the city. I saw him. I guarantee it's him.

**Third.** Why didn't he recognise you and take action?

**Vadim.** Measures have been taken. Either accidentally or deliberately.

**Second.** Look, don't keep me in suspense!

**First.** Don't rush him. Let him talk.

**Vadim.** There's no point in delaying it, my mission is to get rid of it as soon as possible.

**First.** Get rid of what?

**Vadim.** Mission accomplished! I have clean record. Jakub is in the city. If he's still travelling the world under that name. One thing I'm surprised about is why he chose a tiny provincial township. Higher priorities keep him there. There is a platform on the church stairs for those who are tired of climbing the stairs. On the platform he turned among the holidaymakers and walked down with them. Didn't go any higher. A common technique: see if there's a tail.

**First.** Not paying attention to you?

**Vadim.** So it turns out. It was decently camouflaged.

**Second.** How did you identify him?

**Vadim.** He was limping, holding on to the handrails. Caution to the other visitors.

**Second.** Well, all right. Go on.

**Vadim.** He came down the stairs, got on his moped, and without looking back at the church, raced down a dark alley. Must have switched to other cars.

**First.** Congratulations to everyone! We missed him again. Twenty years of chasing.

**Third.** How come he didn't recognise you?

**Vadim.** I'm on a conscious search, and he's not even aware of it.

**First.** Sounds about right.

**Vadim.** I am obliged to report an episode. (*Those present became suspicious*.) During the ascent up the stairs, I had the impression that someone was secretly present in the group of excursionists. I can't explain it. Only intuitively. The atmosphere was tense, a frantic murmur. Each other pushing each other, not apologising, looking for a mysterious object on the floor, the crowd is artificial, provoked. Obviously, they assumed someone was interfering. But who? There was a mess going on, but in whose favour. I can't explain it.

**Third.** Are you saying Jakub was backed up? But you didn't recognise by whom?

**Vadim.** Guarded, I reckon. And if they were, that means they were alerted to the threat.

**Second.** Are you saying you were the one who posed the threat?

**Vadim.** It's hard to say. It's all intuitive.

**Third** (*as if in jest*). You don't allow for all sorts of... hallucinations, false perceptions, mild delusions.....

**First.** I deny it. We trust our employee.

**Vadim.** I regularly undergo the necessary examinations.

**First.** It's enough for the first time. We're still going to go over every fact.

**Second.** Tell me, you had an incident, a confusing incident.

**Vadim.** I'd like to sleep at my place.

*The* ***three executives*** *seclude themselves in a corner of the room. Whispering. They argue with each other.*

**First** (*approaching* ***Vadim***). You can go to your place, you can stay, but the task is not cancelled: at nine o'clock in the morning in the office. (*Holds out the keys to the operational flat*.) Throw them away. Decided to change the grub. The same one has been sticking around for too long.

**Second.** On the stairs, don't wink. Still can't see.

*The* ***first*** *stepped back to the window, slid the curtain.*

*The bullet touched the hair of his head. Everyone collapsed to the floor.*

**First** (*lying under the window, giving instructions on his mobile phone*). Gerasimov, where are you?

**Gerasimov.** Here.

**First.** How many men do you have?

**Gerasimov.** Seven, with me.

**First.** Do you need help? Should we call a team?

**Gerasimov.** Not yet.

**First.** Is everyone armed?

**Gerasimov.** No other way.

**First.** Quickly search entrances, dark nooks and crannies, alleys, suspicious passers-by. He won't get far. In no time at all, I'm waiting in the flat with that who fired off. Did you realise who was shot? I'm lying against the wall under the window.

*A few minutes later, officers enter* ***Driver's*** *flat. There was no limit to the astonishment of those present.*

**Driver** (*quietly*). I got my orders.

**First.** Who? Me? Have you forgotten my position?

**Driver.** No, him. (*Nods head at* ***Vadim***.)

**First.** What's he in for? Have you heard of him?

**Driver.** Yeah, he's experienced. Grounds? Not a clue.

**First.** Who gave the order?

**Driver.** I have no idea.

**First.** Have you seen the henchman?

**Driver.** No. I got the order after the plane landed.

**First.** How many years have you been in the office?

**Driver.** Twelve.

**First.** Why did you shoot?

**Driver.** A grave mistake. Ready to be punished.

**First.** Who made you do it?

**Driver.** Unknowns. A real threat to the family and to me personally. I had no choice.

**First.** Acting on a signal?

**Driver.** You pulled the curtains. You're not supposed to do that in this room. That's the sign. Didn't see a face. I've known Vadim for a long time. I had no choice. They've done the math.

**First.** Who are they?

**Driver.** I've never seen them. Apparently, powerful guys.

**First.** Sitting in the car waiting?

**Driver.** Otherwise I wouldn't have made it home.

**First.** Why didn't you follow orders in the car?

**Driver.** Under surveillance. An inconspicuous, skittish cuttlefish looped along the trail. I didn't dare.

*The* ***first*** *one takes out his mobile phone: - Gerasimov, was there a second car accompanying you from the airport?*

***Gerasimov.*** *Yes. There was a directive. (The* ***first*** *one switches off his mobile phone.)*

**First** (*addressing all*). Why haven't they settled it down? Why did you decide to get rid of it in the first place? Interfered with who and in what way? He travelled halfway around the world.

**Driver.** There's an assumption. Just a hunch, a shaky, flimsy hunch.

**Third** (*irritated*). You, listen. Stop showing off. Where are you? Did you forget? At the noblewomen's ball?

**Driver.** And the assumption is as follows: during his stay in the settlement, let's not name it out loud, Vadim somehow, most likely accidentally, learnt information of the highest level, which is probably a state secret. I don't intend to reveal it, it's too secretive. It's a paradox why he was released. At first they let him out - some people acted, then, when he was placed in the plane, they got cold feet and weighed him on other scales. Just a hunch, a hypothesis. What follows is a field for free thinking.....

**Third** (*equally irritated*). What a bunch of drivers...

**Driver.** I have a professional background.

**Third.** Posing as a lyric poet. Are you able to make your point clearly?

**Driver.** He's got a top-secret, he's scrolling around in a bucket, he won't tell you.

*There was dead silence in the room. Everyone froze in place, heads turned towards* ***Vadim****.*

**First** (*blowing up sharply*). To vacate the flat in one fell swoop. And close the door tightly.

**Second and Third** (*at the same time*). Shall we go out, too?

**First.** Did you hear the order? Release him immediately.

**Second.** The longer you're outdoors, the less foggy your head gets.

**First.** Deal with the fog later. What we need now is speed.

***First*** *and* ***Vadim****. The* ***first*** *with the gun came close to* ***Vadim****.*

**Vadim.** Do you have a gun? With this kind of security.

**First.** Couldn't be bad. I'm a military man, I'm used to all kinds of hardware. Do you have one?

**Vadim.** Of course I do.

**First.** Are you ready to use it?

**Vadim.** Always. I'm still in the service. There are unthinkable coincidences. It's hard to imagine.

**First.** Is there a specific incident you're referring to?

**Vadim.** A curious case. A distant mate lived in a thin-walled concrete nine-storey building. He's a philologist who wrote his dissertation on the American swearwords. What do they call it? Jargon, argot, slang. A new couple has taken up residence behind a thin wall: a Russian blonde and an American. They use jargon between themselves, it doesn't interfere with mutual understanding. Their glossary is pure rubbish. They didn't speak any other language. Buddy sat down after dinner against the wall, sprinkling in rare slang expressions with great pleasure. Wrote out a thick notebook, came in handy as examples for his thesis. Members of the dissertation committee are extremely surprised: from which works he has drawn the juicy, rich slang. The obscene language went on for a year. Then they moved out. Tricky part. Coincidence or mismatch? On the outskirts of Moscow in the same house on the same floor, just across a thin wall, were random neighbours. Not twined. Not deliberately set up lodgers, but strangers. Coincidence or mismatch?

**First** (*rests the gun against Vadim's stomach, mercilessly*). Have you seen the monk?

**Vadim.** Talking, that's how they save their own skin. I'm not afraid. Who is he?

**First.** A monk? Who's Monk? We've been looking for him for thirty years.

**Vadim.** It's a little long.

**First.** You weren't asked.

**Vadim.** Potentially seen on those stairs or on the street. However, I didn't suspect Monk.

**First.** Loved your tale of coincidences. A ridiculous gamble indeed. What shall we talk about? The Monk or the tall stories?

**Vadim.** There's a sorrowful tale.

**First.** A sorrowful one? Go on. Sorrowful for whom?

**Vadim.** For an unspecified person. Depends on where the little man sits.

**First.** Let's hear your tale. You're a storyteller today.

**Vadim.** I've travelled many continents. Everywhere took precautions against the car, a hidden source of danger. I've heard so many threatening cases. I usually suggest to the native to make a quick examination of the rented car: fixing of wheels, steering, closing of doors. On my own dime, of course. I also make you perform a rare test: the radiation background emanating from the car.

**First.** Why don't you tell me?

**Vadim.** They don't believe, they don't show interest, and those who do, already know. Checked my rental car - triggers feedback, most of all in the driver's seat. The frightened craftsmen scattered in different directions, away. It was immediately loaded onto an armoured truck and towed to a special landfill.

**First.** I'll report your curious mishaps at the board meeting. Personally, they are useful to me. For others, they are also of interest. Have you seen the monk? Where? Under what circumstances? Who did you socialise with? Who did you call? Have you tried making contacts?

**Vadim.** Who's Monk?

**First.** All new contacts should be reported. On the street, in a museum, in a pizza place...

**Vadim.** Dear Sergei...

**First.** No name.

**Vadim.** Dear Leader.

**First.** Are you quirking?

**Vadim.** No, really. I was given a specific assignment: to find out if a certain Jakub was in the city. Assignment completed. Миссия завершена.

**First.** You know, it's an unfamiliar thing. It wouldn't cost a thing to slop you. Given my status, I'm gonna come out clean. But for some reason, I can't be able to bring myself to do it. You saw Monk. You don't want to admit it. All right, then. We'll wait. You serve long, are highly regarded. So am I. A lump of longing stirred in his chest. Longing doesn't back up the shot.

**Vadim.** You're not suggesting... I could have accidentally fired a shot a long time ago?

**First.** You little bastard. He's having fun. You cheeky bastard! There's a lieutenant general standing in front of you! Ten-shun!

*With his gun shaking with excitement, he lunged at* ***Vadim****. The* ***Second*** *and* ***Third*** *burst into the room, snatching the gun from the* ***First's*** *hands.*

**Second** (*shouting* to the *First*). He didn't see the Monk! It's too basic! He followed Jakub, but he made friends with Monk. A coincidence like this once in a thousand years. (***To Vadim***.) You're crazy! Tomorrow at nine. And get out of here. You'll have it coming!

*The three operators are left alone, silent. Pause. Silence. Everyone pours their own drinks, takes sandwiches. They're pouring themselves a coffee.*

**Third** (*addressing the First colleague*). I want to ask you.

**First.** I can guess what.

**Third.** And about what?

**First.** Do I trust him?

**Third.** Fair enough. You invited me here for a reason... To probe our position.....

**First.** I have received management authorisation for all actions within the operation.

**Third.** That's the way it's supposed to be. Are you afraid of him sometimes?

**First.** Totally overdriven... Courageous, responsible, proactive employee. Very experienced. Given the line-up, I'm compelled to report on a particular episode. Three people know about him so far. You (*pointing to the* ***Second***), you (*pointing to the* ***Third***) and me (*pointing to myself*). My informant was watching the pizza place. It was in the afternoon. The heat. The heat of the day. Empty street. Not a living soul. Suddenly Vadim jumped out of the pizzeria and rushed towards the canals. After running more than halfway down the street, he disappeared. He's completely gone. My informant then walked a section of the street. I didn't find any indentations. I mean: ditches along the carriageway, where it is quite realistic to roll down; all kinds of wells - temporary and permanent; covered with planks sections of the street, prepared for repair work. The stranger woman from the pizzeria came out onto the porch and watched Vadim run away. She stood there until Vadim disappeared. The heat of the day. Empty street. There is an apparently unhealthy person running through it. He's gone. It's unclear where to. And he shows up in Moscow. I'm guessing he's in a state of prostration right now. But there was an event at the pizzeria. Giving it extraordinary meaning. He was standing on the edge of a precipice, and someone reached out a hand... Let's create an expert group. Exclusively on this occasion.

**Third.** Did you ask around?

**First.** Not yet. I'm gonna frighten him away. We'll wait it out.

**Third.** You've never once mentioned a chick? Why didn't you?

**Second.** Didn't care? It's nothing, a dummy.

**Third.** I didn't pay attention... But I have to report it. And they're reporting. (*Raises voice*.) They don't hide it. Openly reporting.

**First.** Yes, I have to.

**Second.** A recruitment attempt has been made. It's a clear case.

**Third.** And it's clear to him.

**First.** We'll wait for the written report, peruse it.

**Third.** In the meantime, a small one.

**Honey Saviour in Kolomenskoye.**

*A huge honey fair. "Tasting" different varieties, including those in honeycomb. Merchants advertise, offer to buy. From behind* ***Vadim*** *comes a voice: "Have some buckwheat, it's tasty and healthy." He is followed by a smiling, friendly* ***Stranger****,* ***Vadim*** *accepts his services, but, as usual, does not let his guard down.*

**Stranger**. Craving all sorts of tastes, he can't: diabetes.

**Vadim.** A little bit at a time. It's acceptable.

**Stranger.** A little bit, yes. I'm trying it with you.

*They walk along the rows, chatting happily, pointing to the owner of the honey, licking, laughing.* ***Vadim*** *buys a jar of golden, not thick honey. The* ***stranger*** *undoes the middle button of his jacket. Joking with his host, he leans over the table with honey, at that moment* ***Vadim*** *sees a loaded holster under his left armpit.*

**Stranger** (*holding out his hand*). Vladimir.

**Vadim.** Vadim.

**Vladimir.** If you take your time, I'll buy you skewers.

**Vadim.** I'd love to.

*They approach the barbecue stand, where meat and sausages are sizzling and frizzing.*

**Vladimir** (*to the salesman*). Skewers with herbs?

**Salesman.** Well and good.

**Vladimir.** Where to sit?

**Salesman.** At any table, according to taste.

**Vladimir** (*to Vadim*). A bottle of dry red wine?

**Vadim.** I'd love to.

**Salesman.** And we'll bring a bottle.

*They sit down at a long, roughly chipped wooden table.* ***Vladimir*** *doesn't even try to hide the gun. Periodically, they scrutinise each other. For a moment,* ***Vladimir's*** *image blurs, and* ***Vadim*** *sees the* ***Stranger woman*** *from Bruges across from him - a hard, ruthless stare.*

*The waiter brings kebabs, pita bread, greens, uncorked bottle, pours into glasses.*

**Vadim.** Young man, do you watch western films? Notice the bottle is opened in the presence of the customer?

**Vladimir.** Vadim, stop it. Whoever needs to get into a corked bottle will get into a corked bottle. I could see him behind the bar uncorking the bottle from here. I'll drink first. Let him go. (*Takes a big sip of wine, chirruping*.) I like it, by the way. Neutral, easy-drinking.

*Touching glasses. Drinking.*

**Vladimir.** To getting to know each other.

**Vadim.** Pleased to meet you. Let's get to know each other.

**Vladimir.**Don't you carry a gun? (*Eating skewers, drinking wine, breaking off pita.)*

**Vadim.** Why? For adventure?

**Vladimir.** For good measure. Plus a bottle and skewers?

**Vadim.** No, thank you. Sated. Do I owe you one?

**Vladimir.** You're insulting me. I asked you to come. What department are you in?

**Vadim.** I don't get it.

**Vladimir.** All right, then. We made it through.

**Vadim** *(gets up from the table, extends his hand to Vladimir).* It's nice to meet you. Thanks for the skewers. See you later. (Walks away quickly.)

**Vladimir** (*turning away the lapel of his coat).* He's gone.

**Someone's voice.** We heard. Dismissed.

*On the way out of Kolomensky Park,* ***Vadim*** *hears a voice: "Nothing terrible has happened. Jakub doesn't exist. Convenient fiction. Look for the rat among your own. He's out in the open."* ***Vadim*** *looked at the man who had said those words: he was putting a child on a child's bicycle, raised his head, looked into* ***Vadim's*** *eyes, and gently rolled the bicycle.*

**FINAL SCENE**

*On Bolshoy Kamenny Bridge,* ***Vadim*** *admires the Kremlin. His favourite spot in Moscow. Observes an endless stream of cars: different models, different colours, different quirks. The car rumble seems pleasant, at least not repulsive. He asked himself an insoluble question: whether there are a lot of cars in the capital and whether there is a limit to them. An intrusive thought troubled him: his role in the endless stream. Is he a random corner boy - useless and worthless - or is there a tiny speck of him lurking in the incessant murmuring metal monster that belongs to him.*

*He hasn't forgiven himself for the girl, and now he never will.*

*Throws the keys into the Moskva River. There's an authorised operative on duty heading towards him:*

*- "Mr, just a moment."*

***Vadim*** *looks at the approaching duty officer, and suddenly ran. The duty officer tries unsuccessfully to catch up. Both run along the dividing strip of the street. The duty officer on the radio informs: the rotter is running away. A chuckle came from the walkie-talkie: "You can't catch up. I wanted to give you a little training. Go back to your post. There's a shift worker. You'll report."*

*To the left and right, streams of rumbling accelerating honking cars whiz by. Suddenly* ***Vadim*** *makes a sharp throw to the left, under the wheels. The clang of iron, the squeal of brakes, the screams of men. Darkness.*

*A pregnant* ***Marina*** *stands on the edge of the pavement, raised on tiptoe, trying to see what happened in the unrestrained pile of metal.*

**THE END**